

THE HANDICAP OF THE WELL-BORN CHILD

BY H. ADDINGTON BRUCE

DRAWINGS BY HARRY STONER



IN AN IMPOSING MANSION of suburban New York, the home of a man prominent in the business life of the metropolis, there lives a little lad of my acquaintance whose future should be a matter of grave concern to his parents, although they seem blind to the menace hanging over him. An only child, a bright, attractive boy of fourteen, both parents have idolized him since his infancy. To a far greater extent than most fathers and mothers they have obeyed the Froebelian

maxim — *Live with your children.* Almost from babyhood he has been their companion, not alone in the life of the home but on innumerable little excursions and even on journeys to distant lands. Seemingly nothing has been left undone that would promote his mental and physical welfare.

And, indeed, to strangers meeting him for the first time, he appears to be in every way a promising boy. He is sturdy for his years, has a keen interest in sports, and is extremely well-mannered. One instinctively likes him, yet in proportion as one knows him better a feeling of doubt gains ground. It is thoroughly justified. From early boyhood he has displayed danger signals indicative of tendencies which, if unchecked, must end in disaster. At the age of five he was subject to "night terrors," a sure sign of neural strain. These were succeeded, at seven, by symptoms closely resembling St. Vitus's Dance; and, when at all excited, he still suffers from involuntary twitchings of the muscles of the face.

He is restless, moody, abnormally self-centered. His attention power is weak, and, while of good mentality, he seldom occupies himself either long or earnestly with any subject of importance. There is evident in him a constant craving for novelty and change. Under-developed from the standpoint of volitional control, he is over-developed on the emotional side — a juvenile neuropath from which class, in adult life, is largely recruited the population of our hospitals, insane asylums, and penal institutions.

Until a short time before this boy's birth his father was only moderately well-to-do, a man of simple habits and plain ways of thought. Opportunity, shrewdly seized, started him up the ladder of financial advancement, and like many another, no sooner had he put his foot on the first rung than the passion possessed him to climb as high as he possibly could. To his wife at the same time came visions of social eminence. Gradually these two ambitions became the dominant motives in their lives, and to their attainment they strained every nerve. Display took the place of simplicity, tenseness that of calm, well-ordered effort. Arrogance, too, grew apace with increasing wealth, and by word and act betrayed itself even in the seclusion of their private lives.

SUCH was the atmosphere in which they reared their son — an atmosphere laden with psychic toxins as virulent as the germs of any of the physical diseases from which they guarded him with devoted watchfulness. Nay, the very fervor of their love for him, wherein they found their one respite from the laborious pursuit of money and prestige, worked to his disadvantage. Their perpetual and expensive gifts to him, their fond endeavor to anticipate his wishes, their practice of taking him with them wherever the father's business interests called him even at the cost of interrupting the boy's schooling; all this meant an undue taxing of his nervous system and the developing of egoistic sentiments which themselves provide a fertile soil for the growth of all sorts of nervous and mental maladies. In fact, had this unfortunate child not been of a good heredity it is unquestionable that he would have been brought to a complete breakdown before now.

As it is, the chances that he will develop into a sound, well-rounded, really useful member of society are small. His love of sport may yet be the saving of him, if he receives, as his parents plan, a good preparatory school and college

education. On the other hand, it is more than a possibility that by the time he is of college age his neuroticism may be so far advanced that he will not be content with the healthy recreation of athletics, but will seek other and dangerous sources of amusement, to his further deterioration and mayhap to a course of conduct that will bring unavailing sorrow to his parents and dire affliction to himself.

Nor is his case exceptional. If it were, its recital would be scarcely worth while. But the fact is that it illustrates, and helps to throw not a little light on

a state of affairs far too prevalent in our land today — one that amounts to a peril.

Side by side with the increase — as the successive census enumerations clearly show — of wealth and luxury there has been an increase in insanity, feeble-mindedness, and other organic brain diseases, markedly in excess of the growth in population. Similarly with mental and nervous troubles not amounting to actual insanity but finding expression in maladies like hysteria and neurasthenia, and in the moral enfeeblement that gives rise to all sorts of criminal acts — these, too, the best authorities are agreed, are steadily on the increase. So manifestly serious has the situation become that within the past few years an organized crusade has been started, under the name of the eugenic movement, looking to the prevention of further racial degeneration by drastic marriage laws, and even by legalized surgical intervention to render it an utter impossibility for the "socially unfit" to bring into the world children with inherited defects.

BUT heredity is not the sole, nor is it even the dominant, factor to be reckoned with. If it were, we should not find, as we actually do, the various degenerative maladies from true organic insanity to moral "diseases of the personality" far more widespread in countries of a high degree of national intelligence and economic development, like the United States, than in comparatively backward countries. The truth is that an increase in insanity and allied disorders is the price we have had to pay for the advance of civilization — or, rather, it is the toll exacted for imperfect adaptation to the increased strain imposed upon the nervous system by the complexities and stresses of modern life. Inherited defects, to be sure, may and do make it more difficult for us to acquire the necessary adaptability. But, excepting only in the case of born idiots and imbeciles, who are comparatively few in number, it is safe to say that by proper training the mental and moral balance can be preserved no matter how "bad" the family history. On the other hand, when the proper training is wanting the best of hereditaries, as everyday observation shows, is no guarantee against neural disaster.

More than this, and easily the most important fact yet developed by modern scientific research into mental deficiency, it is the training that may be given in the first years of life that counts for most in the immunization of the individual against nervous and mental disorders. And by training is meant not merely the effort to cultivate sane habits of thought and action, but also a systematic adjusting of environment.

So great is the impressionability of children that even the details of their material surroundings, if of an unusually exciting or disagreeable feeling-tone, may have an unbalancing effect upon them. Whereas, on the other hand, it is quite possible, by wise manipulation of the surroundings with an eye to their psychic values, to make of them powerful adjuncts in the development of mental strength and health.

Illustrating this important truth is a little story told by Dr. Louis Waldstein regarding a New York family of his acquaintance. They were poor people, living in humble quarters on the East Side, and always having to struggle for a livelihood. Yet from the father and mother down to the youngest child — and there were half a dozen children in the family — they were characterized by qualities of happiness, cheerfulness, good health, and abounding energy.

The uniformity of these traits in the children as well as the parents puzzled