

ALL THE ILLNESSES

OUR AILMENTS ARE SUCH A FASCINATING SUBJECT TO OURSELVES THAT WE FORGET HOW BORING THEY ARE TO OTHERS

ILLNESSES are catching. So is talking about illnesses. In the ordinary course of events, I do not talk about illnesses myself, because, when you come to think of it, they are not really a pleasant subject; but when everyone around you is discussing ailments, you naturally want to mention your own, and, once the ball starts rolling, I admit I can be as enthusiastic as anybody.

Yesterday, Mr. and Mrs. Jones dropped in to tea. They brought a friend with them, a Mr. Napes, and as soon as I saw Mr. Napes I knew what would happen. He had a pale, semi-cheerful face, and a slight cough which seemed to give him a sad sort of pleasure.

"You've got a bad cough, Mr. Napes?" observed my wife.

"It sounds worse than it is," explained Mr. Napes, with deprecating eagerness. "I've always had it. At least, as long as I can remember."

"You ought to take some wonderful stuff I've just heard of," said my wife.

"It sounds good," replied Mr. Napes, "but we've tried everything." The use of the plural pronoun suggested that his cough was quite a family affair. "It's a curious thing, but my father had a similar cough, and so did my grandfather."

"Sometimes I get a little tickle—" I began; but had no luck.

"Now, that's very interesting," commented Mrs. Jones. Her voice is louder than mine. "I always say these things are hereditary. Otherwise how do you account for this? All our family get breathless after they bathe! Isn't that so, John?"

"Only I don't bathe," answered Mr. Jones.

"No—you know you'd get breathless if you did!" retorted Mrs. Jones. She turned to my wife. "You know, whenever I go into the water, I always have to take a tiny drop of port afterwards. Port and a biscuit. If I don't—well, I'm done."

"I've an aunt who's just the same!" exclaimed Mr. Napes, eagerly. "Only she takes a cup of tea. She brings it in a Thermos flask."

"Port would do her more good," said Mrs. Jones.

"Well, it's very curious, but port always upsets her. She suffers from gout—"

"Ah! Don't I know!" I exclaimed. "Sometimes I get a twinge—"

"That's all nonsense about port and gout," remarked Mr. Jones. "I've proved it. My doctor said to me once, 'Give up port.' Went to another. He said, 'Drink port—it won't make any difference.' He was right. I drink my port regularly, and the gout's just the same."

"Oh, two nights ago!" sighed Mrs. Jones. "Will you ever forget it, John?" She turned to my wife. "He was up all night, my dear. Really, I began to get alarmed. The only

thing that would ease him was hot fomentations—"

"And port," added Mr. Jones.

"Well, it's a curious thing," said Mr. Napes, "but I suffer a little from gout, too, and I find that Dr. Harley's grey tablets are the best. You break them in half and swallow them whole. Or, if you've a small swallow, like a cousin of mine has—she can't swallow the smallest pill—it's a fact—you can crush them to a powder." He paused, while we all crushed one of Dr. Harley's grey tablets in our imagination, or halved it and swallowed it whole, according to the size of our swallow. "I hope you're not a sufferer?" he then asked my wife.

She had all the luck.

"No, gout doesn't trouble me—yet," she smiled, "but I'm afraid I'm getting rheumatism. I get a funny feeling sometimes all up my left arm—there! I've got it now, Jack!—but it generally goes when I've rubbed it with embrocation."

"Horse embrocation?" queried Mrs. Jones.

"Yes. The other's no good. Sometimes I get a little spasm, too, on my left side. I wonder whether that has anything to do with it?"

"Now, that's a funny thing!" I exclaimed. "The spasm I get—"

"Pass Mrs. Jones's cup, will you, Jack?" interposed my wife. "I'm sure she's ready for some more tea."

"I think you ought to see a doctor about that, my dear," said Mrs. Jones, passing me her cup as though I were a Robot. "Spasms want looking into. We had a neighbour once who neglected to go, and she got into a terrible state."

"Was it fatal?" asked Mr. Napes.

"It would have been," replied Mrs. Jones, "only she was knocked down by a motor-bus."

"Well, I don't believe in doctors," remarked Mr. Jones. "My wife is always wanting me to go and have my foot examined, because of a little swelling I've got there. Ten to one they'd tell me some cock-and-bull story—must pretend to earn their money. Might even suggest an operation. And there's that case I read about the other day, of an American doctor who operated on a man for some tumour or something, and they found it was an egg-cup."

"An egg-cup!" we all exclaimed.

"Yes. It's perfectly true. An egg-cup. I suppose he'd swallowed it."

"How extraordinary!" cried my wife.

"It's a curious thing," said Mr. Napes. "But a man swallowed fourteen keys the other day. You remember? There was a picture of them in the papers."

"And once I swallowed a three-penny-bit," I added. "Let me see, I think it was—"

"I do recall one case," chimed in my wife, "of a man—it was my brother's tutor—who swallowed a pencil. My brother says he came out in spots next day, and they never knew whether it was the pencil or the measles. By the way, I hope your children have escaped the measles, Mrs. Jones? It's simply everywhere!"

"We were spared the measles, but not the mumps. Poor little Charlie had a bad attack. But I don't think he was more swollen than I was when I had it last year. I neck swelled out to this size."

She showed us.

"Perhaps you swallowed an egg-cup," I murmured.

No one heard me. They were too full of mumpy memories. In five minutes we travelled from mumps to scarlet fever, hay fever, things in one's eye, and headaches. I began to grow slightly resentful as Mr. Napes was describing a beautiful headache he was suffering from at that moment.

"You ought to take some aspirin," suggested my wife.

"I will, when I get home," he replied.

"Would you like some now?"

He shook his head hastily. That would cure it.

"Headaches are nasty things," said Mrs. Jones, "but I'd rather have a headache than an earache."

"By Jove, yes!" I exclaimed. "Sometimes, when I lie on my right side—"

"But the worst of all is a tooth-

ache," interrupted Mr. Jones. "Don't I know it!"

"And don't I?" laughed Mr. Napes, joyously. "See that tooth?" He bared it. "I've had that stopped five times. I've been up all night with it. Next week I'm going to have it out—I shouldn't wonder."

"The last tooth I had out—" I said.

"Have it out with novocaine," advised Mr. Jones. "I don't believe in gas. I remember when they gave me gas I was ill for a week afterwards. They thought I'd never come out of it. You remember, my dear? What was the anaesthetist's name? Jobson, wasn't it?"

"No, Thomson," replied Mrs. Jones.

"The last time I took gas—" I said.

"Ah! of course. Jobson was the man who attended me that time I got that rash, and you thought it was scarlet fever."

"Once I got a rash—" I said.

"And it turned out to be scarlatina. Extraordinary tonic they gave me afterwards. It contained—"

I could stand it no more. I left the room. And returned, five minutes later, with my hand bound up.

"Jack!" cried my wife. "Whatever has happened?"

"Oh, only a slight cut," I replied, airily. "That stiff window. It broke while I was trying to close it."

I had won at last. For five minutes my cut hand held attention. After that, other shadowy ailments and memories seeming tame beside this solid fact, we left the medical arena for politics, sport, and scandal.

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"And next time," I said to my wife when they had gone, as I undid my bandage, "I really will hurt myself!"

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