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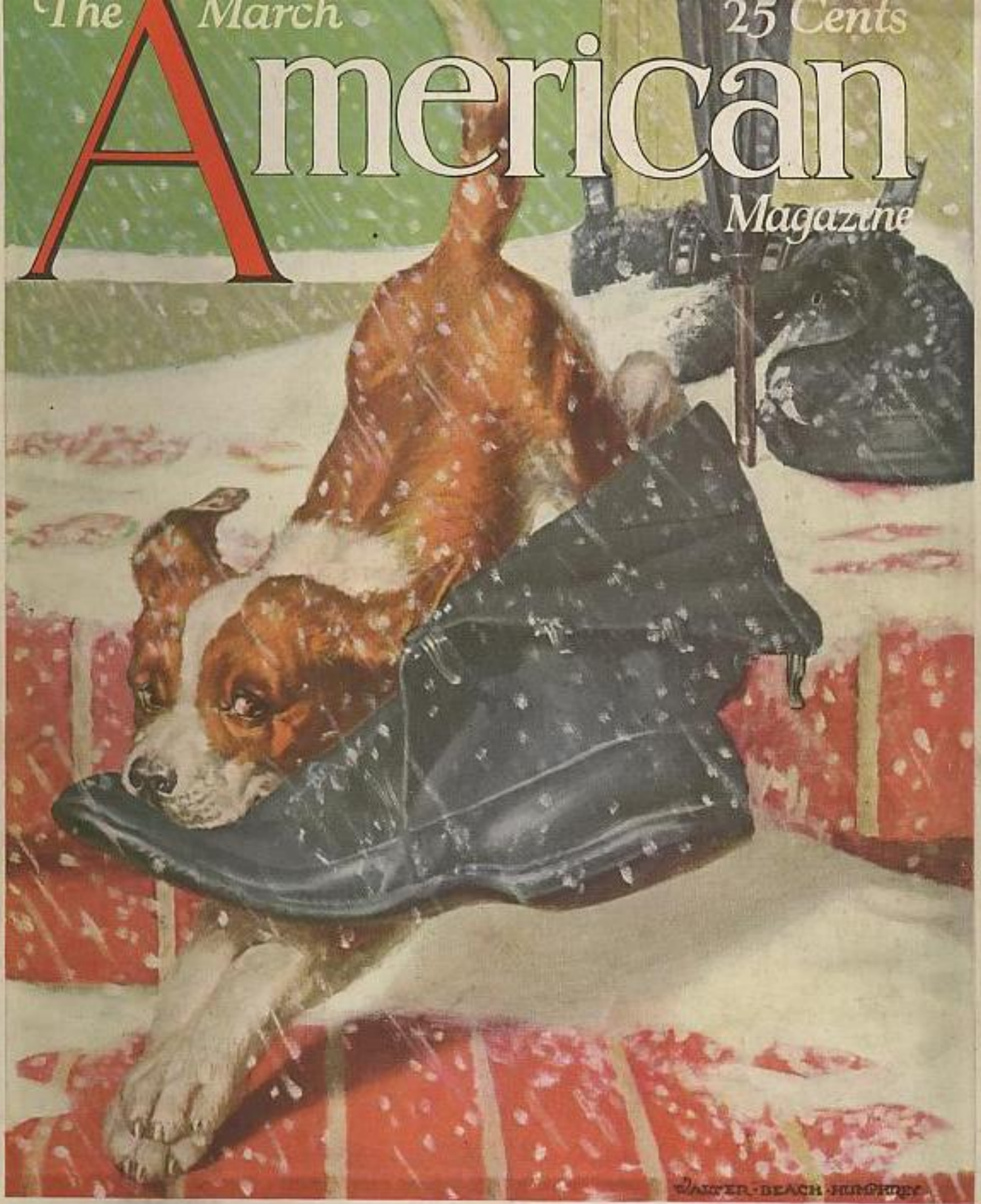

The Ten Greatest Thinkers

By Will Durant

Author of "The Story of Philosophy"

The American Magazine

March, 1927

MERLE CROWELL, *Editor*
JAMES C. DERIEUX, *Managing Editor*

Vol. CIII

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Are You Overworking Your Conscience?

By William S. Sadler, M. D.

THROUGH the solemn stillness of the church the preacher's voice rang out with dramatic intensity: "And Jesus said: '*Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.*' "

Seated in the congregation was a highly strung middle-aged woman of over-conscientious temperament. For some unaccountable reason—it may have been the earnestness of the preacher, or it may have been that she was more overwrought than usual that day—the woman seized this scriptual admonition, and proceeded to translate it into literal terms.

From that Sunday morning she put a bridle on her tongue that was as absurd as it was harmful. Vowing to speak no idle word, her communications consisted chiefly of abrupt sentences reluctantly forced from her as the necessity arose. She no longer chatted with her family or visited with her neighbors—her conscience condemned the pleasantries they indulged in as idle words.

Several months later, this hyper-conscientious woman was numbered among my patients. Her digestion was all awry, her sleep disturbed, her nervousness increased; even her religion had gone back on her, and had become sour and mildewed. It was a hard job to get her back to anything like a normal mental state.

I am constantly meeting people who are sick, physically and mentally, because of needless conflict with their consciences. And it is the purpose of this article to analyze some of these conscientious scruples, and to talk about conscience in its relation to health.

To make my position quite clear, let me say at the outset that I do not believe that conscience is "the voice of God to the soul." The sentiment is a pretty one which probably originated in the brain of some poet—but it isn't true.

Conscience is nothing more nor less than a name which we apply to our inherited and acquired standards of right and wrong. And these standards are tremendously influenced by education, training, association, and environment, especially environment.

In this country we can trace much of our trouble with conscience to the teachings of the Puritans. These sturdy forbears rather inclined to the idea that anything pleasant was sinful; and life with them was a somewhat dreary succession of blue laws. Even to-day I meet a number of their descendants—over-conscientious souls, who, when they discover they are having a good time, immediately become conscience-stricken, and look around shamefacedly to find out what is wrong.

Far be it from me to decry conscience! I recognize the health value of being in possession of a conscience "void of offense toward God and toward men." But I want people to realize that worry and fear, when they become wrongly linked up with conscience, are able to torment and torture the innocent soul, and produce much sickness.

Let us return to the case of the hypersensitive woman, who, in mortal fear of being called upon in the day of judgment to account for every idle word she uttered, wrecked her health physically and almost mentally.

I had to wrestle with that woman's conscience for weeks. I explained to her that, while conscience is a state of mind that tells us always to *do* right, it never tells us what *is* right. I tried to make it clear that other mental powers must be brought into service, to find out what is right—such as judgment, reason, discrimination, choice—and that it was the part of the other mental powers to determine what was right under certain circumstances, and that conscience was merely the mental monitor which admonishes us to do the right thing after we have determined on our course of action.

She and I discussed religion by the hour, and little by little the harsh grip that her conscience had on her conduct of life began to loosen. To-day that woman is getting well, having learned the part her conscience should play in normal existence.

I WOULD like to tell you about another woman who got conscience, religion, and diet all jammed up together. She happened to be one of those persons whose digestion goes on strike when she gets tired. As a result of this, she had eliminated one article of food after the other from her diet, until after eight years she reached the place where there wasn't anything left but baby food and a few special invalid preparations. From one hundred and fifty pounds she went down to ninety-one. A careful examination of her stomach showed everything was all right.

But in the midst of all this worry about her digestion, she began reading books on diet, and somehow got a religious twist to her dietetic practices. Then her conscience became involved in the matter. She decided, and rightfully so, that the laws of health were the laws of God, and imagined that she had transgressed them beyond forgiveness.

I remember well the first time I talked with her. She quoted to me the text: "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?" That is good scripture, and I think some people who are utterly careless and wholly conscienceless in their way of living would do well to heed it. But this poor soul needed rather to get hold of the text describing how the apostles ate their meat with gladness.

I explained to her that the stomach trouble was due to upset nerves, and began her reeducation along these lines. She now has her conscience pretty well under control when it tries to impinge on the realm of dietetics, although she still has a standard of right and wrong about eating.

There are certain foods that her conscience will not permit her to eat; but whether she has her potatoes fried or baked is now immaterial to her. Previously, she regarded the eating of fried potatoes as a sin. Now she knows she can eat them and other erstwhile tabooed foods without fear, if she is not tired out nervously.

A SHORT time ago I came in touch with a man who has made a religion out of physical exercise. If he doesn't perform certain exercises every morning, walk so many miles each day, and do just the same number of exercises each evening before he retires, he is exceedingly unhappy.

He actually told me that he went to church one Sunday and did not enjoy the service, because his conscience told him he had not taken his regular amount of exercise the week before. His friends are beginning to regard him as a pest; even his wife has put him in the nuisance class. His outdoor social life is spoiled because he cannot exercise as other people do. His exercise has to be individual to himself.

What am I doing for this chap? I am inducing him gradually to break away from his slavish régime by pressing home the fact that life needs variety to give it spice, and that from a health standpoint monotony is a dangerous thing.

In going to his absurd extreme in the matter of exercise, he not only enslaved himself but he enslaved his conscience. Fortunately for him, he is beginning to see the light. In a month or so, if he doesn't have a relapse, he should graduate from the nuisance class and become an ordinary, normal human being.

But this man was not nearly such a hard proposition as a pale, anemic young woman I met last winter. She had got it into her head that she must take cold baths in the morning. She didn't like them; but she thought they would be good both for her body and soul—a sort of moral discipline. Her reaction being poor, she would have headaches half the day from the cold bath. But conscience drove her on. I soon discovered that she always had some fad that she was over-conscientious about. Once she took up physical culture, and tried to walk ten miles a day, until she lost thirty-five pounds in weight.

There is hope that some day she will be delivered from this habitual tendency to pick up fads and become hyper-conscientious over them. I'm doing my best to talk sense into her. But let this serve as a general warning: No matter how good your health fad may be, don't become over-conscientious about it.

Thomas Hood, the poet, hit the nail squarely on the head when he referred to "That berce thing they call a conscience." I have a patient at the present time who thought it was wrong to engage in an innocent pastime that all the members of her family indulged in. Finally, she made up her mind she wouldn't be queer, and joined in with the rest. Then her conscience got overly busy and bawled her out for having a good time. In less than three months her health was hard hit by insomnia and indigestion.

She is getting over the attack, because we persuaded her that conscience was an intruder, and that it was a matter of personal choice whether or not she enjoyed this trifling pastime. She now believes it is far better to play with the members of her family than to indulge what she now says was her conscientious ego. In fact, she regards her previous hyper-conscientious reaction as Pharisaical.

ANOTHER interesting case recently came under my observation in the person of a hyper-conscientious school teacher, thirty-seven years of age. She was easily the best teacher in the group to which she belonged; but she was not satisfied with being the best teacher. She wanted to be more than superlative. She was so over-conscientious (and I think there was an element of personal pride and egotism also) that she worked early and late, and put in uncalled-for extra time on her profession. She also attended every meeting that had to do with teachers and teaching, and took advanced work every summer for ten or twelve years, foregoing all vacations and relaxations.

What was the result? Suddenly she went to pieces. For a year now, she has been resting. She said to me the other day, "Doctor, I have learned my lesson. I am not going to try to be the best teacher in the world any more. I shall be satisfied if I'm a good teacher. This breakdown has educated my conscience. Some of the things my conscience made me do to be a good teacher in years gone by, my reëducated conscience will not allow me to do in the future. I have learned my duty to myself as well as to my pupils."

In the realm of family life, I could relate scores of experiences showing how the over-conscientious mother has ruined her health by wrongfully sacrificing herself to her family. When parents have done their duty by their children, why should they worry their heads off? Perhaps the children don't do things just as we would like to have them. Maybe they have a program of their own, and run away from home to carry it out; or skip off to get married. Why should Father and Mother—particularly Mother, for she seems more inclined to do this sort of thing than Father—jeopardize health and happiness by over-conscientious worry?

The children, by the way, are seldom appreciative of this extreme conscientiousness on the part of their parents. It irks them, and is often the basis of that lack of understanding between the two generations which is so prevalent to-day.

The young mother who gets up in the middle of the night to see if the children are breathing all right is the type that had better watch her "conscientious" step. I met such a one not long ago. She was constantly worrying over her children's bringing up, and when she stopped to think that they would have to go to school in another year or two, it was too much for her. How could she bear to have any one of them out of her sight! Something would certainly go wrong in school—they would get hurt, catch diseases, choose the wrong playmates.

AS THE result of all this conscientious worry, she went to pieces, and for eighteen months had to stay away from her family. The children were left in the care of a stranger; and the father told me, confidentially, that they did very much better in the hands of this woman, that they got along better, and developed more character, than they did under their mother's solicitous care.

I am not relating this instance to detract from the value of intelligent and faithful parental training. It's the finest thing in the world, within given boundaries. But why carry things too far?

The trouble is that some people are born with an over-anxious tendency, and develop it to the point where it becomes, in medical parlance, an *anxiety neurosis*. When this tendency gets linked up with an overworked conscience—well, someone has to pay the piper.

I have seen conscience become a misshapen thing in the lives of sons and daughters, who have laid their happiness on the altar of parental duty. I admit this sacrificial spirit is beautiful—we have to admire it while condemning it—but it just isn't human. What a disastrous thing it is, for instance, when a young woman, whose brothers and sisters are all married and settled down, feels she is called upon by her conscience to devote her life to the care of her father and mother.

It may be a lovely picture of filial devotion; but what is going to happen to her when she gets old? She is seldom welcome in the homes of her married brothers and sisters. Oh, of course I know there are exceptions. But look around among your own relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and see the position of the daughter who stayed home to look after the old folks. More often than not she finds herself sitting in a doctor's office, somewhere between forty-five and sixty years of age, worn in heart and health. Usually it is too late to break the mold into which she has set; but she sees clearly that she should have got married, like her brothers and sisters, and that they should have made the care of the father and mother a joint undertaking.

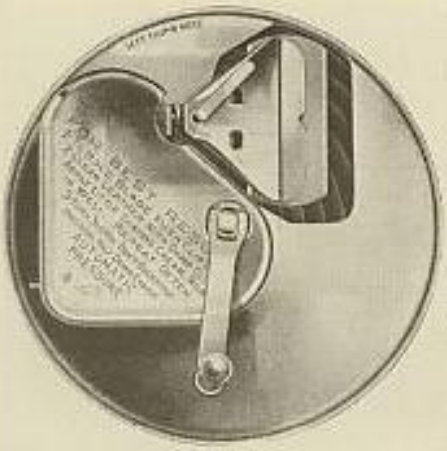
GENERALLY speaking, daughters suffer from this spirit of self-abnegation more than sons; but the other day I saw a man of forty-seven who has sacrificed himself to care for his parents. Five brothers and sisters are happily married, with children of their own; and now this bachelor, as he nears the fifty mark, is growing cynical and bitter. He considers taking care of his parents an unpleasant duty. But he is determined to see it through. Some queer twist of conscience makes him regard himself as the sole bearer of the burden, because of his unmarried state; and he does not feel at liberty to change that state.

In my medical journeys into the minds of folks, I have discovered that children are not only selfish and sometimes actually ungrateful for the loving care bestowed on them but that parents are often very selfish too. I'll go further than that and say that every parent is selfish who monopolizes the life of a son or daughter, thus preventing the child from getting married and living a natural and normal life.

I grant you, in cases where for some reason or other a son or daughter does not get married, it seems only natural that such unmarried child should live with the parents and make a home for them in their old age. Please do not misunderstand me: I do (*Continued on page 98*)

You Should Educate That "Still Small Voice" of Yours!

"UNTRAINED conscience, or what you may take to be conscience, is not an infallible guide," says Doctor Sadler. "You must *educate* your conscience. It must vary, develop, and advance, as life and knowledge vary, develop, and advance. A conscience that is 'void of offense toward God and toward men' is a tremendous health giver. But an ignorant conscience gets all mixed up with worry, fear, false beliefs about right and wrong. It can wreck the most robust health. I have seen many persons who mistook some foolish belief for the voice of conscience, and then in their efforts to live up to this notion played havoc with their lives. Your conscience, if it is divorced from reason and knowledge, is bad company. Educate it! Make it keep pace with knowledge!"



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Are You Overworking Your Conscience?

(Continued from page 40)

not refer to such voluntary celibacy. That's a matter of personal preference. I have in mind those instances where sons or daughters have deliberately thwarted their instincts, and spoiled their own lives by devoting themselves exclusively and wholly to the care of their parents. That, I believe, is both wrong and unnatural, and results in a tragedy in later life.

This hyper-conscientiousness is found in other family relations also. I have in mind two sisters. They are trying to live together in their home; but, as time goes by, their personalities are beginning to clash. They are so fearful of hurting each other's feelings that they keep themselves in hot water all the time, trying to explain their actions one to the other. If they would go right ahead and live their individual lives, and get over this squeamishness about hurting each other's feelings, it would be much better. But they are so conscientious about not offending that they both live under a horrible nervous strain.

A great light will shine forth some day when it is recognized that for people in the same family to try to live together when they grow up is going against Nature. It is Mother Nature's plan to scatter families.

And all that I have said about hyper-conscientiousness in the family applies to husbands and wives in their daily efforts to get along together. Occasionally, a wife becomes over-conscientious about her home, to the exclusion of the needs of her husband and children. The house receives attention out of all proportion to its inmates.

I want, too, in this article to warn parents against worrying over their failure wholly to eradicate inherited traits in their children. Remember that children inherit not from their parents, but rather *through* their parents, and that when you have done your duty as parents to overcome defective heredity in your children, you should cease to worry about it. Let them go out into the game of life and gain the experience that will teach them to correct these inherent weaknesses. Too many parents try to live their children's lives for them. And what is the result? The children lack moral strength and individuality, becoming pale editions of their parents.

WHILE thinking over this article, I remembered the case of an overscrupulous fellow I met many years ago. Until he was about fourteen years of age he appeared to be an average, normal boy. Then a tendency to over-conscientiousness began to manifest itself during adolescence.

He became so over-conscientious in his high-school work that he would study until two o'clock in the morning so as to be absolutely perfect in his lessons. He would also apply himself to the athletic activities of the school, goaded on by the same stern sense of duty. By the time high school was over, he was pretty well worn out.

Starting in college, he broke down after the first year, because he took everything, including himself, too seriously. After collapsing at college, his parents sent him West. Here he met a young woman who fell in love with him. But his conscience wouldn't let him fall in love with her, because of his ill health. Then he worried for fear the girl would break down or go crazy through her love for him. The result was he got so nervous that for months he was almost unmanageable.

Of course they had to bring him home, and for more than two years he moped and worried over what the girl thought of him and his conduct.

FINALLY, I ran across this lad, and after two years of careful planning and hard work, we succeeded in getting his mind directed to other things. He was getting along well until he happened in on some revival meetings. It required his attendance at only two or three of these meetings, with their strong emotional appeal, to throw him off his balance again. He looked back over his life, and decided that all his sufferings and sorrows were due to the fact that he never really had been converted.

He gave up his position, and spent weeks trying to get right with God, talking of his sins and confessing them.

This went on for six months. Fortunately, we were then able to relieve the nervous strain by getting him away for the summer to a boys' camp, where he served as physical instructor. He came back fairly well, and secured a new position. Within a few weeks his conscience got to work again, and he began criticizing the conduct of his firm's affairs, and worrying about it. Well, to make a long story short, from the time he was twenty-five years of age until he was forty his conscience led him to seek twenty-five different jobs!

And now what has happened? As he neared forty, he veered 'round the other way, and decided he had been foolish about this matter of conscience. Life, he felt, was meant to be lived and enjoyed. But instead of following out this philosophy in a sane and sensible manner, he cut loose, and went in for all the amusements and questionable entertainments that he formerly had shunned as a conscientious duty.

Naturally, he failed to find the satisfaction he was looking for, and so he reverted to one of his conscientious spells of depression. And this time he got into real trouble. Realizing that he had deliberately gone into sin, he thought that he had committed the unpardonable sin. It took another year of effort on the part of friends, ministers, and doctors to try and get this fellow straightened out; and any minute his hair-trigger conscience may get him into hot water again!

Fortunately, very few of us inherit such a tremendous tendency to overscrupulousness. In fact, most of us who are born with this tendency have it to such a mild degree that we can overcome it without much difficulty.

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Generally speaking, it would do us all good to take ourselves less seriously. Let us master the art of living with ourselves as we are and the world as it is. By all means, accord conscience its proper place, but at the same time clearly recognize that human reason and trained judgment have *their* part to play in restricting its sphere of action.

I have a patient at the present time who is nearly insane as the result of religious worry. For three and one-half years he has worried about having left one church and joined another. Mind you, the same denomination! One church was a little too active and expected too much of him, and he shrank from participating in so many religious activities. Finally, he left and joined the other church. He now believes he committed a grave sin, and thinks he should go back and join the former church. Even if we allowed this in his present mental state, he would only worry more.

It will probably take six months or a year to get this man clearsighted enough to recognize that there are other duties besides religious ones in the world. I shall have to show him that it's a man's duty to provide for his family and accept his share of the responsibilities of life. While he is sick, his business partners have the whole responsibility of the concern on their hands—and that's hardly fair to them.

Through over-anxiety for his flock, and over-conscientiousness in his parish duties, a ministerial patient of mine has experienced a nervous collapse. He is in the throes of nervous prostration; and now this man, who has helped many distracted souls to find peace, is obsessed with the fear that he has committed the unpardonable sin.

I am having to use on him all of the arguments and reasons that he probably used on those he labored with in years gone by; and I am having the same trouble to get him to see reason as he doubtless had with his parishioners. However, he admitted a few days ago that it was probably true that anyone who had committed the unpardonable sin, whatever it is, would be the last to worry about having committed it. For the time being, therefore, he has accepted the idea that he has not committed such a great offense, and thus is giving nature a chance to heal his distressed soul.

AND how many times are we confronted with those over-conscientious souls who, because they have had a passing thought in their minds to commit some crime or to indulge in some moral dereliction, began brooding over their "moral" downfall. The fact that they resisted temptation, and came out victorious in the struggle between right and wrong, means nothing to them. Their overworked consciences make them feel that the thought is the equivalent of the deed. It takes only a few weeks of unnecessary self-condemnation of this kind to place them in the doctor's hands.

I am particularly eager that young men and women, or those of middle life, should not allow some minor sex or social mistake to ruin the rest of their lives. I am not saying this in order to lessen our self-respect and conscientious devotion to the seventh and to other commandments; but as a physician I am constantly meeting individuals whose pathetic stories illustrate how easy it is to commit some little indiscretion in early life, and then to magnify the moral consequences of this youthful indiscretion so that its gloomy shadow darkens the whole future.

I think the time has come when the medical profession ought to deliver people from wrong notions and exaggerated ideas along this line. We can have high ideals and steer clear of genuine moral turpitude without having to go so far afield as to make false moral issues out of youthful indiscretions, many of which are committed through ignorance or innocence. I believe such people should be set free from the fear that is ruining their lives, destroying their courage, and even preventing their getting married because of a feeling of unworthiness. In the final analysis they may be guilty of nothing more than of having committed some indiscreet but casual act. By casual I mean an act that does not necessarily deserve to have lifelong effects; one that involves no innate depravity.

I HAVE on my hands at the present time a mighty interesting case. I should call this patient the professional reformer type. He has worked so hard and so continuously, endeavoring to make the world over, and, incidentally, trying to make everybody do things just as he does them, that he has gone all to pieces.

Personally, I subscribe to the theory that it is the job of every human being to try to make the world a better place in which to live; but in doing so we should preserve a sense of values and proportions. This man I speak about had lost his, and could see no hope for the future in anyone's ideas but his own. I know that this is ticklish ground I am treading on, for we all have our pet hobbies; and I am not meaning to quarrel with a single reader about this matter. But why should some well-meaning folks suffer a nervous collapse stewing and worrying over their methods of reforming the world, when it is more than likely that other people are doing the same work in a way that is just as good, and perhaps even better? At least the matter is worth thinking over.

I do not advocate a slackening of conscience. What I advocate is the education of conscience in accordance with the light of the age. We should weave our own experience and common sense into our conscience, and check up its operation by the average of our own circle of acquaintances, and by our own race and nation.

Moreover, we must recognize that we may refrain from doing something to-day that, through more light and information, we will gladly do—with a clear conscience—to-morrow. Likewise, we may be doing things to-day with a clear conscience that, as a result of more experience and advance in education, we may cease to do to-morrow, because conscience condemns it. Conscience should vary as life varies. It is not infallible, nor is it a fixed or unalterable law on which our lives should be rigidly planned, but a power of the human intellect amenable to reason and subject to education and training.

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