

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

The Dancing Plague of the Fourteenth Century

After long and heated controversies upon the subject, it would be difficult to tell just how much we know of the nature of the mind. — If no two metaphysicians have agreed as to the exact significance of the word, the psychologists need not be discouraged if they can not tell the exact nature of the force.

Whether organization alone can produce thoughts we probably will never know. But that mental operations have material conditions, no one can deny. And the wonderful interdependence of body and mind will never cease to be a study of profound interest. Today we are able to talk about the physiology of the mind the phenomena of brain-force as we do about any other force in nature, and not shock the orthodox ear. We may say that mental faculties are not confined to the brain; that there are other organs in the body capable of producing mental action so long relegated to the brain alone.

I say we are able to talk about these matters and not be regarded as gross materialists. With this encouragement, and with these facts, the student enters the field of Mental Phenomena to find much that is interesting, bewildering, astounding. — It is in this direction I invite your attention for a few minutes.

St. Vitas (*sic*) was born in Sicily, in the third century. He suffered martyrdom under Diocletian. The legends respecting him our obscure, and his name would have passed into oblivion, had not the transfer of his remains to St. Denis, thence to Couun, raised him to the rank of a saint. — A legend was given in the 14th century that just before he bent his neck to the sword, he prayed to God that he might protect from the dancing plague all who should solemnize the day of his commemoration, and should fast upon its eve. Thereupon was heard a voice from Heaven: — “Vitas, thy prayer is accepted.” — Thus St. Vitas became the patron saint of those afflicted with the dancing mania.

The dancing plague referred to by St. Vitas was no new development, but a phenomenon is well known in the Middle Ages, of which many wonderful stories were traditionally current. Individual cases were not infrequent, and

in some localities it prevailed to a greater extent. In 1374 a collection of men and women were seen in the streets of the old town of Aix la Chapelle presenting the following strange spectacle. – They formed circles hand in hand and began to dance and to perform all manner of comical and ridiculous actions. Head, arms, and limbs all flying in hideous contortions. For hours they continued in their wild delirium until they fell to the ground in a state of exhaustion which at times assumed an epileptic form, panting, twisting, and foaming; then suddenly springing to their feet and began the same wild performance. They seemed to have lost all control of themselves and apparently insensible to external impressions, did not recognize their friends or listen to their heart-rending entreaties; but shrieked out names of [deceased] friends, who appeared to them in visions. Others saw the Heavens open, the Saviour enthroned with the Virgin and then supernatural sights, greatly adding to the intensity of the strange scene. The number of dancers increased until the town was in an uproar. Business suspended, all work abandoned either to join the dancers, to care for friends or to witness the crazy spectacle.

Rumors of the appearance of the Devil and his doings reached other towns, and the manifestations of his presence soon followed, and it was not long before a large part of Germany was engaged in the Devil's service. At Cologne more than 500 were dancing in the streets at the same time; and at Metz 1100 blocked the Street day and night filling the air with their shrieks and groans. Peasants left their plows; mechanics their workshops; housewives their domestic duties to join in the mad revels. Boys and girls left their parents; servants their masters to witness the scene, and in turn were seized with the delirium and swept into the maelstrom. A peculiar fascination, and a resistible impulse would possess lookers on, and ere they were aware, they too had joined the crazy performers, which not only added to the numbers, but increased the delirium of others.

Gangs of vagabonds, who understood how to imitate the dance gestures and contortions bent on deeds of infamy roamed along the country roads from place to place thus aiding in the spread of the curious malady. At Strasburg they danced through the streets with music. Musicians with bag-pipes accompanied by anxious friends and relatives and a large crowd of lookers on, altogether, history tells us, presenting one of the strangest spectacles ever witnessed. Here the town authorities took it in hand, dividing the dancers and the parties, and placing a superintendent over each division to protect them from harm and to prevent disorder.

In this town was located the Chapel of St. Vitas, and crowds gathered at the spot praying for protection from the plague or relief from an attack. They came in carriages, were carried, or on foot, dancing and twisting on their way to the chapel of the patron saint. The scene at the altar beggars description. Many miracles were performed or reported, and it is reasonable that many were instantly restored.

The malady in this locality took the name of St. Vitas' Dance, a name we find associated with a somewhat similar nervous affection to this day. The mania varied somewhat at different places. In towns in Belgium the dancers wore wreaths on their heads and bands about their bodies. After falling from exhaustion, they complained of abdominal pains and it was customary to bind them tightly around the bowels which afforded relief. Thus the Belgium dancers wore the bands ready for adjustment when occasion required. In smaller country places where there was less excitement, the attacks were more periodical. Those affected would meet from time to time at appointed places, and unless prevented continued to dance until breath and strength were exhausted. At other places, where the excitement ran high, it would assume a degree of madness, and in their wild frenzy the stricken ones would dash their brains out against walls and buildings, or rush headlong into rivers. Frequently obstacles or barriers would be placed in the way of the dancing crowd, hoping, in their efforts to surmount them, they would exhaust their strength.

Music was introduced at some places as a kind of treatment, as it was observed that with some it possessed charms to soothe their crazy muscles. Local authorities employed musicians for the purpose, with many it had a contrary effect but it was continued nevertheless, as in aggravating the dancers it soon exhausted their power to longer dance.

The length of an attack was only limited by the strength of the individual; and the only treatment was to exhaust at the earliest moment possible, and to protect them from injury. At one place where music was employed all the cases were greatly aggravated, and the effect cannot be described. Dancers with their clothes half off wriggling and twisting, turning hand-springs and cart-wheels, leaping and jumping in the air to the sound of music; was a scene too weird to be real.

The increasing numbers of the afflicted excited no less anxiety than did the

attention that was being paid them. In some localities processions were formed to accompany the dancers and sing songs. Every attention that sympathy could suggest was extended, which increased, not only the numbers but also the severity of the attack.

It was the work of the Devil; the presence of evil spirits was the all-prevailing belief; and fear and dismay was on every face. In some places it was found that any thing of the red color in the same effect as music and while it was encouraged in places to shorten the attack, in others was ordered suppressed.

As we can well imagine the question “what to do to stop the spread and suppress the plague” was uppermost in the minds of those in authority, i.e. The priests. “The Devil hates a saint” is an old saying. In this instance he hated the priests. They were loudly denounced and their presence at the dance could not be tolerated. Dancers would fly at them, and unless prevented, inflict personal injury, “unmistakable evidence” said the priests, “that it was of the Devil.” It was observed that the dance was mostly confined to the poorer classes. In every community they were the first to be influenced. So the priests were bold to apply the remedy so powerful in those days, – exorcism. Some of the afflicted ones when coming of the influence, yet still in a semi-trance, stated that if they had been left alone a short time longer they would have reached the nobility and through them the priests. These statements were repeated with exaggerations, until the better class were in mortal terror. The priests pushed their work with increased vigor to prevent the evil reaching themselves.

What form of exorcism, what adjurations or ceremony was employed to expel the evil spirit, history does not inform us. But the means employed were successful, for the epidemic was checked. The sporadic cause continued to appear, and some localities continued to suffer but the Devil's toil was broken, and he gradually left the field.

What was the cause of these remarkable phenomena. So subtle and intricate are many of the influences which conspire to disturb mental action that many times we are unable to trace phenomena to an adequate source or to account for it upon any known hypothesis. But when it manifests itself in epidemic form the field of observation is extended and the task is not so difficult.

We are told that there is but one force in nature, that all activities are but different modes of motion each possessing attributes which distinguish it from the rest. Heat, light, electricity possess attributes and are regulated by laws peculiar to each, and so it is with mind force. Here we have the attributes of feeling, will, and thought the force may be evenly or unevenly distributed. If more goes to one of course less remains for the others, the entire quantity being limited. If that of feeling predominates at the expense of will and thought, we will have the phenomena described.

It would be of surprising interest to trace in history to what extent this attribute termed feeling or emotion is capable of development. In it lies the solution of witchcraft and those peculiar forms and ceremonies of the superstitions past of which we read with wonder and doubt. In Eastern countries children of peculiar nervous organization were selected and placed in training under adepts. Epilepsy was the nervous manifestation most in favor. With the Greeks this was a sacred malady and other nations regarded it as something divine. The fact that Mahomet was an epileptic is regarded by many as explaining his peculiar mental organization.

The epileptic children thus placed in training, were so developed mentally that they could at any time throw themselves into a trance, into states of ecstasy, clairvoyance and other remarkable mental states. They became a kind of psychical jugglers, performing mental operations of an astounding nature. "This faculty of psychical juggling was greatly increased" says Carver "by hereditary transmission." In referring to many of their accomplishment, Carver remarks "that mental operations were developed in them which we lack just as we lack many of their physical accomplishments. Frequently illness will suddenly develop these mental conditions and faculties not supposed to exist are called into exercise and manifest wonderful power.

To a student of physiology, psychology, psychic or mental philosophy, I know of nothing more interesting than review of these facts. To a reader unfamiliar to this class of phenomena it would appear as impossible, absurd; yet to mind force its development is just as normal and not nearly so rare as is Genius. Both are recognized as having a pathological side. If one is an abnormal development of Feeling and Motion, the other is an abnormal development of thought; and there is just as close a relationship between high intellectual endowment and mental derangement as there is between high emotional endowment and mental derangement.

Turning to Mr. Moreau's tables of biographical facts, let us group Ben Jonson, Pascal, Lamb, Cowper, Burns, Scott, Tasso, Shelly, Swift, Byron, Poe, Voltaire, Handel, Carlisle and other representatives of Genius. I say, let us put them together each in lively exercise of individual idiosyncrasies, the accompaniment of genius which no name describes, and it would be difficult to tell which crowd presents the greater abnormal aspect to the average common sense, the dancing crowd or the intellectual geniuses.

To return to the cause of the dancing plague, from the 4th century St. John's Day was solemnized with all sorts of strange and rude customs, of which the original, mystic meaning was variously interpreted with the addition of relics of superstition. Thus the Germans added to the festival of St. John's Day an ancient heathen usage "The Rundling of the ned-fyre". In some sections, the belief continues to the present day, that people and animals that have leapt through flames and smoke are protected for a year from fever and sickness. Bacchanalian dancers originated in similar ideas, and were always attended with every kind of performance that could originate in superstitious imaginations.

Germany had just passed through the horrible black plague which had decimated the population, destroying thousands of lives, and leaving thousands more sick and destitute. Their fears had been worked upon; their nervous organization stretched to a fearful tension; they were poor and oppressed with no security for life or property. Priest-ridden and superstitious to the lowest degree, believers in wonders and apparitions, in miracles and ghosts, fear and feeling had been developed at the expense of will and reason. St. John's Day arrived, was celebrated in the usual way, and soon after, the dance made its appearance. How much or to what extent the celebration of this day led to the development, we do not know; but it is reasonable to believe that it tended to bring to a crisis a condition which had long existed. The dance was but a natural result of the peculiar time and mental condition of the people. All that was needed was a St. John's day or any other day that was attended with superstitious excitement, to start the epidemic.

The St. Vitas epidemic is not the only one of which we have record. At the close of the 15th century a peculiar mania agitated Italy. It was termed Turantism. It was supposed to have originated in the bite of a spider or a Tarantula; – hence its name. It is not easy to imagine how this epidemic could have started in the bite of a spider, but in Italy as in Germany, all that

was necessary was an exciting cause to develop a pre-existing condition; the influences tending to produce this condition in Italy closely resembling those in Germany. Italy, more than any country in Europe had suffered the ravages of fearful plagues. The black plague, bubo plague, and smallpox following each other decimated the country till Italy was a vast grave yard. Here, too, superstition reigned supreme and the religious ideas and ceremonies tended to develop fear and heated imaginations, which under the fearful strain of poverty and despair, prepared the way for the nervous phenomenon which I will briefly narrate.

The bite of the tarantula was held in about the same horror that Hydrophobia is with us. The bite was usually fatal, or, if the patient recovered he passed the remainder of his days in solitude and depression. The effect of the bite is variously described but in all, intense mental excitement is prominent. Laughing, dancing, and singing in the wildest manner; and complete mania not an unusual sequence.

To what extent we can attribute these symptoms to the bite of the spider, and how much to fear, it is impossible to state. But we know that the bite of the tarantula in our day is devoid of these manifestations.

But some were bitten and the mania followed, and it was not long before others imagined themselves similarly afflicted; and the dance began and continued until the inhabitants of the surrounding country were twisting heads and legs in crazy confusion.

The dance was not exclusive, for foreigners from every clime joined in the revel. Youth and old age mingled with the crowd, boys scarcely old enough to walk, and old men threw away their cares and joined the Tarantella. Uncontrollable emotions and actions of every kind prevailed as in Germany. Here, too, mania played a part. Whole bands marched up and down the country, producing the maddest effects. The Tarantella, a piece of music which found special favor with the dancers, continues to the present day. While in Naples a few months ago, we witnessed a play in the open air where this music was introduced with the dancing scene; And a crazy sight it was.

Here, too, color exerted an influence; but, contrary to the effect in Germany, red was in demand. Every dancer carried a red handkerchief; and without unpleasant results. In Italy there was no devil to cast out, and the epidemic

ran a course and gradually died out. But the dance was not limited to the continent; – for we find the steady old Scotch man had his season of performance, differing somewhat from the cases narrated, but the characteristic features were the same. Here it was termed the Leaping Ague. It is said similar conditions have existed in Abyssinia, Shetland Isles and other places.

Mankind is made on the same general plan; so the same kind of men is found the world around. Given the same physical causes and mental phenomena will not be dissimilar. We are inclined to look upon these phenomena with wonder, and try to comprehend a condition of things external, and a condition of things internal, capable of producing such strange results. We refer it to an age of ignorance and superstition, which this civilization has left behind. – Let us see.

In 1800 a whirl-wind of religious excitement swept over our western and southern states, the records of which can not [now?] be found in many homes in the South. The enthusiasm in Kentucky and Tennessee, was without parallel. Business was suspended, courts adjourned, schools closed. There was but one all-prevailing thought “Believe or be damned.” The believers were in ecstasy, the sinners in misery. And the mingling of the shouts of the sanctified with the groans of the lost can only be compared to the scene in Strasburg 400 years before. Churches could not contain the number. The meetings were held out of doors and hundreds who lived at too great distances to return home at night, bought tents and provisions. The outward form or expression of worship consisted in singing, praying, and speaking, jumping up and shouting. The excitement increased with the crowd and the crowd increased with the excitement until the whole country for many miles were gathered together and it became the scene of the wildest confusion.

Many were speaking, others shouting; some with heads thrown back, singing in the loudest strains; and others running up and down, wringing their hands and uttering horrible moans. It was soon discovered that some were indulging in a variety of gesticulations and engaging in a series of performances not altogether orthodox. They were wildly dancing up and down others rolling over the ground and giving utterances to unearthly noises accompanied by violent contortions of facial and other muscles. It was further discovered that this conduct was [in]voluntary beyond the control of the individual.

This trouble spread, and in a short time this great mass of people resembled an insane asylum let loose. Men, women, boys and girls joined in the wagging, twisting dancing and shouting until they fell to the earth from sheer exhaustion. It was not limited to this locality extended all over Tennessee and Kentucky and continued for some time, then gradually disappeared; but the effects were visible long after. Men were incapacitated for business, wives unable to care for homes and families, and children unable to attend school owing to a peculiar nervous affection termed chorea or St. Vitas dance. Hundreds of cases were reported the effects of which will not die out with this generation or generations to come.

The contagious feature of nervous disorder, and the part they play in the ills of humanity is receiving the closest attention of the Physiologist and Pathologist. Accepting the explanation of abnormal development of feeling, much, very much, remains to be known of that invisible mysterious and stupendous force called mind.

Science has measured the oscillation of a ray of light and followed it to its source; it has calculated the vibrations of a musical chord and traced it to its resting place but science has not estimated the vibrations of an intellectual cell, or analyzed the aura that waits its bidding. It has not comprehended its faculties or even furnished us with the means of determining when the organs are out of tune, or why their notes are so discordant.

A nun in a French convent began to mew like a cat; it was imitated by a sister, taken up by another, until the whole convent was mewing hours at a time. The cat concert attracted the attention of the neighborhood, and was only suppressed by the aid of police and the separation of the nuns.

In a convent in Germany one of the sisters fell to biting another; others took it up. Soon the whole convent were engaged in the same ridiculous behavior. The report reached neighboring convents and the phenomenon soon followed. It spread to Germany, into France, into Italy.

Not many miles from Cincinnati a case of chorea or St. Vitas dance made its appearance in a boarding school. (young ladies). In a short time the school was dismissed as nearly all the pupils were similarly affected.

In an orphan asylum in our city the same experience was encountered, and

was checked by separating the children. – Natural objects and phenomena become more interesting and intricate as we advance from the lower toward the higher gradations of being. To classify phenomena that illustrates the laws and relations of the human mind is the crowning work of all. The study of the emotional phenomena of past ages is nothing less than the study of the mental development of mankind. It is a branch of that larger, vaster science of evolution which occupies our thoughts today & which the philosophers and theologians must reckon.

When the attribute of feeling as a predominating factor in the affairs of life was superseded by reason and emotion yielded to the higher and safer attribute that of intelligence; myths, superstitions, and nervous plagues disappeared. We should study its history in relation to mental science as we do fossils in Geology: a relic of the human past in archaeology. The work as heretofore taught only presented us with the outward structure without the inner light which reveals the mysteries of the temple.

The laws regulating mind force are not at all inscrutable, and we are daily learning more than is revealed in the catechism or taught in ordinary schools of learning. “The time has come,” says Carpenter, “when no one is entitled to express an opinion in philosophy unless he has first studied physiology. I am persuaded,” he adds “that the only possible route to truth in mental philosophy is through the study of the nervous mechanism. The experience of 2500 years and the writings of the greatest metaphysicians attest with melancholy emphasis the vanity of all other means.”

The peculiar manifestations to which I have called your attention, amusing, though I trust instructive, forms the ground-work of study and research which is rapidly reducing phenomena to law, and bring within the limits of the understanding some of the mysteries of the greatest of all forces, The Human Mind.

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