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RITUAL DISEASES.

BY VICTOR G. PLARR, *M. A. Oxon. London.*

That certain diseases produce specific mental states, leading to special courses of action, is an accepted fact in medicine, but it is at least open to question, whether these states and their manifestations in action are pathological in any given case or merely ritual and imitative. It is a question, too, whether men, especially primitive men, ever rightly diagnose the disease from which certain mental and physical symptoms have arisen. Thus the bite of a mad dog led, it was anciently supposed, to dread of water, but it has now been shown that sufferers from hydrophobia are also the victims of tetanus, and that the frantic effort to open the mouth on the patient's part may very well have led onlookers to suppose him convulsed with terror of water, while of course his inability to open his jaws and consequently to swallow anything gave further support to the supposition. Hydrophobia, therefore, is in some sort a picturesque disease, an affair of the imagination. Lockjaw, not fear of water, is the result of mad dog bite. On the other hand, it is a question whether, among primitive peoples, suggestion does not play a part, leading the victim of hydrophobia either to fear water actually or to act that fear in a ritual manner.

Again, the *Sudor Anglicanus*, or Sweating Sickness, is now known to have been miliary fever in some form or other, but, in the Middle Ages, it was often artificially induced or merely imitated. A sufferer from the acute dyspepsia born of a mediaeval surfeit, let us say, was put to bed by his friends, who decided that he had the sweating sickness, and proceeded to subject him to a fixed ritual treatment. He very soon perspired profusely under heaps of bed clothes and superimposed humanity, for his friends stretched themselves across him, it is said, the father, or eldest male ascendant in the family taking the place of honour across his chest and the rest ranging themselves over the other portions of the body according to precedence. Profuse perspiration

and semi-suffocation often led to collapse and death. And then everybody was satisfied with the original diagnosis. Here, of course, we have an instance of a ritual disease deliberately manufactured.

Among primitive savages death is often treated with ritual observances by the living, who accelerate if they do not produce it. Thus in Messrs. Spencer and Gillen's „Northern Tribes of Central Australia" (1904) we have a strange account of the death-ritual among the Warramunga.

A medicine-man of middle age is very ill of the dysentery, but his colleagues decide that the bone of a dead man is inside him. The lubras, and then the men of the tribe, prostrate themselves on his body, till „gradually the struggling mass of dark bodies began to loosen, and then we could see that the unfortunate man was not actually dead, though the terribly rough treatment to which he had been subjected had sealed his fate."

Such rituals of death, based upon a wrong conception of the nature of death as of something accidental, must have been common among innumerable savage tribes in many ages. Akin to them are the rituals of birth, and our own deathsigns, of which latter Mistress Quickly gives some account when describing the demise of Sir John Falstaff.

„For after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a' babbled of green fields" („Henry the Fifth", Act. II, Scene 3).

With this we may compare the Signs of Death as set forth in an old work on „Domestic-Medicine" or rather chapbook of recipes, „A Thousand Notable Things", which continued to enjoy a vogue in country parts as late as the close of the eighteenth century.

„If the forehead of the sick wax red, and his left eye become little, and the corner of his eye run, and his brows fall down, and his nose wax sharp coid if he will pull straws, or the clothes of his bed these are most certain tokens of death."

The ritual in both cases is the fumbling with the bed-clothes and the pulling at small objects — flowers in the poet's description, straws in the chap-book.

Tarantism, again, popularly held to be caused by the bite of the tarantula, a spider, and to be curable by dancing, is now shown to have been mainly a form of imitative chorea, of which twitching, easily suggestionised and metamorphosed into dancing, was a manifestation. The literature of this subject, already large, becomes vast if we count as forms of tarantism those many diseases, such as the malayan „Amok" and its kindred „Latah", the Siberian Miryachit, the American „Jumpers",

the Palmus, the Tic-convulsif of La Tourette, which are now generally classed as identical. In all these cases disordered or diseased nerves are the basis of the disease-condition, but the ritual thereof differs in different countries and is of course greatly dependent on custom, imitation, and suggestion.

Running amok, or „a muck”, as it used to be written, is a detailed procedure, having analogies with the kind of convulsive cannibal dances of the head-hunters of the South Pacific, or in ancient literature, with the madness and cruelty of the Bacchanals of Euripides.

The malay, who runs amok, almost invariably arms himself with a cuttingweapon and attacks the public in full career. The grand object is to run and to slash. Again, the malayans when victims of Latah follow a specific ritual, imitating the actions of others but also uttering words of a certain kind. Though this disease has been often described, we may perhaps be pardoned for quoting the classic authorities on the subject more fully than is the custom. Our material is derived from a collection on „Latah”, presented to the Library of the Royal College of Surgeons by the late Dr. A. M. Brown of Sidney, himself a writer on the subject.

O'Brien is the classical authority on Latah. The malay has been called the Irishman of the East, and Mr. H. A. O'Brien, writing in the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1883, says „No man, *pace* all Irishmen, is more ‚touchy’ than a malay. It is this nervous impressionability which leads to those mysterious *vendettas* and unaccountable *amoks*, which so often place the European completely at fault in dealing with this otherwise charming and loveable people.” It is the same nervousness, which accounts for „latah”. The victims of „latah” are divided by O'Brien into four classes. In the first class he places „those subjects who appear to be affected merely by such excess of nervous sensibility as is exemplified by starting unduly at the sound of an unexpected and loud noise, or at the sight of an unexpected and distressing or alarming incident.” In this, of course, they might seem at first sight not to differ from „nervy” people in all lands and climates, but, says O'Brien „I have noticed two peculiarities which seem to differentiate the mental shock, which they undergo from that, which Europeans experience under like circumstances. Firstly, their irresistible impulse seems to be to strike out at the nearest object, animate or inanimate, and, secondly, their involuntary exclamation is always characterised by what I must call obscenity. This element is never absent from the cry of a startled *latah*, who may, on ordinary occasions, appear the essence of propriety.”

In class two are placed those „whose nervous emotions are unduly excited without apparent, or, at all events, without adequate cause.” Certain words produce *latah* to an extreme degree. Thus Mr. O'Brien had more than once met with river boatmen, who could not bear to hear the word *buaya* (alligator) mentioned, and who dropped whatever they were holding in their hands and ran to shelter, whenever they heard it unexpectedly uttered. They were not otherwise nervous men and had never apparently met with an alligator adventure.

„On one occasion, after a curious exhibition of this description, I shot an alligator on the bank next morning. The *latah* was, to my surprise, the first to approach the saurian. Against my earnest entreaties he proceeded to pull the creature about, and finally forced its mouth open with a piece of firewood.

His persecutors, his fellow-boatmen, stood at a respectful distance. An hour afterwards, as he was poling up the river, one of the crew called out to this man *buaya*! He at once dropped his pole, gave vent to a most disgusting exclamation, and jumped into the river — an act, which shewed, that his morbid terror was quite unconnected with what might be supposed to be its exciting cause.”

Other Malays could not bear the mention of the word *harimau* (tiger) or *ular* (snake). „In each case of this description, my Malay companions solved my perplexity, at times very great, by saying „*dia latah, tuan*”. A medicine-man, or *pawang*, is cited, who though he constantly slept out in the jungle, yet exhibited extreme distress at the mention of a tiger.

In the third class, are placed those — who involuntarily imitate „the words, sounds or gestures of those around them.” It is impossible to say, when sufferers will be seized with the imitative mania. There is apparently no periodicity in their disease, which leaves them perfectly rational at most times. The Malays, be it said, draw a marked distinction between *latah* and insanity proper. They have, moreover, strict ideas as to propriety and decency. The following story of Mr. O'Brien's is, therefore, remarkable.

„A malay woman of respectable position and exceedingly respectable are, was introduced to me some time ago as a strong *latah* subject.

I talked to her for at least ten minutes, without perceiving anything abnormal in her conduct and conversation. Suddenly her introducer threw off his coat. To my horror, my venerable guest sprang to her feet and tore off her *kabayah*. My entreaties came too late to prevent her continuing the same course with the rest of her garments, and in thirty seconds from her seizure the paroxysm seemed to be over.

What struck me most in this unsavoury performance was the woman's

wild rage against the instigator of this outrage. She kept on calling him an abandoned pig, and imploring me to kill him, all the time that she was reducing herself to a state of nudity."

Latah is said to be common among Malay women of mature age. Among the young of the female sex it leads to complete sexual abandonment, and in this direction they are imitated even by the aged. Sometimes the disease leads to tragedies, as when a father threw his child to the ground and killed it in imitation of a man, who had thrown a piece of wood down.

The latahs of the fourth class may be simply described as complete victims of hypnotic suggestion. They do anything, that is suggested to them, and in this they resemble the victims of the Siberian „miryachit", an imitative nervous disease common in Eastern Siberia and among the Lapps. In the *British Medical Journal* of April 19, 1884, appeared an article by Dr. William A. Hammond of New York, in reference to a journey from the Pacific Ocean through Asia, by Lieut. Buckingham and Ensigns Foulk and Mc. Lean of the United States Navy. These travellers were perhaps the first to describe the disease. The steward of their steamboat on the Ussuri River was a victim of it, and was teased by the passengers into imitating sudden and unexpected actions. „We witnessed an incident," they remark, „which illustrated the extent of his disability. The captain of the steamer running up to him, suddenly clapping his hands at the same time, accidentally slipped, and fell hard on the deck. Without having been touched by the captain, the steward instantly clapped his hands and shouted, and then, in helpless imitation, he, too, fell as hard and almost precisely in the same manner and position as the captain. In speaking of the steward's disease, the captain of the general staff stated, that it was not uncommon in Siberia; that he had seen a number of cases of it, and that it was commonest about Yakulst, where the winter cold is extreme. Both sexes were subject to it, but men much less than women. It was known to the Russians by the name „Miryachit," which means „he, or she, plays the fool." To be strictly correct, the word should be written „Miriatchit". In the *Vratch*, No. 36, 1885, Dr. Jankovsky publishes his observations of an epidemic of this neurosis, which occurred on the coast of Eastern Siberia in 1876. He was told one evening by his assistant-surgeon in garrison with the First Eastern Siberian Infantry Battalion, that fourteen „mad" soldiers had been brought to the hospital. On his arrival he found a crowd of the patients, and, naturally enough, addressed to them the question, „What is the matter with you'? To his greatest astonishment, all fourteen addressed him in chorus,

„What is the matter with you'? He then tried to put the interrogation in another way. „What ails you'? The answer followed again, „What ails you'? In short every word of the medical man was simply echoed by every one and all of the patients. On examination, he found in every individual case, increased apex-beat, rapid pulse, extreme mobility of limbs (especially of the hands), somewhat increased cutaneous sensibility, dilatation or contraction of the pupils, gay disposition, laughter, or smiling, without any reason whatever, etc."

All these men had had for their supper potatoes and hemp-oil. The latter had been bought from a Corean kawker, who was himself a miriasha, and who thus set the example of „fooling". Miriachit, indeed, is said to begin under the influence of contact with one of its victims. It is a hysterical contagion. „There is," observes Tanzi, „an hysterical contagion and a paranoiac contagion, which form the two opposite poles between which oscillate all the psychical epidemics and all the varieties of communicated insanity. Hysterical contagion is carried by blind imitation from one grand hysteric to other lesser ones, who come under the power of a presence and conduct, that harmonize with their state of emotional tension." Thus the soldiers after coming under the influence of the Corean hawker, continued to shout „oil, oil, oil" at the chance mention of the word (*maslo*, in Russian).

Epidemic hysteria is common in armies especially when, during times of stress, the men are over-worked or over-wrought. Thus panic is in some sort a form of miriachit, and in a recent „Nova et Vetera" (*Brit Med. Journal*) the madness of the French Foreign Legion was described, wherein a regular ritual procedure is followed.

Tanzi cites the skopzki, or self-mutilators of Russia, as persons suffering from paranoiac contagion, and, in this connection, one might cite some of our own „militants" at the time, that it was *de rigueur* for them to chain themselves to „grilles" or benches, to use dog-whips, or to subject themselves to forcible feeding. The idea of following a ritual of chain and whip was certainly uppermost in the *suffragettes* mind, but though extreme *suffragettes* are probably very hysterical, their condition is not as pronounced as that of the victims of latah; for the last-mentioned have commonly no sort, of recollection, of what they have been doing during one of their seizures. They resemble epileptics.

It is difficult, indeed, to decide where epidemic folly becomes pathological. Perhaps, however, it may be suggested, that whenever we find a painful and senseless ritual, which is an end in itself, there we have the beginnings of latah.
