Welcome to topic number 37... today we will be discussing the disorder known as “brain fever”, used throughout the stories in the Canon.
In five stories of the canon, “brain fever” strikes five different characters: Alice Rucastle in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” Nancy Barclay in “The Adventure of the Crooked Man,”...
While the twenty-first century reader might consider this illness a quaint trope of Victorian literature, the medical establishment recognized it as a serious physical ailment and treated accordingly.
The contemporary concept of “fever” as an elevated body temperature does not correspond to the nineteenth century definition.
Prior to the discovery of microorganisms and their role in diseases, “fevers” could be contracted from the environment (“miasma” or bad air) or by the body creating its own poison.
The term “fever” was used to describe the disease itself, rather than a symptom...
...and was used as the diagnosis for cholera, influenza, typhus, and smallpox, the result of injury, bad air, violent emotion, irregular bowels, and extremes of heat and cold.
The specific diagnosis of brain fever grew out of the classical concept of “phrensy,” used to describe a delirium brought on by fever and an inflammation of the brain.
Even after the delirium subsided, mental confusion could remain and permanently affect the individual.
A description of brain fever appeared in medical texts up to the late 1800s and was marked by “acute pain in the head with intolerance of light and sound;...
...watchfulness, delirium; flushed countenance, and redness of the conjunctiva, or a heavy suffused state of the eyes;...
...quick pulse, frequently spasmodic twitchings or convulsions, passing into somnolency, coma, and complete relaxation of the limbs.”
The most notable aspect of this particular disease, and very relevant to those affected in the canon...
...was its sudden onset in seemingly healthy people, often occurring after a particularly “severe shock to the nervous system.”
The shock could occur from fear, anxiety, disappointment, intense study, lack of sleep, and, of particular concern, intense thought or study.
For those in the canon, an intense shock is behind the five cases: Alice Rucastle is pestered by her father to sign over her inheritance to the point of her exhaustion;...
...Percy Phelps suffers for more than two months following the theft of the treaty he had been copying; Nancy Barclay is rendered unable to testify in her own defense following her husband’s murder;...
...Rachel Howells is a “black-eyed shadow” after she is involved in the death of her former lover; and Sarah Cushing takes to her bed after she understands her role in the death of her sister and former lover.
In some of these cases, the victim recovers once the mystery is solved and the trauma alleviated...
...but some are first treated as practice dictated at that time.
For example, Alice Rucastle had her hair cut off to relieve the pressure on her brain.
Victorian literature employed the concept of brain fever as a means of indicating the power of the emotional trauma or shock a character received...
...but for the medical community of the time, it was a true and identifiable condition...
requiring the same attention and treatment as a broken bone or laceration from physical trauma.
So we have completed topic 37 in our series...

Yes, but we'll be back with another topic soon...
References for this topic:

- http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/health-and-medicine-in-the-19th-century/
Baker Street Elementary

“The Life and Times in Victorian London”

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