Observations on Nightmare. By WILLIAM SWEETSER, Jr.
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NIGHTMARE was noticed at quite remote periods of antiquity; and we find it spoken of, both among the Greek and Roman writers. Though, from the frequency of its occurrence and its peculiarly distressing nature, it has excited considerable attention, still the ideas entertained with regard to it, are quite vague, even at the present day. The various names, which, at different periods, it has received, are all expressive of the peculiar sensation it produces; that is, of a heavy weight pressing upon the chest. Thus the Greeks called it *φιαλτης*, from the verb, *φωλλομαι*, signifying, I leap upon. The Latins called it, *incubus*, from *incubo*, I lie upon. In English it has received, among the vulgar, different names; as mare-riding, hag-riding, and wizard-pressing. It is now commonly known by that of nightmare, a term originating, probably, in superstition.

“So on his nightmare, through the evening fog,
Flits the squab Fiend, o'er fen, and lake, and bog,
Seeks some love-wilder'd maid, with sleep oppress'd,
Alights, and, grinning, sits upon her breast.”

The following are its symptoms:—A sensation, exciting the idea of a weight lying upon the chest; a difficulty of breathing, which is often excessive. These symptoms are always accompanied by some frightful dream. Thus, the imagination will often lead us to the brink of a precipice, from whence we expect every moment to be precipitated, but are incapable of the slightest movement to escape this peril. Sometimes we imagine ourselves actually falling, and our agitation becomes so great, that we awake with a sudden start. Again, we fancy that we are beset with thieves, murderers, or with evil spirits, but in spite of all our efforts, can neither fly from them, nor defend ourselves from their assaults. Sometimes, after great exertion, we are able to cry out for aid; and this cry is always indicative of the greatest terror and distress. There also is often made an indistinct moaning noise. It now and then happens, that the muscles of locomotion are under the control of the will; and persons have been known to jump from the bed, and run about the room, calling out for help, apparently in great agony. I once knew a person, in whom the affection

always showed itself in this way. In nightmare we not unfrequently are conscious of the state under which we suffer; conscious also of the necessity for exertion to free ourselves from it, but all efforts of the will fail of their usual influence. The countenance is indicative of the distress endured. It exhibits a lividness, approaching to its appearance in asphyxia. Sometimes the eyelids are wholly, or partly, open, motionless, and the eyes fixed, which, added to the distortion of the features that often occurs, gives the physiognomy altogether a peculiarly horrid appearance. A partial sweat, in this state, will often break out and stand in drops about the forehead. Sweating sometimes becomes general. I have found the pulse, immediately after awakening, never having examined it during a paroxysm, full, frequent, and remarkably soft. When aroused, often the sense of oppression in the chest will remain, and, for sometime, there will be noticed a shortness and quickness of respiration, together with palpitation of the heart, similar to what we observe in persons who have taken violent exercise, or who have long kept in their breath. The symptoms of nightmare, which have now been stated, afford us some grounds on which we may found an opinion of its proximate cause. Relative to this, there have been, and still are, many different theories. Some have believed it owing to a congestion of blood in the brain. Others have supposed, that it arises from a stagnation of this fluid in the heart and its large vessels. Others, again, have considered it dependent on a congestion in the sanguiferous system of the lungs. It has likewise been referred to the stomach, and to the nervous system. One reason for regarding it as a nervous affection, and this the principal, has been, because there is noticed in it a cessation of voluntary power. Now we should recollect that this apparently always happens in a state of natural sleep. In nightmare, then, here seems to consist the difference; we feel a necessity for exertion to escape some fancied danger, hence arises a volition, but no action following, as we for the most part find to be the case, we grow conscious of a cessation of influence from the will. From the phenomena that have already been noticed in nightmare, and from observation that the causes exciting it always, in a greater or less degree affect respiration, I am led to believe that its proximate cause is in the lungs, or, perhaps to speak more properly, in the blood, since that principle in the atmosphere, which changes the quality of this fluid, fitting it for the purposes of the animal economy, is not, from causes that seem involved in obscurity, furnished in due quantity to produce its full and necessary

effect. The different causes that excite nightmare, appear always to exert either a direct or indirect influence on the pulmonary function. It will generally take place in the predisposed, when much food, or food of an indigestible nature, is taken into the stomach soon before retiring to rest. Now it is apparent that in a waking state, if digestion is performed with difficulty, the respiration becomes affected; it grows short, quick, and irregular, accompanied with a frequent sighing. Of this fact there can be no doubt, though the cause of it is somewhat mysterious. The gastric organs may here sympathetically influence the respiratory, or we may account for it on the principle, that the increase of activity in one organ, if we here allow an increase of action in the gastric organs, supposes a proportional diminution of activity in all the rest; or we may attribute it to an influence from both these causes. It is probable, too, that the pulmonary function may be affected by the stomach, in a state of distention, interfering with the function of the diaphragm. When we fall asleep under the circumstances above stated, respiration, from causes with which we are unacquainted, does not go on with the same perfection as when awake. How the suspension of voluntary influence affects this function, we know not. Sighing, which is a long and deep inspiration, followed by a sudden expiration, and showing a deficiency of atmospheric air in the lungs for the purposes of the animal economy, seems, in part, owing to an effort of the will, and always takes place in those states of the system in which this affection is most apt to occur. Now should this be true, that sighing is in part owing to a voluntary effort, during sleep it would not so readily take place, or perhaps not at all; the consequence of which would be, under certain circumstances, a deficiency of atmospheric air in the respiratory organs. We are not, however, sufficiently acquainted with the nature of the function of respiration, to indulge in speculations of this kind. Did we know the exact relation in which this function stands to the two lives, the animal and organic, we might then, perhaps, be capable of forming a more correct idea of the effects upon it from a suspension of voluntary power. That it goes on independent of the will, seems evident; we know, also, that it is under the control of the will, but whether under any circumstances of the system it requires the aid of this power, we are ignorant. How it may be influenced by the state of the organs of organic life in sleep, we cannot tell. May there not be more sympathy exerted in this life, in consequence of the animal powers being suspended? This would appear probable on the theory,

that there is a determinate sum of powers spread throughout the system, which always remains the same. We must here, however, acknowledging our ignorance of causes, be content to observe their phenomena. "Such," says Bichat, "are the narrow limits of the human understanding, that the knowledge of first causes is almost always denied to it. The thick veil that covers them, envelops in its innumerable folds whoever attempts to rend it asunder." Many of the different passions, for these will often operate during sleep, bring on nightmare, particularly such as are of a depressing kind. Now all these, more or less, affect respiration. In grief, we have a sense of suffocation, and frequent sighing takes place. In fear, breathing is short, quick, and much disturbed. In plethoric persons, this affection often occurs; and in such we generally find, that the respiration is easily affected. It is common in diseases of the heart, hydrothorax, &c.; and here we know that powerful efforts are often necessary to prevent asphyxia. Persons who possess much sensibility and irritability, and have delicate stomachs, as those of the nervous temperament, are generally subject to it; and in such habits we, for the most part, find that the respiratory function is readily disturbed. The healthy and robust are not often troubled with nightmare; and in these we know that respiration usually goes on with ease, which may happen because there is less sympathy exerted among the different organs, or because the powers of the system in general are greater, each organ having sufficient energy within itself for the performance of its task. The question may now be asked, why is nightmare more apt to occur when we lie on the back than in other positions of the body, since this seems favourable to the easy performance of the pulmonary function? Of the fact, I cannot admit a doubt. I would not, however, be understood to believe, that this posture alone can induce the affection, but merely that it is favourable to the operation of its exciting causes. Its comparative frequency in this, and other positions of the body, has been accounted for on the supposition, that here the stomach presses on the aorta; also that the heart presses on the large trunks of the pulmonary veins, giving rise to a congestion of blood in the lungs. It has, likewise, been supposed that the abdominal viscera interfere more with the function of the diaphragm in this, than in other postures of the body. Many, however, would be unwilling to believe that nightmare could here be produced by these mechanical causes alone, because, on analogical reasoning, it would seem difficult to admit the idea, that a Being who has so nicely constructed us, and showed such

care in adapting the different organs, each to its particular situation, and who has established between them so nice relations, should suffer such as possess in the animal economy functions so important, to interfere with each other in a posture so common, and apparently, so natural. Nightmare, however, we should recollect, is the effect of morbid actions in the system, in which state those relations that hold between the different organs in health, become disturbed. To what extent, therefore, mechanical causes may operate in the production of this affection, would be difficult to say, that they may have some effect is not improbable. When we lie on the back, the relaxation of the system becomes more general; a less number of the animal muscles come into play; but whether this by sympathy could affect the function of respiration, we know not. To conclude, then, I consider nightmare to take place in this way:—There is a deficiency in quantity of atmospheric air inhaled, to effect the necessary change on the blood, in its passage through the lungs. Blood, then, unfit for the purposes of life, or partly venous, is sent to the different parts of the system. This induces a sense of suffocation; the fancy, then, from the laws of association, places us in some imminent danger; this we make an effort to avoid, which, availing nothing, we grow conscious of a cessation of voluntary influence. It is plain, from the nature of this affection, that should it exist in any considerable degree, and be long continued, death would be its inevitable consequence; and I believe with Dr. Rush, that most persons who retire to rest, apparently in good health, and are found dead in their beds in the morning, die from this complaint. That power, however, of the system, which is ever watchful for our welfare, does not here often desert us; but to warn us of our danger, raises in the imagination some dreadful phantom, the fear of which stimulates us to exertion; and this at length becomes so powerful that we awake. Those frightful images, then, which here rise up before the fancy, are not to be regarded with horror; for they come, not as enemies, but like guardian angels, to rescue us from a painful death.