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A PRISON PSYCHOSIS IN THE MAKING.

(Report of a case.)

WILLIAM A. WHITE, M. D.¹

The whole subject of the prison psychoses is comparatively a new one, especially in this country, and very little has appeared in the literature regarding them. The present case is therefore reported as it shows well the mechanisms in this form of mental disorder conditioned by factors outside the patient, and serves very well to illustrate the way in which such factors operate.²

The patient, a colored woman, 30 years of age, had been convicted of murder in the first degree and sentenced to be hung for killing her husband. I made two examinations of the prisoner, which examinations were made while she was under sentence of death.

At the first examination the general plan was carried out of making as systematic an examination of the mind as possible, using among other things the prescribed forms of intelligence tests. In addition to this a neurological examination was made covering the condition of the nervous system, and also certain examinations of the internal organs. The result of this examination was negative. The prisoner appeared to be an ordinary colored woman with about the usual limitations of intelligence of her race. There were no neurological defects, and nothing of any account was brought out that was abnormal except the condition of both apices of the lungs. It was understood that a diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis had been made, and my examination was confirmatory of that diagnosis.

In addition to the negative results of this examination, it was brought out that the prisoner was irritable and that she got into difficulties with other prisoners and with the matron. It was also discovered that on previous occasions, either during or pending her trial she had certain convulsive, probably hysteriform attacks.

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²An historical survey of the origin of the concept of the prison psychosis, together with a statement of the views that have been held by different investigators up to the present time is admirably set forth in "The History of the Prison Psychosis," Nervous and Mental Disease Monograph Series, No 13, price \$1.25. 64 West 56th Street, New York City, N. Y.

The sum total of the first examination is therefore a rather simple minded colored woman in not very good health, with negative findings so far as the neurological examination went, and with a history of marked emotional instability and irritability.

At the close of this examination her spiritual adviser told her about certain ideas that she had expressed to him, namely, of having seen her husband since she had been locked up in the jail. I immediately went up to the prisoner's cell and asked her about these ideas and she told me that she had seen her husband on one occasion since she had been in jail, that she thought he might have been dead, but was resurrected, and said that her various sisters who had died had also been resurrected and were in the jail.

My second examination was more particularly addressed to the ideas she had expressed about seeing her husband, and the like.

She claims to have seen her husband upon the occasion of a religious service on a certain Sunday about a month previous. She was asked whether she really believed that it was her husband whom she saw, to which she replied in the affirmative. She was then asked why, if she did believe it to be her husband, she did not call out and call attention to him, inasmuch as there was the man she had been accused of killing, and if she could make other people see him and really believe it was he, it would save her life and get her out of jail. She gave no adequate reason for not taking this course and practically replied to this question by saying that they were not supposed to make any noise or talk during service. Further questioning, however, showed a very definite feeling of uncertainty on her part as to whether she really had seen her living husband in the flesh at this time.

It became at once necessary to evaluate these statements of the prisoner's to find whether they must be taken as the truth or whether there was a definite attempt at malingering. The following are the reasons why I believe her statements to be absolutely genuine: This prisoner from the very first of my examination to the conclusion made every possible effort to comply with all of my instructions and tried as hard as she knew how, without any question, to measure up to the tests that were given. I do not think any one who was present at the examination could possibly have any doubt upon this point. If the symptom that we are discussing, namely, having seen her husband, is not genuine, then it is the only feature in her entire examination upon which doubt must be cast. It is significant that during two hours of most detailed examination of the prisoner on the first occasion she never offered to say a word about ever having had such an experience, although

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I asked her specifically whether she heard voices or had heard her husband talking to her since she had been in the jail. Had the prisoner been a malingerer here was an admirable opportunity for inserting a reference to this vision. She did not do so. During the first examination also, in talking about her crime, she never once intimated that her husband was not dead.

- Q. What are you here for? A. Murder.
Q. Have you been tried? A. I have once.
Q. What was the verdict? A. Guilty.
Q. Of what? A. Of the crime of murder.
Q. Whom were you accused of murdering? A. My husband.
Q. What did you do it for? A. Promises—deceiving.
Q. You deceived him, didn't you? A. Not until he deceived me.

Here she acknowledges being convicted of the murder of her husband, and, though here is another splendid opportunity, she does not avail herself of it. Further, I conducted the entire first examination without ever telling this prisoner who I was, without her ever expressing any desire to know who I was, and so far as I know she had no information as to what I was there for, nor did she express any desire to know. At the second examination I asked her who I was, what my name was, etc., and she expressed herself as not knowing. Had she been a malingerer she would surely have taken pains to find out whether I represented the people that she might have supposed to be her friends or her enemies. She did not do this, but simply and without any effort at subterfuge, submitted to the examination. So much for the outward evidences; now for the inner.

The patient has all the elements of superstition which makes possible such a belief as she has set forth of having seen her husband and believing him to be resurrected. This is shown by her discussion of the differences between soul and spirit, and also by her discussion of night doctors.

- Q. What is your idea of a spirit and a soul?
A. I think there's a difference between a soul and a spirit, because a spirit can come in many forms and many a shape, but a soul is the same as one of us. It is one natural thing all the time.
Q. Well, what do you think this was, a spirit or a soul?
A. It could have been a spirit.
Q. Does a spirit mean that it is the spirit of a dead person?
A. Well, no, I don't think that a spirit ever dies.
Q. Must the body be dead in order to have this spirit appear?
A. Well I think that the spirit can appear even when the body is alive.
Q. Where did you get all these ideas?
A. I don't know, they just come to me. I sometimes think about them, and study them out. That's my belief about it. The spirit's on earth all the time or it's in the air.
Q. Do you believe in hoodoos? A. No, sir, I don't.
Q. Why not? A. Because if I had belief in such as that perhaps I would not have been here.
Q. Why so? A. Well, because my life could have been happy.

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Q. How could your life have been happy if you had believed in hoodoos?
A. Perhaps someone could have fixed my life so I couldn't have such a heavy worry. They could have given me luck.

Q. Do you believe anybody can do that? A. I don't know whether they can or no. Q. Do you believe in night doctors? A. Well, not specially. Q. Why not? A. I don't because I think doctors have enough bodies to practice on. Years back there may have been night doctors. People didn't die so much; there wasn't so much diseases. I think doctors have enough practice without taking lives.

Q. So you don't think they do it? A. I don't know. They may have to do it to have someone to practice on if they didn't have enough practice. People live such a "raptus" life that the doctors have more than they can practice on now. The hospitals and places are filled up with them.

Her attitude, before mentioned, of some uncertainty as to whether her husband was a real human being in the flesh attracted my attention, and I went into the matter somewhat further. Her description of her vision has certain characteristics about it that remind one of a dream:

Q. Tell me about that idea that you expressed to me that you had seen your husband here in the jail.

A. Well, I saw him as I told you from the 'ception hall where we go to church at, across over here in the window.

Q. Was he in the building?

A. Yes sir.

Q. When was this?

A. About a month ago. I think it was about a month ago yesterday past.

Q. Have you ever seen him more than once?

A. That's all to my know of.

Q. Did you ever have any other reasons to suppose he was here?

A. Yes, I have often felt that he was here.

Q. What made you think so?

A. Well, I don't know; it seems to reason in my mind that way.

Q. When you did see him, how did you know that it was your husband?

A. Well, he looked the same as he always looked. From the throat I could see a stream of blood, or something like that. He was all white, but that was the onliest thing that I could see what was wrong. It looked like him, otherwise it was natural as 'fore.

Q. What did the stream of blood from the throat mean to you?

A. That I don't exactly know.

Q. Didn't you shoot him in the throat?

A. That's what the coroner said.

Q. Don't you know?

A. No, sir.

Q. Didn't you see the wound?

A. No, I didn't see the wound at all.

Q. What clothes did he have on when you saw him here?

A. He appeared to have a uniform on with a white coat. When I first looked at him he was dressed the same as you were dressed and the second time I looked at him he appeared to have a white coat on—kind of shadow like—shadow on it.

Q. What do you mean by shadow like was on it?

A. Shadow of someone else. He was between the shades. I taken them to be priests.

Q. Catholic priests?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Are you a Catholic?

A. No, sir, I am a Methodist.

Q. Was your husband a Catholic?

A. No, sir, he was a Baptist.

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Q. What was he doing there?

A. That I don't know.

Q. Did you try to attract his attention?

A. No, I did not.

Q. Why not?

A. Well, we were having services and we are not allowed to do anything like that.

Q. Did he try to attract your attention?

A. No, sir.

Q. Did he see you?

A. He did.

Q. Did he recognize you?

A. I don't know whether he did or not.

Q. Do you think he is really alive now?

A. Why, yes, sir, I do. I don't know why I think so, but I certainly do.

Q. Well, do you think that you killed him?

A. Why, I know that I shot him, but whether I killed him I don't know that.

Q. Well, everybody says you did.

A. Well, that may be so, too.

Q. How do you account for the fact that everybody says that you killed him, that you were tried and convicted of killing him, that the coroner and all the doctors, the judge and the jury and all the lawyers and everyone say that he is dead? How do you account for the fact that everyone says that he is dead and yet he is alive so that he can be here in the jail.

A. That I couldn't tell you to save my life. I have that reasoning in my mind, that I don't believe that he is dead.

The characteristics that remind one of a dream are that she first saw her husband dressed in an ordinary suit of clothes and then suddenly he appeared to have a white coat on. This kind of transformation is very characteristic of dreams and dream-like hallucinations. I therefore went into this matter more fully and found that after she had come back from service on the Sunday in question she went to her cell and lay down. She says that she was very sleepy in those days, as she is now, and she does not remember, and cannot be made to remember, whether she had her lunch that day after chapel or not. The whole experience, therefore, indicates either that she had a dream-like hallucination at the time or that she may have dreamt about her husband after returning to her cell and projected the experience back a few hours, both of which are perfectly possible explanations. It is significant in this connection that she has frequently dreamt about her husband while in jail. I have no doubt that these dreams are perfectly genuine because they have the features of dream formation and are of a simple character in accordance with the mentality of the patient, and are rather superficial in general, and easy to understand. For example, she makes the statement that she never dreams she is with her husband in prison. This is a plain wish fulfilling mechanism of a perfectly simple and characteristic kind. She always dreams of being home with him where she wishes to be.

So that aside from the external reasons for considering her account

of her hallucinations genuine, the internal reasons also support this view, namely, that she is a single-minded, superstitious darkey, that her description of the vision tallies with the known characteristics of such visions, and that she had numerous dreams of the same general character.

There remains to explain the situation. The prisoner is under sentence of death for murdering her husband. She has got into a difficulty which does not permit her to make an efficient adjustment. She is unable to square herself with reality. The realities are too appalling to be accepted. There arises then an unconscious effort on the part of the individual to so arrange her world that she can live in it. She cannot live in the world of facts when those facts include her execution in a few days. She therefore has to build up certain defense reactions, certain contradictions of fact, certain delusions, supported by hallucinations, and other things, to wit, her constant sleepiness, to enable her to get along. The one great single thing that confronts her is the crime which she has committed and for which she is to be hung. If her husband were not dead, then everything would be all right. The suggestion that he is not dead comes to her, I am not sure just exactly how, either in a dream or trance-like state and she accepts it. Why should she lay aside this vision, why should she measure it up against reality and discard it, when by discarding it she is breaking down all her defenses, she is throwing away everything that enables her to live? As a matter of fact she grabs it with a desperation that a drowning man grabs at a straw, and if she deceives anyone she deceives herself into believing that it is true. And as the days go by this truth characteristically becomes more and more elaborated. For example, the vision, as she tells it to me, is much more complex than it was as she originally told it. It has several added elements, and under a continuation of the conditions that surround her it would very probably continue to become more complex.

We have here, then, a typical beginning prison psychosis, a psychosis that has originated as a result of her arrest, her imprisonment, and her conviction, and which is dependent upon these factors—a psychosis which is in every sense a defense psychosis and which has come into existence as a mode of reaction to the difficulties in which she finds herself and as an expression of her way of building up defenses to those difficulties.

The theory that we have here the early stages of a prison psychosis, is supported by the historical features of the case: the hysteriform attacks, convulsive-like, with anesthesia which occurred just preceding or during her trial, and the attacks of irritability and violence which

she has had while in the jail. These all belong in the picture, because it is a certain kind of individual that develops this kind of reaction. It is the individual who is poorly organized mentally, whose mentality is poorly synthetised, the elements of whose personality are not well balanced and harmonized, who acts in this sort of way.

The lack of synthesis in this prisoner's personality is well shown by the fact that on the first examination she, to all intents and purposes, acknowledged having killed her husband, while on the second examination she said that she believed him to be alive, having been resurrected from the dead. We have, in other words, two streams of thought diametrically opposed to each other, existing side by side, and not interfering with each other—a very characteristic phenomenon of the poorly knit personality.

Such a case as this raises a number of questions of medico-legal importance. There is no doubt in my mind but that we have here a beginning psychosis and that in all probability if the sentence of hanging were carried out the mental symptoms would become progressively aggravated as time went on. It is quite certain, also, that if this patient were relieved from the stress under which she is suffering, if, for example, she were pardoned and set free, that the mental symptoms would melt away almost immediately. Should a person in this state of mind be executed?

Leaving aside entirely, as not being germane to the subject, a discussion of whether capital punishment is right or wrong, accepting it as the present law, this question presents at least two aspects. In the first place, there is a general feeling of abhorrence against executing a person who is insane. Of course it must be understood that the word insane has no definite meaning, and in connection with a feeling of this sort it can only be presumed that it is applied to a person who is mentally diseased and who is not in an understanding state of mind towards the situation. The feeling is built up of two components. One is the abhorrence against executing a sentence of death upon a person who is really sick and the other the feeling that execution is a punishment, that in order that it should have its dual effect both upon the individual executed and upon the public generally, it should only be carried out when the criminal is in the possession of his senses and has a full realization of what is intended.

On the other hand it may be argued that a psychosis such as this colored woman suffered from is the natural consequence of her act and as such should not be given consideration. This is a well known principle in criminal law, for example, if a man engaged in housebreaking

is surprised by the owner of the house and kills him, even though it be in self-defense, he is guilty of murder in the first degree, because he has caused the death of a human being while committing a felony, and although the homicide was not originally contemplated, it was the natural outgrowth of the act which he was engaged in, which act was illegal, and therefore the criminal is not entitled to consideration because of the element of self-defense. So in the case of this colored woman. Her psychosis is the natural consequence of her act, a remote consequence, perhaps, but nevertheless a consequence. And then further it will be seen that there are other reasons why the psychosis should not be considered in the carrying out of the sentence. A psychosis such as this is, as I have already said, a defense psychosis and enables the individual to get along in the face of intolerable conditions by building up a delusional system which asserts that such conditions do not exist. Should, therefore, the individual be given special consideration because she is so mentally constituted that she is enabled to elaborate a mental state that is of material assistance to her in getting through the days and enables her to live with less suffering than otherwise?

And finally and here we arrive at the crux of the whole problem. Does not the psychosis from which this patient suffers throw some light upon her mental state when she committed the homicide? I have all along pointed out that such a psychosis as this occurs only in a type of personality that easily disintegrates and falls to pieces under stress. Is it not because of this capacity for easy disintegration that she lacked the qualities that enabled her to deal with her difficulties efficiently and made recourse to homicide a possibility growing out of this weakness? Here, then, we have the true psychological viewpoint of the case as regards the question of responsibility. The very type of character from which the prisoner suffers and which made such a psychosis as here outlined possible is also the type of personality which made recourse to homicide necessary, and therefore the two things must be considered together in deciding upon the course that society should pursue with reference to her. It would at least seem that to execute her is to meet out death because of a certain defect for which surely she is not to blame. And in the face of the generally well accepted fact that punishment has only a minimum effect in preventing crime, the question may be well asked whether society has any right to pursue such a course.

The psychology of the condemned criminal will be a very interesting chapter to be written—the way in which they react when all hope is past, after all of the recourses of the law have been appealed to and failed. I have not as yet had sufficient experience to dogmatize, but from

the reading of newspaper accounts and such other information as I have, I doubt very much if anyone ever goes to execution in what might be termed a normal state of mind. The religious conversions of some of the most hardened reprobates, their resort to continuous prayers, and their thorough and complete conviction which occurs towards the end, that their soul is saved and their sins forgiven is fully as great a departure from the characteristics of their every day life as the hallucinatory dream-like delusional state of the woman discussed in this paper was from her every day life. It might also just as properly be considered a psychosis, but just because in its content it fits more closely the recognized standards of the average human being it is not so considered. Yet every psychiatrist knows that the real standard that must be taken is the standard of the individual in question. From this point of view such a reaction might properly be considered as a psychosis and if so, surely a defense psychosis in the same sense as set forth in this paper with regard to the case described.³

In concluding I desire to call more emphatic attention to certain points that have been only touched upon. In the first place I would call particular attention to the fact that here a pretty complete psychological analysis has been able to build up an explanation and understanding of the prisoner, not only in her present condition, but with reference to the crime, and that it has been possible to evaluate all of her various statements without recourse to anything outside of herself. In other words the whole picture has been constructed from internal evidence alone, a fact which psychiatrists fully appreciate as perfectly possible, but which our legal brothers appear never even to suspect can be done. Witness the constant and repeated questions on cross examination with reference to alleged delusional states; constant attempts to prove that delusions correspond to facts, with the implied assumption that if they are found to so correspond, then they are not delusions—a wholly inaccurate method of attack upon the problem, but one which, of course, can be easily understood when we take into consideration our present methods of legal procedure.

As an example of the internal evidence, take the statements in the paper that the delusional formations were dream-like in character and that the dreams as detailed by the patient were consistent with the general theory of the case as outlined. Such a statement as that might

³With regard to this matter, it may be interesting for the readers of this article to know that a case somewhat similar to this involving the same questions is now before the Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia. While going through the press, I learn that the case has been decided adversely to the prisoner.

easily mean nothing to the average person and probably would mean very little to the lawyer or to the presiding judge, but when such a statement is based upon a knowledge of the present day voluminous literature and incisive psychological studies of dreams that have been making their appearance in the scientific world for the past few years, then immediately it is given a positive value—a value which it would be of tremendous difficulty to demonstrate in court; it would indeed be practically impossible, unless the expert witness were much more than a scientific man and had an unusual capacity for putting abstruse scientific matters into easily understood words. Even then it would probably be impossible in the limited time which would be devoted to his testimony. In fact, it is hard to conceive how a condition could arise under present methods whereby such a statement could amount to anything more than a statement that would or would not receive credence in accordance with general principles—the apparent credibility and learning of the witness. It is certainly open to question whether the ends of justice can best be served by methods that are so accidental as the ability to present a scientific view in a convincing and simple manner to a lay jury, and to be free from the embarrassment of the physician on the witness stand that the expert is very likely to suffer, especially if badgered by a persistent cross-examination.

After a wide experience I am almost convinced of the practical impossibility of presenting, at least with any degree of satisfaction to myself, a scientific position from the witness stand.