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The Reluctant Sleepers

NOWHERE else in Sartor Resartus is Professor Teufelsdröckh more lyrical than when he looks down at midnight from his attic window: "Upwards of five hundred thousand two-legged animals without feathers lie around us, in horizontal position; their heads all in nightcaps, and full of the foolishlest dreams." There is much more of it: Carlyle's night thoughts, mostly written in broad daylight, were exuberant and protracted. If, however, the Professor were looking down from his window in 1954, he would have to be less sweeping in his vision. The lights could still be burning from sick-rooms, from places of happiness and misery; but before the Professor became rhetorical he would have to pause over the thought that the occupants of some lighted rooms had merely been sitting up for a little late listening.

There are, apparently, more of these people than might be expected by visitors who notice our simple habits. Our way of life does not give them much encouragement. Timetables and meal hours are arranged everywhere to suit the early riser and sleeper. Yet there are people who like to be stirring while the moon climbs higher and their neighbours' houses sink into darkness. Some of them are not very good at waking in the morning. The day starts too soon for them; they have been born out of their true time and place and would be happier if, like the handful of millionaires for whom TIFH recently put across a special programme, they could be roused by the voice of an announcer saying, "The time is twelve noon. Good morning everybody!" But there are others, not really nonconformists, who like their days to end gradually. A temperament with a tincture of phlegm makes them willing to be motionless. They have got used to being

up, and cannot bring themselves to begin again the tedious round of sleeping and waking, undressing and dressing, fasting and eating. They like to sit on, soothed by a radio tuned to a companionable murmur, and their thoughts half-way to dreams.

It might be found, however, that the persistent late-sitter has finished his listening in the middle part of the evening. He will have heard what he wanted to hear, and nothing else. This man likes to feel the quietness of the house, and beyond it the stillness of the suburb, the town or the countryside. There is no better time, he will say, for reading and thinking. True, he may be interrupted. If the night is calm, the house itself will throw out little sounds, not always easy to identify. They are magnified in the silence, so that the flutter of a moth's wings at the window can be like the tapping of fingers. And this sort of thing, oddly enough, can be more disturbing than a brisk commotion from the radio. Perhaps the thoughts men have in their late sittings are also magnified beyond their true worth. Silence and tiredness, especially if the tiredness is half-concealed, can make a framework for illusion. Most of us remember nights when words spoken or written seemed to have the glow of truth and prophecy, whereas in the morning they were sadly disappointing. The senses are not as alert as they seem to be; it is the quieter world, and not our minds, which supplies the clearness. And in New Zealand, where cities are small against the hills and the plains, the quietness can be disconcerting, especially if it comes in suddenly at the end of a book or when the radio clicks into silence. Even Professor Teufelsdröckh, if he found himself alone at midnight in one of our distant suburbs, might postpone his soliloquy and go off meekly to bed.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 2, 1954.