

"THE CHANGE OF LIFE" IN WOMEN; WITH REMARKS ON THE PERIODS USUALLY CALLED "CRITICAL."

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I PROPOSE to offer in the present, and subsequent numbers of this Journal, a series of essays upon the subject designated by the above title, to which the candid attention of the profession is invited. It is one, not usually treated of in books to any considerable extent, and, it is feared, not regarded in general practice, in the light which nature and sound views of science would dictate; and as the investigation of it may elicit some novel reflections which are opposed to generally-received notions of the subject, I enter upon it with cautious deference to recognized au-

thority, and yet, I trust, in the spirit of independent inquiry. While I would urge that the changes in the life of woman should be met by her professional attendant, with an honest regard for her welfare—that he should consider them as *appointed times* in her history, and not as outbreaks of an erratic nature, or as accidents, in the working of a delicate machinery—I would have the profession gracefully to shrink from undue interference with the operations of nature, and save itself from the imputation of rash meddling with the wise and essential developments of natural law: that it may not be said of any of her votaries—

“—fools rush in, where angels fear to tread.”

In these times when *specialties* are becoming the order of the day in medicine; when physicians are apt to select some particular subject upon which to display their talent, and exercise their skill, there is great danger of exaggeration, both as to the nature and treatment of the particular diseases that may claim attention. And though it be true that greater light may be elaborated by such special investigations, it is well to guard against at least *extravagant error*. With reference to the matter before us, we fear there is more error than may be freely confessed. Woman herself, according to the custom of the day, has made up her mind that these changes are always more or less dangerous; and the physician is too often tempted to accord with her prejudices, and to subject her to treatment, sometimes the most unscientific in its character, and in its results, most unsatisfactory, except to the pecuniary *taste* of the prescriber. While I would not apply this remark to the whole profession, I would appeal to the observation and conviction of all, and ask—Is there any subject within the domain of medical science, that is more frequently presented by the empiric, than that of female disease?—are there not more “cures” offered through the press, and in the social circles of females, for the so-called diseases of this class, than any other? Does not almost every paper contain advertisements of specifics to conduct females safely through their “critical periods”? And even within the ranks of legitimate medicine, are there not hundreds of physicians scattered through our land, who are running, with wild enthusiasm, into false theories, and adopting injurious practice, with reference to the uterine system?

What can be more humiliating to a high standard of professional honor and probity, than to see a man, who may honestly enough, and with propriety, devote himself to the study and cure of female diseases, stoop to the practice of examining, with the eye, all cases of suspected disorder, or displacement of the uterus? taking young girls from the school or the nursery, and exposing them to the degrading practice of ocular inspection. There are cases when this course may be indicated; but to aver that the practice should become common, is an absurdity, against which all past experience in medicine, all decency in morals, and all honor in manhood, should exclaim with unceasing opposition. Instances have come to the knowledge of the writer, where through the officiousness of a so-called “womb doctor,” young ladies, just developing into maternal proportions, and experiencing the sensations peculiar to that particular age and condition, have been suspected of uterine disease,

and exposed, without the least necessity, to having the vagina dilated by a speculum or bougie, so that the operator, and friends of the patient, might have an opportunity of "seeing for themselves" the appearance of the organ. Credulous and anxious mothers, superstitious nurses, and meddling female friends, were perhaps called to witness that the diagnosis of the physician was correct, while they themselves could not judge between a natural or disordered appearance of the parts; and yet this speculum and bougie practice is becoming extremely fashionable in some places, and the physician who can boast of having *seen* the greatest number of *wombs* is esteemed worthy of more credit, than the hundreds of less officious, and yet quite as successful practitioners who have been content to use the speculum as a necessity, and not as an amusing boast.

Take, again, the other period of life, when the uterus, to use a familiar comparison, "retires from active service:" how common it is to act, at this important change, as if the organ was rebelling against a natural law, instead of yielding to an unalterable decree; and to impress the mind of the female with the belief that she is doomed during her remaining years to countless ailments, unless she submits to medical treatment. It would be just as rational for the husbandman to force open the advancing bud of spring, or to climb the trees of his forest to assist nature in stripping them of their falling leaves in autumn, as to interfere with the opening bud, or the falling leaf, in the vernal and autumnal seasons of womanhood, unless such interference is positively demanded by a departure in the constitution from a natural condition. What these departures may be—and how they are to be managed, will occupy our thoughts in future. If there are pains and sensations of an unusual nature, the doctor suspects, or says there is danger—as the function of the organ is now to cease—of cancer, or some kindred malady, and to judge that all is right, or find out what is wrong, he *exhorts* his patient into a panic; and she, wearied with undue advice, and alarmed by her own feelings, rendered morbid, and acutely sensitive by constant direction of the mind to herself, submits to *inspection*, perhaps to cauterization, and she escapes, if with nothing worse, perhaps with irritability of the organ, and deranged nervous system, that are entailed upon her for life.

We would not disclaim against specialties—we are glad to see them pursued in the hands of prudent and honest men; and no one is more deserving of the best talent and most arduous labor, that our profession can supply, than that which comprehends the entire uterine system; but we would raise a voice, and bear a testimony—be they ever so feeble—against the practice, that is becoming common in certain quarters, of placing woman in that position, in which she is made the special victim of professional cupidity, because she is taught to believe that she is peculiarly the subject of alarming disease; and if the effort now made, to shield her from offensive professional intrusion, may be in the least degree successful, while it may contribute to enlighten her as to her true position in these respects, the author will be amply rewarded for his labor.

That there are two changes in the life of women, termed *critical*, is well known to all; but that these are necessarily dangerous, is not so readily admitted. Every female of sufficient years experiences one, or

both, in the course of her history. Every careful mother, to whom has been assigned the responsible charge of rearing a daughter, knows what it is to look forward, with anxiety, to the period of pubescence in her growing child. The girl of 12 years becomes in her eyes, a new being, and after her twelfth birth-day, the watchings and fears, the doubts and hopes, that toss her heart to and fro, as she looks with maternal solicitude upon the daily course of her child, are only known to herself. But why these conflicting emotions? The child is well, she has been reared so far with a good degree of health; and whence the trembling now?

Nature has appointed a change—a *critical* period. In that girlhood is to commence a development that is to assume a woman's nature—organs of the body that have been hitherto dormant, are now to be aroused to actions, as essential to the health of their possessor, as they are, to her guileless mind, novel and mysterious—she is to grow into woman's estate. Her bones, muscles, all her tissues and organs, are to spread out with a rapidity hitherto unknown. In stature she becomes a woman, and in mind more womanly.

The mother is anxious lest any natural or artificial interruption should arrest the progress of nature; and then, as she passes on in her own circle of years, till the age of 40 or 45, she begins to experience a new train of thoughts, and to have new fears, and many anxious hours by day and night with reference to herself. The time is at hand, when nature shall visit her with the assurance that she has reached the summit of maturity, and that, henceforth, she will pass over the downward slope of life. Those very functions, the healthy manifestation of which in the child, she so much desired, and watched with so much care, are now to cease in herself; and though she may have borne children, and had a goodly heritage through all the days of her maturity, now she shrinks, and yet rejoices. She fears lest it may not be well with her, and yet would be glad because the time is past for her to become the mother of any more offspring. She wants to cross the line, and yet she falters. She knows she must, and yet she fears; she feels that she will, and yet she would not. Nature has appointed another change. In that womanhood, matured by experience and care, is now commencing the process of decline. Organs that have contributed by their operations to constitute her equal to her sphere and calling, now, as in childhood, become dormant again, and she stands upon the threshold of old age, looking fearfully forward, to years of suffering and affliction, at the very time, when, of all others, she should be cheered with a bright prospect of an easy decline, because the cessation is the kind monitor that comes, bidding her to lay aside the fears and pains of child-birth, to be released from the wearisome toil of the nursery, and in the full bloom of ripened age, crowned by experience and wisdom, to scatter about her, in the domestic circle, and amid her little community of friends, the fruits of her past labors in the field of life. It will be shown, hereafter, why woman should learn to welcome, rather than fear, this change—and why her physician should stand by her at this interesting crisis, not to alarm, but to encourage and support her.

The term of thirty or thirty-five years, that is embraced between these two periods in the life of woman, may be considered as the time of her maturity, when the organs of the body, upon which these changes depend, should be in the free exercise of their respective functions. All the processes of generation, birth, lactation, &c., that are peculiar to this stage of life, it is not, however, now my purpose to consider; ample scope being afforded for remark, upon the peculiarities that are developed at the appearance and cessation of the menses. As these are seasons in woman's history, that are anticipated by such conflicting emotions, it becomes the physician to study well the course and results of their development, both as to the moral and physical changes that are coincident with them; it is also proper for females themselves to understand their position, and to have their minds relieved of needless anxiety and fear at these times. We will offer the suggestion, as a starting point, that these changes, although called critical, are natural, and are not to be interfered with, unless some abnormal symptoms accompany them.—*New Jersey Medical Reporter.*

[To be continued.]

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[Continued from page 482, vol. 49.]

FROM the earliest period of infancy to mature age, there is a constant progression in the development of the human organism. There are organs, which may be comparatively useless in feeble infancy, that are destined, in the course of ripening years, to serve essential purposes in the human economy; while others are from month to month, and from year to year, modified in their capacity, and prepared to perform functions, which, though similar in kind, differ materially in degree. The babe, as it reposes upon its mother's bosom, careless of all surrounding objects and influences, is itself a passive being. Its eyes may be open, and appreciate the surrounding light; and yet, while the objects within its visual range may be daguerreotyped upon the miniature retina with distinctness, there is no evidence of an intelligent impression being transferred to the brain. The brain, as yet, may be considered a latent organ. It is the unpolished plate, waiting for the hand of the artist, to *change* its surface, and fit it for the reception of the impression, already pictured within the frame work of the instrument. In the lapse of time, the cerebral function becomes apparent; the child evidently exhibits the phenomenon of mental perception; thought is elaborated, and the period comes when judgment, like a feeble stem, sprouts forth, and continues to grow, through constantly multiplying changes, till it assumes the type awarded

by the Great Disposer, appropriate to the finite condition of its possessor. Again, in the early period of life, the infant is only capable of receiving such nutriment as does not require mastication; nature has indicated this, most certainly, in withholding the teeth from the child, and supplying a maternal fountain, equal to its wants. The stomach, at this stage of existence, is not capable of appropriating the stronger food that it will afterwards demand as essential to the vigor of the individual. A *change* must be wrought in the organ, to meet the *change* of circumstances—and as it may be matured, the teeth come and go again, in pairs, the jaws widen, and the muscles, covering and moving them, strengthen, so as to execute the stern demands of a *natural law*. As the brain and its appendages connected with vision, so the stomach and its appendages connected with nutrition, *change* in their size capacity and power, from year to year. And as the former may be said to be the centre of the nervous system, and the latter the centre of the nutritive system, there is a corresponding *change* in the power and susceptibility of the equalizing medium, exhibited in the nervous arrangement with which they are both essentially connected. It is the telegraph by which disorder is announced. If the brain or the nervous system becomes deranged, the stomach and nutritive system feel it, and *vice versa*: while either, with a powerful reflex action, may agitate the whole organism. Hence, the familiar examples of disease incident to the period of dentition, the details of which it will be needless to enumerate, as the reference here made to the subject of early childhood and its *changes*, is merely for the purpose of affording an analogy, from which to derive a confirmation of the doctrine, presented in the introductory essay, *viz.*, that the "changes of life" in women are natural, and not to be interfered with, unless some abnormal symptoms accompany them.

The peculiarities of childhood already noticed, are natural to both sexes; but the first great *change* to which the human female is subject, is menstruation. The word menstruation means simply a monthly flow. Its etymology does not embrace the character or quantity of the discharge, referring only to its periodicity. The organs from which it comes, are the uterus and its appendages. Its office is to transform the girl, from girlhood to the estate of a woman. It performs its office by developing a latent organ, hitherto inactive and apparently useless. Power is exhibited by the transformation—power to conceive and to mature a living human being.

The period for the appearance of the menses, called *menophania*, occurs generally in this climate between the ages of 12 and 14 years. We then have before us, at this age of female life, a new organ with its appendages, and a new function. To examine them briefly, in connection with their sympathies and relations, will be the object of this essay.

A new organ—a womb. For twelve years it has lain in its pelvic bed, without alteration, except a very gradual increase of size, to maintain its progressive relation with other parts of the economy. A truncated conoid body, flattened somewhat upon its surface, nearly an inch in thickness, about twice that length, and in breadth perhaps midway between the two. It has a body and a neck, with a slight fissure or cavity

occupying its interior, and of the same shape, terminating below in a corresponding opening, called its mouth, or *os uteri*.

Its appendages—Fallopian tubes, situated above and on either side, communicating with the upper angles of the internal cavity, by extremely small openings, and extending laterally four or five inches, at first straight and narrow, but in their course extremely tortuous, till they terminate in a wide fringe, called by anatomists the *fringed extremity*.

The ovaries—two ovoid bodies, containing a clear fluid, placed on each side of the uterus, and supported by the uterine ligaments, into which one of the tendrils of the fringed extremity of the tube before described terminates in order to form a direct communication with the cavity of the uterus.

The vagina—a canal or opening five or six inches in length, embracing the neck of the uterus above, and terminating externally.

These varied and complicated structures spring speedily into new life—become sensitive and excitable. The entire system sympathizes with the effort, and there is a rapid change in the whole being—a change too familiar to need detailed description.

Consider for a moment, however, the extent of this change. The womb, and its immediate tributaries, if I may so call its appendages, are not only concerned, but they make a demand upon the heart, and through it upon the entire circulatory system—the spinal marrow, and through it the entire nervous structure—the brain, and through it the intellect and moral nature, until all are forced into the work. The heart beats more vigorously perhaps, and the pulse is more rapid. The nervous force is distributed, it may be with some inequality and excitement. The brain is more acute, and the moral sensibilities more intense. Such a general change in the habits of the constitution, in the character and development of mental phenomena, in the degree and force of moral impressions, renders this period one of great interest, while the organs concerned in this process are being gradually developed. Their peculiar function appears at once—sometimes without premonition. The discharge often comes on in a moment, or the child may rise from bed in the morning, alarmed by the presence of a bloody flow from her body, she knows not whence, or how; and if the general health be good, if her mode of life has been natural, if her mind has not been over-taxed, and her body subjected to irregular pressure or constraint, it comes even suddenly, without danger—but more of this hereafter.

What a wonderful provision of nature. It affords to the human female a characteristic mark, not known to any other being—a mark distinguished by a sanguineous flow from the uterus, every lunar month, which continues from three to six days, and measures in quantity from eight to ten ounces. Does it cause the general development of the system, or is it the result of growth in the individual? This is a question unsettled by physiologists; all we can say upon the subject is, that the menstrual development is coincident with the general increase of size and power in the mental and physical frame—that its occurrence makes an important *change* in the habitudes of the individual, and that it is a natural appearance, and essential to a healthy condition of mind and

body. Its sympathies, then, are with every part of the human structure because it maintains a relation to every part : without it, there cannot be perfection in development. With it, properly regulated and sustained, there may a perfect existence. If its appearance is modified by excess, or the reverse, there is a corresponding modification in its relations to other organs, its sympathies become morbid, and disease is the result. So, again, there may be a power over the uterine system, employed by morbid changes occurring in other organs : a power sufficient to arrest the menstrual flow, to diminish or to increase it. As has been said already, the telegraph by which these sympathies are conducted, is the medium of equalizing disturbed and opposing forces ; and if we regard not the nervous system in our therapeutic appliances to disorders of menstruation, we shall fail to display that tact and wisdom which should ever emanate from and adorn the medical profession.—*New Jersey Med. Reporter.*

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[Continued from page 57.]

In the changes to which reference has been made, there is an allusion to the power, or capacity of the female system; the power exercised by the generative organs, upon other parts of the body, and the reciprocal influence or control, felt by these organs, from other parts. Leaving, for the present, the question of diseased action, we may consider these congregate systems in their normal dependencies on each other.

Power is a significant word. It implies the exercise of some inherent force. If that force is latent, its exhibition proves the power of development. It is active—it is the *vis a tergo* through which the life force speaks in the progressive existence of the being. Without it there can be no growth. The wheels of life cannot move in their circle of organic structures. The machinery by which the productions of the animal are evolved, must of necessity be arrested; and certainly, as the wise man has said, will "the pitcher be broken at the fountain." Death is the result of a want of power, whether it be from disease, or the natural wearing out of the thread of life. This suggests the idea of the *limited* nature of this motive power: limited, because the life of the animal is itself confined within certain bounds; and if it be limited, it may be modified. It may be excessive in its manifestations at one particular part of the body; or other and distant influences may take from it a portion of the energy allotted to that part, by which it must necessarily suffer.

Now in the change of girlhood, called menstruation, there is not only strong evidence of this power, but of its action through sympathy. The uterine system being the great central characteristic of female life, around which moves the circle of all the mental, moral and physical phenomena, peculiar to this stage of existence, the flow may be affected through either of these media, both as to the time of its appearance, and its character. For example—if the mind should be over-taxed, and the vital force summoned to the support of the mental effort, to a degree beyond its share, the uterine supply may be measurably withheld, and the production which should result from a fair and equable working of the machinery, may not be evolved. The law of sympathy, in full force;

in such a case, between the mind, which maintains its supremacy, and the struggling uterus, the latter is robbed of its proportion of vital energy, and the whole system, thus disturbed in its sympathies and relations, gives evidence of disorder in some form. Again, a fright, or any strong emotion, may re-act upon the uterine organs, and produce an excessive flow of the menses. And yet again—a physical injury, or shock, as a sudden fall, or fatiguing exercise, may, by a reflex movement, contribute to the hasty if not premature development of the uterine flow, by the operation of the same immutable principle.

The uterus, that has been dormant for years, and is now aroused, producing a new fluid, by which its capacity may be known and measured, possesses the power of conception. In this function, likewise, it demands the sympathies of the entire being, of which it forms a part. The mental, moral and physical attributes of that being are exercised in all its performances. The impressions that fasten themselves upon the mind, the moral emotions which spring up simultaneously in the heart, and the physical changes that occur, all bear an interesting and an important relation to each other, and each contributes its portion to maintain the uterus in its office. The new organ, and its appendages, are all alike concerned. The uterus itself—its tubes—its ovaries—its vagina—each has a share in the *change*. The absence or inability of either, will impair or destroy the perfection and harmony of the arrangement, and the uses it is intended to serve. There is likewise power to *mature* a living being. The generative apparatus developed now, and in the fulfilment of a natural law, is still undergoing *change*. Menstruation and conception have already occurred. The speck that forms the embryo, must grow out of its embryonic state, and assume its foetal life. The foetus in utero must develop its proportions in due season, and then become a living being in the world of life without. The changes in the size, shape, &c., of the embryo and foetus, are marked by corresponding changes in the habits, feelings and tastes of the mother, all of which are striking, but too frequently unregarded, if not unobserved. Mark them—the uterus, from a passive organ, some two inches in length, gradually enlarges, rises out of the pelvis, extends upwards towards the chest, and widens laterally, till it occupies nearly the entire abdomen. In texture it is also altered. From an apparently solid mass of muscle, divided by a single fissure, it is stretched into a thin texture, till distinct fibres are seen extending in various directions; and the internal cavity, instead of being a thread-like cleft in the substance of the organ, becomes the residence of a living being, of human form and dimensions. The Fallopian tubes are pressed aside; the ovaries crowded out of their place; the vagina laden with a heavy weight, and often enormously congested; the bladder flattened, and the intestines greatly compressed. For six months, at least, this state of things is experienced in a greater or less degree, until the time of parturition comes, when, by the sudden removal of the contents of the womb, it collapses into its former state; not, however, by a gradual decline, but by the most heroic throes of nature, in the exhibition of tremendous power. And with its return, its appendages follow, and take their wonted places, the viscera are re-placed, and the whole organism again restored.

Let us not overlook the fact, that with the occurrence of conception, the menses cease to flow, and that with the close of pregnancy lactation commences. Cessation of the menses at the recurrence of gestation, is a natural and legitimate consequence. It may be true that there are exceptions to this rule, but the rule is still the same. And it is an obviously wise one. The womb, when menstruating, performs a function widely different from what it is called to in the process of gestation, and it may not exert two opposing forces at the same time. Lactation has likewise its separate design—a design affecting not merely the child, that is to be nourished at the maternal fountain, but one adapted to protect the constitution of the mother. The breasts, in furnishing a supply of nutriment, allow the womb, to which they are allied by a near sympathetic relation, to rest, perhaps for a whole year, during which time the female is saved the toils and trials of the pregnant condition. All this is natural. The vast changes that have been described, as occurring during the long period of utero-gestation, from the time of its commencement to its close, are all in obedience to the law of life—all natural; and the physician does not interfere to arrest, or scarcely to modify them. Take, for example, the “morning sickness,” that passes like a wave through the whole economy, disturbing the repose of almost every organ, and for three consecutive months subjects its victim to harassing discomforts, that no medicine can relieve. The vomiting and general distress, dependent upon this condition of the system, is not disease, unless pregnancy is disease. It is a symptom of gestation; and if there be no departure from health in the cause, the symptom cannot be morbid. The experience of the profession everywhere, and in all times, corroborates this view of the subject. As far back as the days of Hippocrates, the illustrious father of medicine declared—“if the catamenia are suppressed, without being followed by rigor or fever, *but by disinclination for food*, pregnancy may be suspected.” Who, then, would treat the vomiting of pregnancy as gastritis? or who would subject his patient, under such circumstances, to a “course of mercury,” for example, as he might be disposed to do if pregnancy did not exist? As a general rule, no treatment is required in the pregnant condition, if the patient will but observe ordinary hygienic rules. So when the period is at an end, and the child is born, but little medication, if any, is necessary, unless disease may interfere and demand professional aid.

In all these changes, striking and wonderful as they are, nature is the kind physician, who counsels, and whose gentle hand directs the power that accomplishes them all. We cannot estimate their extent, because they are performed in silence and obscurity. As the hidden seed in the bosom of the soil, that shoots forth, and grows, and becomes the widespread shelter, and the prolific bearer of goodly fruit, performs all its wonderful changes in unobserved stillness, moved by a concealed vitality, that no art can supply—so do the “changes in the life of women,” that are connected with the uterine system, go on in the mysterious chambers of her own organism. The hidden uterus, aroused from its long lethargy, grows, and develops the whole being, first giving evidence of its power to execute the command to “Be fruitful and multiply,” and then, by

the same inherent *vis vitale*, spreading out and affording shelter for a living being, and bearing it into the world.

With all these physical changes and developments, we should not overlook the differences in moral and mental character. The changes in these respects occurring at mature girlhood, have already been noticed; but as those presented during the course of utero-gestation, too often escape observation, perhaps some of them may be re-called here. The morbid temperament, often irritable, and exceedingly sensitive, and it may be desponding; and the seemingly disordered, and even loathsome appetite, in the early months of the pregnant female, must be familiar to the careful observer. With the "disinclination for food," or the unnatural appetite, and the distressing sickness, it would seem reasonable to anticipate a sensitive temper, a disposition for retirement, even from the fondest friends, and a morbid feasting of the mind on imaginary ills and delusive fears. But when we can realize these exhibitions of character, as the result of uterine disturbance acting sympathetically upon the brain, we shall reach a physiological fact, that may serve as an important purpose in other manifestations of *change* that may occur in the uterine function. It is not urged that these peculiar displays of physical phenomena are universal; but that they, or some kindred exhibitions of perverted taste both mental and physical, are exceedingly common, no one will attempt to deny. Take a lady, for example, of refined and amiable disposition, who, during the first few months of pregnancy shows a character just the reverse of her accustomed habit; and it cannot be satisfactorily accounted for, in any other way. She is dissatisfied with herself, mortified and grieved, and yet she cannot control her feelings and desires. They are indications of a state of the system, at once peculiar and astonishing; indications that point to a series of connecting influences between the thinking and the generative powers, that shows them to be intimately associated.

Now if they be so closely related, and the uterus may produce such marked changes in the mental character, why not the brain re-act upon the womb, and create a corresponding diversity of effects? For the time comes, in the history of female life, when the mind acts with mature vigor, and the generative organs decline.

Let us explain. The changes in the uterus connected with conception and its immediate results, are independent of mind. They occur when exposed to the natural stimulus, whether the will of the individual concurs or not. The mind may oppose, and yet the cell that is lodged in the womb shall grow out of its own life, into its embryo state, and then onward to its foetal existence. But not so in the dreaded "change of life," occurring in more advanced years. When the uterus will have lived out its term of active service, return to its first estate, and become again a passive organ; the mind will have just grown up to its full proportions, and be capable of acting with a corresponding power. It is therefore suggested, that if the individual be taught to anticipate this change, with cheerful expectations, many of the ills now attendant upon it may be avoided.

Let us inquire what they are.—*New Jersey Medical Reporter.*

[To be continued.]