MEDICAL PRACTICE

Spring Books

Gilded youth gone

GEORGE DUNEA

From a world long vanished comes the story of a Cassanova who spent his days picking up pretty young women. Standing one day in a streetcar and noticing a potential conquest sitting several seats away, he casually moved up, straightened his tie, and gave a sharp cough to attract her attention. The young woman stood up and gave him her seat. At that moment, the story has it, this aging Cherubino realised that his days of philandering were over. Life is finished, he might have thought gloomily, hurled with singular abruptness into the dark despondency that Mr Geoffrey Ross calls the male menopause. But for the more usual victim the onset of this emotional crisis is more insidious, and "the storm clouds start gathering when he passes a mirror and instead of seeing a gilded youth reflected sees a man on the verge of middle age looking back at him," confirming what he suspected: he is getting old.

Like aleukaemic leukaemia the term is a misnomer, an impossibility, and the author freely admits it. But he thinks that it has a more "evocative ring." It is certainly more catchy. Though denoting a largely emotional crisis, the term menopause has the added potential advantage of giving a man a pretext for behaving irrationally. It also gives the wife, perhaps menopausal herself at this time, a certain satisfaction, especially if she has grown tired of lovemaking and is looking for excuses. Not that all men at this stage of their lives are sexually inactive, or suffer from what is called in the book the No-Go complex. Indeed, there is a whole chapter on Go-Go men—who, faced with the thought of obsolescence, are out constantly proving that their virility has remained unimpaired.

Only about a fifth of Western men are said to escape the male menopause, and for the others, whom Mr Ross calls the M-M men, the syndrome is no joke. Indeed, neither is the book. Expecting from the cover to read something amusing or even burlesque, I discovered a serious book, worth reading by all but the 20% who grow old without ever falling victims to M-M. But for the others M-M is described as a plague that strikes unpredictably and at random somewhere between the "thirty-ninth birthday and the late forties." And it all makes interesting reading. Mr Ross, a journalist and freelance author, has done

his homework well, though he should not write about high blood pressure being caused by stress and hypertension.

So, in essence this is a book about the beginnings of getting old, about trouble at the threshold of middle age. And, while there is always an unavoidable sadness associated with the consciousness that life is ebbing away, the intensity of the crisis this may engender is not always appreciated. The symptoms, largely emotional, are said to last about four years; hence the inappropriateness of the term menopause, quite apart from its being "fairly insulting," as the author himself admits. Described as an illogical but all consuming urge for change, for changing jobs or partners, associated with a constant sense of depression and frustration, it leaves its victim helpless and isolated, for the wife says he should pull himself together, his friends don't understand, and the doctor may also not be supportive. After all, "how can anyone be sympathetic with a man who whines?" Added to the urge for change there is often a sense of failure, a feeling of having missed out on life or being cheated, accompanied by behavioral changes, listlessness, aggressiveness, boredom, irritability, poor work performance, apathy, restlessness, day dreaming, divorce, mistresses, insomnia, or waking up at 3 am in a state of panic.

Then there are chapters in this book about the Bad News, all that happens as the body grows old, and a few Good News about things that don't happen, at least not until later. Hangovers are poorly tolerated by the M-M man; alcohol and drugs may become a problem; voyeurism and latent homosexuality may become manifest, as may exhibitionism. Some M-M men "dress young" and thus become ridiculous in the eyes of the really young. But, reassuringly, getting up at night to urinate at the age of 40 is more likely a symptom of too much alcohol at bedtime rather than of prostatism.

The second half of the book is the survival manual. The M-M man is given a sound dose of philosophy and reassurance, told that life begins at 40, but that henceforth he must resign himself to stay out of the fast lane and keep to the left, at least in the United Kingdom. But he must eat right. He should avoid smoking, and especially alcohol, which could help make his face red,

baggy, and unattractive. He should have a physical examination because he may have an underlying defect that could lead to a premature recall to the factory. Then there is much about venereal disease, cholesterol, hypertension, continuation or resumption of sex (but again in the slow lane), much about diet (not more than three eggs a week, no sugar, no cream, little salt, no fried foods, and easy on cheese). There are ideal weight tables in pounds and kilograms, menus, a whole chapter on dressing smartly and successfully, with advice to buy the right size, avoid fancy dress, and keep the clothes clean, for "nothing

gives a clearer picture of an unsuccessful man or contributes more to the impression of a man whose life is going slowly downhill and falling apart than dirty clothes." And finally there is Fitness Plan X 3, to recondition the body, 13 pages with pictures of exercises for men over 40, that should help all but the most menopausal of M-M men to keep their strength and vitality and "lay down foundations for making the most of middle age."

How to Survive the Male Menopause. Geoffrey Aquilina Ross. (Pp 120; £6.95.) Elm Tree Books. 1984.

Funny things are everywhere

W K COWAN

Thank you, editor, for sending me this book in time for Christmas. Undoubtedly, many copies were bought and appreciated as Christmas gifts; in our house it joined the *Penguin Book of Limericks* and *Piper's Places* as light bedside holiday reading.

As most readers will know, William St Clair Symmers senior is an unusual man (I almost expected to find a limerick about him in the *Penguin Book*), now retired from the chair of pathology at Charing Cross Medical School after some 29 years and chiefly known to the world of pathology as editor of the British six volume textbook *Systemic Pathology*, in which his personal contributions show a remarkable breadth and depth of knowledge. He has found a wider readership as a collector and presenter of medical curiosities, some, as the blurb says, mortal, some of them trivial, and almost all of them worrying to somebody. Selections from this curious and exotic collection have been presented to many audiences in divers parts of the world and in 1970 several were published in the *BMJ*.¹ Encouragement by colleagues led to publication in 1974 of *Curiosa*, "a miscellany of clinical and pathological experiences," an entertaining and instructive (for me) collection of 50 cases. It was hinted then that should the sales be encouraging, a further batch, *Exotica*, would appear, and that a third and final volume could complete the presentation of some 150 cases. Alas, inflation, austerity, and perhaps the sales of *Curiosa*, have resulted in an *Exotica* of but 25 chapters, printed direct from the typescript, and there is slender hope it seems, of the remaining 75 cases being published at all.

I have to say at once that I did not enjoy *Exotica* quite as much as *Curiosa*. An obvious reason was that *Exotica* was only half the length; I am one who would have enjoyed all 150 cases presented à la *Curiosa*, but there are other reasons and these relate to style. The author himself has typed the book with enviable skill and only one or two mistakes but the versatility of his electronic typewriter has intoxicated him at times and I found the profusion of typefaces (up to seven different examples on one page) distracting. Being his own typesetter has allowed him little internal jokes; thus he can split "cowpathy" (an ironic neologism for disease of cows transmissible to man) on to two lines and hyphenate it into "cowpat-hy," but sometimes I was left wondering whether I was detecting a misprint or missing a *double entendre*; are "peptic ulsters," "lobar pneumonia" (sic), and "air-raïd sirenes" true mistakes or (as I suspect) private jokes, renderings of the way these words were pronounced? And, if I have missed the point of these subtleties, I argued, maybe the sentence that begins "Perhaps, of course, when the teaching of pathology is changing so much . . ." contains a nuance that has escaped me.

After a note on the frontispiece, an introduction, a valedictorian, a disclaimer, the contents, and another disclaimer we arrive at chapter 1 of this too short book. The style may suggest to some that it could have been shorter. How about this? "A surgeon,

recently irked by a pompous young pathologist's manner of phrasing a rebuke, sought to reconfirm and reinforce clinical supremacy by provocatively and in aggravated form repeating the offence that had goaded his colleague in trying an insufficiently considered means of obtaining better collaboration in the shared exercise of biopsy diagnosis." Henry James, perhaps? W St C's love of footnotes, and a necessity of a working knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, and lexicography if the reader is to appreciate all the little asides such as "Initial assumption that she was . . . ponaprothymic (if not frankly ponophobic), even

Not a Tudor laundry—these ladies are trying to turn base metal into gold. The rare treatise on alchemy from which this illustration is taken fetched £1150 at Sotheby's recently in the sale of Dr Walter Pagel's library. Dr Pagel, who died last year, was an outstanding scholar and medical historian "equally familiar with early sources in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and the modern languages, many of which he could speak and write fluently"; his collection included editions of Aristotle, Galen, Paracelsus, Helmont, and Harvey as well as works on philosophy, metaphysics, and mysticism. Even Sotheby's were surprised by the response to the sale: the final figure of £126 030 was well above their highest estimate.