2. *French Retrospect.*

By W. Herbert Packer, L.R.C.P.Lond., Assistant Medical Officer, Salop County Asylum.

Demoniacal Possession.

The following translation of a letter in the "Progrès Medical" of the 2nd July, 1881, seems to me of considerable interest as showing, among other things, the powerful effect of the force of imitation in that Protean disease hysteria, and also the result of bad moral treatment. A series of somewhat similar cases, illustrating what has been well called the contagion of nervous affections in these leading to undoubted insanity with distinct delusions, is well described, and typical cases noted, by Dr. M. de Montgel, of the Marseilles Public Asylum, in the January number of the "Annales-Medico-Psychologiques." But in almost all the cases there cited hereditary taint was distinctly made out, the weak mind being crushed by continued contact with the insane one. This *folie-à-deux* deserves serious attention; it may, from a medico-legal point of view, assume considerable importance; for instance, a person accused of crime may be under the domination of another's delusions. Many of the ecstatic outbreaks of seeming religion exemplify this form of insanity, often observed although seldom treated according to their deserts.

The letter is written from Saint-Breuc, by M. J. Baratoux, and is dated June 28:—

The local and Parisian journals have on several occasions of late referred to strange events taking place in the neighbourhood of this town. Seven children of the Marcet family, living in the Hotel Morin, four kilometres from the town of Pledran, are, it appears, *possessed by spirits.* "These children are subject day and night to most strange contortions; sometimes forced by a supernatural agency, they crawl on hands and knees, and throw themselves into a well in the farm-yard, and climb up the wall out again like monkeys. At other times they clamber into the trees, ascend to the roof of the house with giddy speed, and execute a demoniacal dance on the chimney tops, accompanied by wild shouts. Even the youngest child, aged seven months, takes her share in the performances if the precaution of tying her in her cradle be not taken." Such are the facts as related by serious and trustworthy people, according to the local journals. Indeed, the neighbours told ourselves a similar story.

Before reporting the facts we have personally observed, we consider it will not be useless to explain what the district of Pledran and its inhabitants are like. This inland market town is situated about nine kilometres from Saint-Breuc. Four kilometres distant is the village of Grand Hirel, and ten minutes' walk thence across the fields is the Hotel Morin, consisting of three old houses. These dwellings, made

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of timber united by a thin layer of plaster, and thatched with straw, are only one story high. They form one building where men and horses live together. Against the front of the house, which has at the most an elevation of about three metres, is built a small stable, about two metres high, and adjoining this is placed a sloping mound of earth, which permits one to mount easily on to the stable, and thence to the roof of the house. Several metres from the house a well has been dug, which is constructed as follows: Its opening is about 75 centimetres across, and its depth about five metres, there being about one metre of water in it. The descent of this well is very easily made by holding on to the stones projecting into its interior, and which here, as in the house, are quite uncovered.

We should also say that the inhabitants lead a very primitive mode of life, that they are ignorant, credulous, and simple, their great and only, so to speak, diversion during the winter being the evening gathering, where each relates a tale of which fairies and wizards are the subject. Thus it is that any unusual occurrence they may observe is attributed, by their strongly impressed imaginations, to an occult influence. It is unnecessary to add that these people are under the almost exclusive control of their Curé and those about him.

When one of these children felt the first symptoms of her illness, she related, in so grossly exaggerated a manner, all she had seen and heard that very soon people began to say that a spell (*une passee*) had been thrown over the Marcets, who were at the same time under the influence of all the devils and imps. They quickly called to their assistance, but ineffectually, the clergy, who said masses, blessed the house and those they deemed possessed, in order to exorcise the devils. The Curé of Pledran, who had gone to the farm of Grand Hirel for this purpose, found Marie Jeanne, the eldest of the family, on the roof, and when he begged her to come down she replied in angry and insulting language, grinning fiercely the while, "so the mother states."

But putting on one side this fantastic narrative, let us relate only the information which we have ourselves obtained, and the facts we have observed with our own eyes.

On the 23rd February of this year Marie Jeanne Marcet felt the first of those symptoms that were soon to be so greatly aggravated. On that day she was very nervous, complained of a violent pain in the head and a frequent feeling of sickness. Next day, her mother told us, her upper limbs were seen hanging by her side, and remained so for four days, when the left arm regained its power, the right not doing so until three days after, that is on the 2nd March. It was at this time that she suffered from her first nervous crisis, her parents noticing that she lost consciousness and made disorderly movements, analogous to those which we afterwards saw. During the attack, lasting an hour, the child seemed much frightened. The attacks were renewed for several days, but soon ceased, and Marie

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Jeanne was free from them from the 10th March to the 21st April; from time to time she had simply a pain at the top of the head, a feeling of a ball rising from the pit of her stomach into her throat. Nevertheless during the last two months the attacks have returned stronger and more frequent than before; we will describe them presently.

The day after that on which Marie Jeanne was again attacked, namely the 22nd April, the third child, Pierre, aged 11 years, had a fit similar to his sister's, and lasting four hours. Twelve days after he experienced a second attack of the same duration; but contrary to his sisters, Pierre clearly remembered these fits. Since he has always been nervous and excitable, very irritable, and on the slightest provocation breaking everything within his reach.

On the 23rd April, the second daughter, aged 13 years, had a nervous attack resembling in all points that of her sister. Next day, that is the 24th April, the fifth child, Anne Marie, aged 6 years, suddenly became unconscious, had no sort of fit nor convulsions. She has had several attacks since, but they have never been of the intensity and duration of her sister's.

Beginning on the 28th, the sixth child, Toussaint, aged 4 years, had his right arm in a contracted condition for two days, but after disappearing for a day, this returned on the morrow, to cease definitely on the next day but one. This child has never exhibited the same phenomena as his brothers and sisters. His mother tells us he is simply exceedingly nervous.

As regards the youngest, a girl aged seven months, nothing abnormal was found. The acrobatic performances she was said to be troubled consisted of movements of the limbs caused by the sight of her sisters' peculiar antics. She seemed to take a delight in their odd gestures, these exciting and amusing her.

There only remains the fourth child, Jean, aged eight years, who went to service at a neighbouring farm on the 10th April last. Since then he has had several attacks of giddiness, and he has had to keep his bed on various occasions, as the least labour tires him. He has become a badly disposed boy, and often neglects the cows he is employed to watch. Latterly he has frequently mistaken the tail of a horse for its head, and has held it by the tail when he thought he had it by the bridle, and when the animal disobeyed his orders and did not advance to his liking, he struck it several hard blows until the horse gave him such a kick that kept him at home in bed for several days. Whilst at home at the Hotel Morin he felt none of the phenomena such as his sisters suffered from, but returning to his master's, he became very irritable and nervous, and wished to do only what was contrary to orders. This child had therefore only undergone a change of character, and from being well intentioned and submissive, had become naughty and passionate; nevertheless he has had no fit. During our visit we saw all the children except Jean, and

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of him therefore we shall say no more. With the exception of the two youngest, they were all very excited. On our arrival Marie Jeanne was hiding behind a piece of furniture, but seeing a scarf-pin with a red top in the tie of a friend who accompanied us, she quickly snatched it and hid it away in a cupboard, in which we noticed a quantity of roses. This girl has well-marked *clavus hystericus;* she has hyperæsthesia of right side, hemianæsthesia of the left, and pain in the ovarian region of the same side. Violet seems to her to be white, and green blue.

Louise has well-marked left anæsthesia. Violet appears to her white, and red yellow. Pierre was nervous and irritable, violently pushing away his brothers. Before long he climbed down the side of the well, and stopped at the level of the water, and in about a quarter of an hour crawled out again. Then by means of the mound and stable he clambered on to the roof, helping himself by the thatch covering these buildings; he then threw at us stones and pieces of mortar, which, with the straw, formed the roof of the house This was all we saw of the devil's dance said to have been executed on the chimney tops.

Since the end of May two of his sisters have been in the habit of descending into the well, and climbing on to roof, but they did not take the same means to perform these feats as their brother, but required the assistance of a ladder. About 1 p.m.—the usual time for the attack—the excitement of Marie Jeanne became extreme. In appearance she looked wild, her eyes brilliant and conjunctiva-injected, and panting for breath. She upset any one who approached her; her fingers were continually moving; she tugged fiercely at the sleeves of her gown, and threw her sabots savagely at a horse lying near. She complained of a feeling as of a ball in her throat, and of pain in the abdomen; she soon lost consciousness. Then she exhibited movements of circumduction of the arms, her body falling immediately afterwards into a state of tetanic immobility which lasted several seconds. A series of rapid vibrations then shook the body and limbs, followed by complete quiet. But almost immediately she became strangely contorted, rolled on the floor, seized a sack of corn, and hid her head beneath it. It was in vain to attempt to keep her in this position, for she struggled vigorously, and jerked her limbs violently about in all directions.

It is very difficult to attempt to describe these singular movements. One time she would be crawling on the floor; another time she would be leaping about shaking her head. Her respiration was gasping, interrupted by piercing cries during inspiration. One moment she was tearing her clothes, the next grasping her throat as if something were choking her.

Then the convulsions grew milder; her countenance, excited and covered with saliva, became more placid. She put herself in various postures, sometimes stooping down as if listening to a distant sound,

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which she presently told us was that of a drum—of music ; sometimes she trembled, taking an attitude as if afraid, and hiding her head in her clothes. Now she heard chains rolling, guns firing, and saw the devil escorted by a troop of demons ; again she called on her dead godfather and grandmother, crying out, " I wish to go with you." She fancied she saw the sea filled with red fish. Such was the account she gave of her visions on awakening from the attack, which had lasted a quarter of an hour. After a time seeing the circumductory movements of the arms and the contortions coming on again, we compressed the left ovary; the attack ceased, and the patient soon regained consciousness, shedding tears copiously, and then described her visions to us. She complained of pain in the part of the abdomen we had compressed, and showered on us a heap of epithets evincing her disgust. The previous evening Marie Jeanne had had an attack, or rather a series of attacks, lasting from midday to four o'clock ; this was in fact the usual duration of her and her sister's attacks. Towards the end of Marie Jeanne's attack Louise, feeling one coming on herself, emptied a bowl of water over her head, and quickly recovered. The Morcets employed this plan to arrest the nervous crises of their children whenever they felt themselves attacked.

We ought to mention that these fits occur about the same time in all the children, but Anne Marie's are shorter than those of her older sisters. Finally, it is seen that all the symptoms we observed resembled in every way those we habitually find in severe cases of hysteria. As the report of the occurrences that have taken place at Pledran has spread so far, we think it should be attributed principally to the rarity of *Grande hystérie* in our country places, and also to the imagination of the inhabitants, which has immensely amplified the facts they have seen or of which they have heard. Again, the devil and the wizards are not the cause of the troubles we have described ; if they exist, it is in the imagination of those who would do better to drive them out of their children by a strict and firm treatment rather than by prayers and exorcisings.

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3. *German Retrospect.*

By William W. Ireland, M.D.

New German Periodical on Neurology and Insanity.

We have received the first number of the " Neurologisches Centralblatt," published in Berlin at the beginning of this year. It is edited by Dr. E. Mendel, whose book on General Paralysis is reviewed in the present number of our Journal. In the programme the editor expresses his design to endeavour to establish a closer connection between the anatomy, physiology, and pathology of the nervous system

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