

NERVE GAMBLING.

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WE have before us to-day two object-lessons: the one the Far East islanders, fighting for existence, simple in life, self-contained alike in victory and defeat, resolute to attain what is called independence. This is the Future. Then we have nearer home the Anglo-Saxon race, one branch of which, the English, has risen from poverty to unequally distributed affluence, having shed the great lessons of its slow and severe up-bringing, and which is fast coming to consider luxury as the reward of toil. This is the Past. And across the Atlantic the other branch of the Anglo-Saxon race is foreshortening history to attain to a vast, phenomenal, and unheard-of-hitherto commercial plutocracy. And that is the Present. And the Present and the Past are girded round by iron chains of habit, while the Future is rearing up self-sacrifice and self-denial as the true ideals. The Anglo-Saxon is preaching Christ, often in febrile exacerbations; the Japanese are practising many Christian virtues without professing Christianity. Here is a complex question for the man who lives on water and can see across it!

Now, the attaining to liberty is a slow process; the attainment of wealth must be rapid, or the excitement "fizzes out." And it must not only be fast and furious, but it must be fed on flame-food and spurred on by stimulants. It lives in the hope that its nerve-risk will survive its dangerous existence at the highest possible pressure. No animal on earth lives so unhealthy a life as the modern money-spinner. Foul air, late hours, excessive food, excessive stimulants, antidotes in the shape of drugs and narcotics, lavish waste, wasteful lavishness, all records of cause and effect forgotten or ignored, a feverish existence on the edge of the financial volcano. How, one wonders, do the delicate and vital tissues stand the strain at all?

And for what? To make money, to make vast sums which no man could or can spend; and behind the avowed intent of retirement and rest is the implacable Demon of Unrest, which will permit no man to stop who once gets into the eddies of the whirlpool. Swim round and round he must, *or* go under.

It is true that such men are often—nay, usually—the most amiable, kind-hearted, generous, and benevolent of human beings, their financial *alter ego* notwithstanding. They are worth saving, but who is to save them?

If, by their superhuman toil in one direction, they could change physical conditions by bribing physical laws to change, that would be to (perhaps) ensure the time in which to rest, when premature nerve-age had put the seal of impotence on the hot wax of endeavour. But that is beyond even the multi-millionaire to accomplish. His doom is in his own swift success.

I once knew such a man who, having accumulated an enormous fortune, signalized his attainment of his life-work by paying the price of his reason for it; and the inverted wealth-craze straightway took the form of a delusion that he was poor. He lived quite happily for many years as a labourer in his own garden. It was my sad privilege to be asked by him to raise his weekly wages, and, so long as it was done cautiously, all went well. But in his mind-eclipse there came back to him some sense of the true value of toil. It was a bitter price to have paid for so elementary a lesson in economics.

Of course, all this is trite and stale enough. Everyone knows it. But its pitifulness is none the less when we remember that, during the unhealthy time of that neurotic financial stress and strain, a man may have children; and then our duty to the Future comes in, and a very grave duty it is.

I am led to write in this manner from a growing conviction that the scope of the word "inebriety" must be extended. It is no doubt quite right to run full tilt against alcohol; but alcohol, and even drug-taking, only involves and includes the first four letters of the alphabet of inebriety. I should hesitate, in making a religion of what is called "temperance," to forget every other hygienic sin. I am sure we should be wrong to do so. We may say we,

as a medical profession, do not forget them, and we may not ; but unless we insist that alcoholism and drug-taking are often only symptoms of the individual "greed" which is becoming to-day's "fashion," we shall not always appeal to one of the classes of inebriates we wish to reach. What is the gauge of civic worth to-day ? Is it not wealth ? What is the test of a man's success in life ? It may not invariably be wealth ; but if wealth and worth enter the lists together and claim men's esteem, the worth will be much sooner forgotten than the wealth, I fancy. Of course, I am not talking of the journalistic or national epitaph ; that is quite another matter. That is equally claimed as to critical expression and posthumous gratitude by the *de mortuis* composer of such, and an always needy Chancellor of the Exchequer. We judge men by the way they spend their money. We might a little consider how they make it ; it would be a far juster standard very often.

Of course, I know quite well that wealth will always kick the beam against cheap virtue. I am too well aware, moreover, how easy it is to denounce what you do not possess. One of the most comically pathetic sights I ever saw was when a temperance orator was told that an uncle of his had left him some brewery shares—in fact, I shall never forget the scene to my dying day. He knew, after his many public speeches, what he ought to have done, and the other residuary legatee hoped he would do, what he obligingly called "the right thing." He may have done it—I cannot say—but he sold the property in a rising market. It is true he ceased lecturing, and so, in this complex world, we had one bore the less !

But, of course, I do not mean that men should cease to desire wealth or become wealthy. I only say that there should be some moderation in the means employed. I only claim that to gamble away the priceless and irrecoverable nervous system is not justified by the exchange you may make in coveted millions. That is all I say and all I mean.