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Migraine

Continued from this Journal 1996;60:448.

Wilfred Blunt, 1901–87, The compleat naturalist. A life of Linnaeus (1971)

On reading Malmis, Linnaeus was laid low by one of his recurrent attacks of migraine, which on this occasion resulted from drinking a glass of sloe gin. Sometimes it was alcohol—sour wine in particular—which brought them on, sometimes cold weather or strong wind. Or even a sharp disappointment. A few years later he recorded in his Autobiography an occasion when an attack was induced by annoyance at the loss, through a gardener's stupidity, of some long desired cochineal insects brought back for him by Daniel Rolander from Surinam.

He was a life long victim of migraine. We learn that prior to an attack he would often observe someone walking alongside him stopping perhaps to examine a flower. It was a little while before he realised that the man he saw was his Döppelgänger... Once he entered the lecture theatre prepared to take his class, when he saw someone standing at the lectern. Thinking that he had arrived before the previous lecturer had finished, he turned away, only to realise he had been looking at a specular hallucination of himself.

John Dryden (1631–1700)

For all the happiness mankind can gain
Is not in pleasure, but in rest from pain.

Jean-Marie Charcot (1825–93)

At one of his Tuesday clinics:
“Mon Dieu! It is not surprising that one cannot describe the shock of the scintillating scotoma. Many times I have experienced it. The first occasion when it happened I had, or thought I had, a firework display in front of me. Only later, from closer scrutiny, did I make out a sort of circle like one of Marshal Vaubain's fortification with its salients and recesses.”

Winifred Holtby (1898–1935)

Constant companion of my wakeful days
And uninvited bridegroom of my bed
Withdraw a little, and thy hand upraise
From my tormented head.

John Steinbeck, the wayward bus (1947)

Mrs Pritchard—“Her husband knew her headaches, and they were dreadful. They twisted her face and reduced her to a panting, sweating, grinning, quivering blob of pain. They filled a room and a house. They got into everyone around her. Mr Pritchard could feel one of her headaches through the walls... The headaches usually came when she was nervous and when things, through no fault of her own, were not going well.”

Steinbeck also touched on the extra cross that the migraine victim often bears, the accusation of malingering, here by Mrs Pritchard's unfeeling daughter, who dismissed the pain as merely “psychosomatic”. It was not so.

“They seemed to be selfish, these headaches, and yet they were not. The pain was real. No one could simulate such agonizing pain. Mr Pritchard dreaded

them more than anything in the world. A good one could make the whole house vibrate with horror.”

Alexander Pope, 1688–1744, A life by Maynard Mack (1985)

4 feet 6 inches. He was very hump-backed and deformed (Pott's disease of spine). He wore a black coat and, according to the fashion of the time, had a little sword. He was afflicted with constant headaches, sometimes so severe that he could barely see the paper he wrote upon.

George Bernard Shaw, 1856–1950

He suffered from headaches for most of his life, as illustrated by his meeting with the famous Arctic explorer, Nansen:

One afternoon after recovering from an attack, he was introduced to Nansen and asked whether he had ever discovered a headache cure. “No”, said Nansen with a look of amazement. “Have you ever tried to find a cure for headache?” “No”.

“Well that is a most astonishing thing,” exclaimed Shaw. “You have spent your life trying to discover the North pole, which nobody on earth cares tuppence about, and you have never attempted to discover a cure for headache, which every living person is crying aloud for.”

Michael Holroyd in the first volume of his biography of Shaw, *The search for love*, describes some of Shaw's attempts to overcome his monthly migraines:

Shaw's experiments encouraged in him the belief that vegetarian food might improve his general health—in particular remove the severe headaches that had started to attack him every month and this he attributed, not to anxiety or overwork, but to unscientific eating habits.

There must be benefits, he reasoned, in studying food a little instead of going on with the old unthinking habits infused on him in childhood. In a sense vegetarianism came easily to Shaw. A symptom of his neglect in Ireland had been the poor diet, the only food he had liked was the stoneground bread which his mother occasionally buttered for him. An ordinary vegetarian diet was not enough:

He was of the opinion that his diet included an excess of protein. Until he was 70 he accumulated some poison that exploded every month or six weeks in a headache that blew it off and left him quite well after disabling him for a day. He tried every available treatment to get rid of the headaches and all quite unsuccessful. He now makes uncooked vegetables, chopped or grated, and their juices with fruit, the staple of his diet and finds it markedly better than the old high protein diet of beans, lentils and macaroni.

On the 19th May he started a new novel. He had been at work on this for about a week when he began to feel ill. The new vegetarian diet had not cured his headaches and, in the belief that he was spending too much time indoors he prescribed for himself a number of rides round London on the top of an omnibus. A few days later he discovered he had smallpox.

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