

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM DIABOLISM TO HYSTERIA.

I. THE EPIDEMICS OF "POSSESSION."

IN the foregoing chapter I have sketched the triumph of science in destroying the idea that individual lunatics are "possessed by devils," in establishing the truth that insanity is physical disease, and in substituting for superstitious cruelties toward the insane a treatment mild, kindly, and based upon ascertained facts.

The Satan who had so long troubled individual men and women thus became extinct; henceforth his fossil remains only were preserved: they may still be found in the sculptures and storied windows of mediæval churches, in sundry liturgies, and in popular forms of speech.

But another Satan still lived—a Satan who wrought on a larger scale—who took possession of multitudes. For, after this triumph of the scientific method, there still remained a class of mental disorders which could not be treated in asylums, which were not yet fully explained by science, and which therefore gave arguments of much apparent strength to the supporters of the old theological view: these were the epidemics of "diabolic possession" which for so many centuries afflicted various parts of the world.

When obliged, then, to retreat from their old position in regard to individual cases of insanity, the more conservative theologians promptly referred to these epidemics as beyond the domain of science—as clear evidences of the power of Satan; and, as the basis of this view, they cited from the Old Testament frequent references to witchcraft, and, from the New Testament, St. Paul's question as to the possible

bewitching of the Galatians, and the bewitching of the people of Samaria by Simon the Magician.

Naturally, such leaders had very many adherents in that class, so large in all times, who find that

“ To follow foolish precedents and wink
With both our eyes, is easier than to think.” *

It must be owned that their case seemed strong. Though in all human history, so far as it is closely known, these phenomena had appeared, and though every classical scholar could recall the wild orgies of the priests, priestesses, and devotees of Dionysus and Cybele, and the epidemic of wild rage which took its name from some of these, the great fathers and doctors of the Church had left a complete answer to any scepticism based on these facts; they simply pointed to St. Paul's declaration that the gods of the heathen were devils: these examples, then, could be transformed into a powerful argument for diabolic possession.†

But it was more especially the epidemics of diabolism in mediæval and modern times which gave strength to the theological view, and from these I shall present a chain of typical examples.

As early as the eleventh century we find clear accounts of diabolical possession taking the form of epidemics of raving, jumping, dancing, and convulsions, the greater number of the sufferers being women and children. In a time so rude, accounts of these manifestations would rarely receive permanent record; but it is very significant that even at the beginning of the eleventh century we hear of them at the extremes of Europe—in northern Germany and in southern Italy. At various times during that century we get additional glimpses of these exhibitions, but it is not until the beginning of the thirteenth century that we have a renewal of them on a large scale. In 1237, at Erfurt, a jumping disease

* As to eminent physicians' finding a stumbling-block in hysterical mania, see Kirchhoff's article, p. 351, cited in previous chapter.

† As to the Mænads, Corybantes, and the disease "Corybantism," see, for accessible and adequate statements, Smith's *Dictionary of Antiquities* and Lewis and Short's *Lexicon*; also reference in Hecker's *Essays upon the Black Death and the Dancing Mania*. For more complete discussion, see Semelaigne, *L'Aliénation mentale dans l'Antiquité*, Paris, 1869.

and dancing mania afflicted a hundred children, many of whom died in consequence; it spread through the whole region, and fifty years later we hear of it in Holland.

But it was the last quarter of the fourteenth century that saw its greatest manifestations. There was abundant cause for them. It was a time of oppression, famine, and pestilence: the crusading spirit, having run its course, had been succeeded by a wild, mystical fanaticism; the most frightful plague in human history—the Black Death—was depopulating whole regions—reducing cities to villages, and filling Europe with that strange mixture of devotion and dissipation which we always note during the prevalence of deadly epidemics on a large scale.

It was in this ferment of religious, moral, and social disease that there broke out in 1374, in the lower Rhine region, the greatest, perhaps, of all manifestations of "possession"—an epidemic of dancing, jumping, and wild raving.

The cures resorted to seemed on the whole to intensify the disease: the afflicted continued dancing for hours, until they fell in utter exhaustion. Some declared that they felt as if bathed in blood, some saw visions, some prophesied.

Into this mass of "possession" there was also clearly poured a current of scoundrelism which increased the disorder.

The immediate source of these manifestations seems to have been the wild revels of St. John's Day. In those revels sundry old heathen ceremonies had been perpetuated, but under a nominally Christian form: wild Bacchanalian dances had thus become a semi-religious ceremonial. The religious and social atmosphere was propitious to the development of the germs of diabolic influence vitalized in these orgies, and they were scattered far and wide through large tracts of the Netherlands and Germany, and especially through the whole region of the Rhine. At Cologne we hear of five hundred afflicted at once; at Metz of eleven hundred dancers in the streets; at Strasburg of yet more painful manifestations; and from these and other cities they spread through the villages and rural districts.

The great majority of the sufferers were women, but there were many men, and especially men whose occupations

were sedentary. Remedies were tried upon a large scale—exorcisms first, but especially pilgrimages to the shrine of St. Vitus. The exorcisms accomplished so little that popular faith in them grew small, and the main effect of the pilgrimages seemed to be to increase the disorder by subjecting great crowds to the diabolic contagion. Yet another curative means was seen in the flagellant processions—vast crowds of men, women, and children who wandered through the country, screaming, praying, beating themselves with whips, imploring the Divine mercy and the intervention of St. Vitus. Most fearful of all the main attempts at cure were the persecutions of the Jews. A feeling had evidently spread among the people at large that the Almighty was filled with wrath at the toleration of his enemies, and might be propitiated by their destruction: in the principal cities and villages of Germany, then, the Jews were plundered, tortured, and murdered by tens of thousands. No doubt that, in all this, greed was united with fanaticism; but the argument of fanaticism was simple and cogent; the dart which pierced the breast of Israel at that time was winged and pointed from its own sacred books: the biblical argument was the same used in various ages to promote persecution; and this was, that the wrath of the Almighty was stirred against those who tolerated his enemies, and that because of this toleration the same curse had now come upon Europe which the prophet Samuel had denounced against Saul for showing mercy to the enemies of Jehovah.

It is but just to say that various popes and kings exerted themselves to check these cruelties. Although the argument of Samuel to Saul was used with frightful effect two hundred years later by a most conscientious pope in spurring on the rulers of France to extirpate the Huguenots, the papacy in the fourteenth century stood for mercy to the Jews. But even this intervention was long without effect; the tide of popular superstition had become too strong to be curbed even by the spiritual and temporal powers.*

* See Wellhausen, article *Israel*, in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, ninth edition; also the reprint of it in his *History of Israel*, London, 1885, p. 546. On the general subject of the demoniacal epidemics, see Isensee, *Geschichte der Medicin*, vol. i, pp. 260 *et seq.*; also Hecker's essay. As to the history of Saul, as a curious land-

Against this overwhelming current science for many generations could do nothing. Throughout the whole of the fifteenth century physicians appeared to shun the whole matter. Occasionally some more thoughtful man ventured to ascribe some phase of the disease to natural causes; but this was an unpopular doctrine, and evidently dangerous to those who developed it.

Yet, in the beginning of the sixteenth century, cases of "possession" on a large scale began to be brought within the scope of medical research, and the man who led in this evolution of medical science was Paracelsus. He it was who first bade modern Europe think for a moment upon the idea that these diseases are inflicted neither by saints nor demons, and that the "dancing possession" is simply a form of disease, of which the cure may be effected by proper remedies and regimen.

Paracelsus appears to have escaped any serious interference: it took some time, perhaps, for the theological leaders to understand that he had "let a new idea loose upon the planet," but they soon understood it, and their course was simple. For about fifty years the new idea was well kept under; but in 1563 another physician, John Wier, of Cleves, revived it at much risk to his position and reputation.*

Although the new idea was thus resisted, it must have taken some hold upon thoughtful men, for we find that in the second half of the same century the St. Vitus's dance and forms of demoniacal possession akin to it gradually diminished in frequency and were sometimes treated as diseases. In the seventeenth century, so far as the north of Europe is concerned, these displays of "possession" on a great scale had almost entirely ceased; here and there

mark in the general development of the subject, see *The Case of Saul, showing that his Disorder was a Real Spiritual Possession*, by Granville Sharp, London, 1807, *passim*. As to the citation of Saul's case by the reigning Pope to spur on the French kings against the Huguenots, I hope to give a list of authorities in a future chapter on *The Church and International Law*. For the general subject, with interesting details, see Laurent, *Études sur l'Histoire de l'Humanité*. See also Maury, *La Magie et l'Astrologie dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Age*.

* For Paracelsus, see Isensee, vol. i, chap. xi; also Pettigrew, *Superstitions connected with the History and Practice of Medicine and Surgery*, London, 1844, introductory chapter. For Wier, see authorities given in my previous chapter.

cases appeared, but there was no longer the wild rage extending over great districts and afflicting thousands of people. Yet it was, as we shall see, in this same seventeenth century, in the last expiring throes of this superstition, that it led to the worst acts of cruelty.*

While this Satanic influence had been exerted on so great a scale throughout northern Europe, a display strangely like it, yet strangely unlike it, had been going on in Italy. There, too, epidemics of dancing and jumping seized groups and communities; but they were attributed to a physical cause—the theory being that the bite of a tarantula in some way provoked a supernatural intervention, of which dancing was the accompaniment and cure.

In the middle of the sixteenth century Fracastoro made an evident impression on the leaders of Italian opinion by using medical means in the cure of the possessed; though it is worthy of note that the medicine which he applied successfully was such as we now know could not by any direct effects of its own accomplish any cure: whatever effect it exerted was wrought upon the imagination of the sufferer. This form of “possession,” then, passed out of the supernatural domain, and became known as “tarantism.” Though it continued much longer than the corresponding manifestations in northern Europe, by the beginning of the eighteenth century it had nearly disappeared; and, though special manifestations of it on a small scale still break out occasionally, its main survival is the “tarantella,” which the traveller sees danced at Naples as a catchpenny assault upon his purse.†

But, long before this form of “possession” had begun to disappear, there had arisen new manifestations, apparently more inexplicable. As the first great epidemics of dancing and jumping had their main origin in a religious ceremony, so various new forms had their principal source in what were supposed to be centres of religious life—in the convents, and more especially in those for women.

* As to this diminution of widespread epidemic at the end of the sixteenth century, see citations from Schenck von Grafenberg in Hecker, as above; also Horst.

† See Hecker's *Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, pp. 87–104; also extracts and observations in Carpenter's *Mental Physiology*, London, 1888, pp. 312–315; also Maudsley, *Pathology of Mind*, pp. 73 and following.

Out of many examples we may take a few as typical.

In the fifteenth century the chroniclers assure us that, an inmate of a German nunnery having been seized with a passion for biting her companions, her mania spread until most, if not all, of her fellow-nuns began to bite each other; and that this passion for biting passed from convent to convent into other parts of Germany, into Holland, and even across the Alps into Italy.

So, too, in a French convent, when a nun began to mew like a cat, others began mewing; the disease spread, and was only checked by severe measures.*

In the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformation gave new force to witchcraft persecutions in Germany, the new Church endeavouring to show that in zeal and power she exceeded the old. But in France influential opinion seemed not so favourable to these forms of diabolical influence, especially after the publication of Montaigne's *Essays*, in 1580, had spread a sceptical atmosphere over many leading minds.

In 1588 occurred in France a case which indicates the growth of this sceptical tendency even in the higher regions of the French Church. In that year Martha Brossier, a country girl, was, it was claimed, possessed of the devil. The young woman was to all appearance under direct Satanic influence. She roamed about, begging that the demon might be cast out of her, and her imprecations and blasphemies brought consternation wherever she went. Myth-making began on a large scale; stories grew and sped. The Capuchin monks thundered from the pulpit throughout France regarding these proofs of the power of Satan: the alarm spread, until at last even jovial, sceptical King Henry IV was disquieted, and the reigning Pope was asked to take measures to ward off the evil.

Fortunately, there then sat in the episcopal chair of Angers a prelate who had apparently imbibed something of Montaigne's scepticism—Miron; and, when the case was brought before him, he submitted it to the most time-honoured of sacred tests. He first brought into the girl's pres-

* See citation from Zimmermann's *Solitude*, in Carpenter, pp. 34, 314.

ence two bowls, one containing holy water, the other ordinary spring water, but allowed her to draw a false inference regarding the contents of each: the result was that at the presentation of the holy water the devils were perfectly calm, but when tried with the ordinary water they threw Martha into convulsions.

The next experiment made by the shrewd bishop was to similar purpose. He commanded loudly that a book of exorcisms be brought, and, under a previous arrangement, his attendants brought him a copy of Virgil. No sooner had the bishop begun to read the first line of the *Æneid* than the devils threw Martha into convulsions. On another occasion a Latin dictionary, which she had reason to believe was a book of exorcisms, produced a similar effect.

Although the bishop was thereby led to pronounce the whole matter a mixture of insanity and imposture, the Capuchin monks denounced this view as godless. They insisted that these tests really proved the presence of Satan—showing his cunning in covering up the proofs of his existence. The people at large sided with their preachers, and Martha was taken to Paris, where various exorcisms were tried, and the Parisian mob became as devoted to her as they had been twenty years before to the murderers of the Huguenots, as they became two centuries later to Robespierre, and as they more recently were to General Boulanger.

But Bishop Miron was not the only sceptic. The Cardinal de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris, charged the most eminent physicians of the city, and among them Riolan, to report upon the case. Various examinations were made, and the verdict was that Martha was simply a hysterical impostor. Thanks, then, to medical science, and to these two enlightened ecclesiastics who summoned its aid, what fifty or a hundred years earlier would have been the centre of a widespread epidemic of possession was isolated, and hindered from producing a national calamity.

In the following year this healthful growth of scepticism continued. Fourteen persons had been condemned to death for sorcery, but public opinion was strong enough to secure a new examination by a special commission, which reported

