

THE SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT OF A CASE OF CHRONIC PARANOIA

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Abstract

The following study is based upon a case of paranoia of ten years standing in which I have succeeded in destroying a fixed system of ideas of persecution in an unmarried woman of 53 and in giving her complete insight into the nature of her disease.

The patient visited me first on December 10, 1909. She brought with her a letter of introduction from a lady of my acquaintance who had won for herself a world-wide reputation in the woman's rights movement. The contents of the letter was in part an emphatic assurance that neither the chief of the firm in which the patient worked, nor any one else so far as she knew had ever had a bad opinion of her and partly a demand upon her to visit me in order to be freed from her erroneous ideas.

As soon, however, as she began to speak, she stated that she had not come to talk of her ideas but to be cured of a goitre from which she had been suffering for years. She was very sure that her nervousness was due to the goitre and that if she were cured of that she would be able to stand her ground against her persecutors, whose boldness was now beyond all bounds.

Asked in regard to the letter she said that she had ventured to write to Fraulein K. who was acquainted with her chief in order that she might use her influence to protect her against all the mischiefs in the office. All her own complaints had been without result. She had thought that Fraulein K. had been a central part in the conspiracy. She had been much surprised at her reply. However, even tho Fraulein K. knew nothing of the conspiracy, that made no difference. The evidence was entirely too convincing. It was useless to tell me about it. Assured of my willingness to listen, she was surprised, but permitted herself to be convinced that I knew nothing of it. Her story is as follows:

She notices the persecutor in all sorts of signs. People move their feet, they make peculiar movements of the legs and arms, they show her pens, scissors and similar objects with insulting intent. But especially they put out their tongues at her in an unmistakable manner. As soon as she appears on the street they begin and it continues everywhere. She cannot go into any shop where she is known but must visit distant shops in the hope of finding one in which she is not known. But even then she dares not return for even on the second visit she notices that they are already drawn into the conspiracy against her. It is worst of all in her office. The cashier is a regular devil. He stirs up the others and leads the persecution. Every time he passes the door he makes a sign. The assurance in the letter that the chief knows nothing means nothing whatsoever. He also put out his tongue at her. In the restaurant where she eats it is unbearable. Just as soon as she enters they stick out their tongues at her. Even her closest friend from whom she had expected protection became hostile to her some months before. The others do not speak to her any more. She would have been entirely deserted if a niece had not begun to take lunch with her, but already she begins to see the signs of persecution in the latter's two year old daughter. A shameless servant girl had taught the little one.

In order that I should not believe that she had exaggerated she undertook on the second visit to prove to me that the persecutor had an actual cause. There are so many people who wish at all costs to hinder a woman from living her life as she pleases. She had had a relationship with a man. That was her right and she feels no regret over it. She wished to have a woman's full experience. But people could not bear that. That was the basis of the whole affair. She was for this rejected from society, condemned to death.

She asked me if I knew the story of Fraulein X. The persecutor had succeeded in getting from her the fact that she was pregnant. When she learned that, she killed herself. (This was a fact). It is her persecutor's intention to drive her also to suicide. She fears that they may succeed. She cannot stand it much longer. The conspiracy has now for ten years been becoming more and more violent. She knows the center of it all. It is the Women's Society Union which has a real inquisitional purpose. The members spy with unbelievable assiduity. Previously she had been a teacher. She had even been elected principal of one of the largest girls' schools. Now the schools are among her worst enemies. She has also been a journalist, but the persecution manifested itself in the press. Of especial importance was a caricature of herself in Puck's Christmas number in 1899 and an article entitled "Was Neues" in February 1900 in which she was sharply attacked. A deceiver's role had been played by the journalists' society where her affairs were discussed. It was made clear to her thru an anonymous letter in which she was attacked in the most grossly insulting manner. This letter she had burned at once in order to forget it. At times the persecutor was less intent, but that was only that her enemies might gather their forces for a new onslaught.

Asked more specifically about the beginning of the persecution she said it began early in 1899 in Xbury where she had gone with her lover. She noticed then indications of persecution, and when she returned to Stockholm she noticed this also.

Physically, except for the goitre, she is quite well. The goitre she first noticed in 1906.

Concerning her heredity the important facts are as follows: Her paternal grandfather was the illegitimate son of a count well-known under the name of Med. X. Before his marriage the grandfather had had children by seven young girls. In his marriage there were a number of children born. In his old age he was afflicted with hypochondria and seemed at times quite beside himself. The father of the patient was the fruit of a union with a peasant girl. He was a good and gifted but peculiar fellow. He gave up the profitable business of clock-maker to found several newspapers, of which at least one was important. Always he was starting crazy schemes only a few of which came to anything. He once took out a patent for a contrivance for soldiers, a rubber bulb to be placed under the foot inside the shoe, so arranged that at each step it would blow air into the face. His last patent was a contrivance for pulling the bed clothes up over the head.

All the siblings of the father were taciturn, peculiar people. One was gifted but a misanthrope and a pathological liar. Another, a woman, who was fine as a writer of stories could not as a child tell reality from phantasy. Another suffered from the compulsion of riding on the railroad until finally she threw herself out and was killed.

On the mother's side nothing peculiar was noted.

Of the twelve siblings of the patient, five died young. All the others are more or less afflicted nervously. One brother has for years had ideas of persecution. One sister suffers from phobias. Two sisters have gone thru serious changes of personality. One was in youth a cold, remorseless person, but married happily and is now a saint who dwells in another world.

The patient is unquestionably very talented and her judgment in matters outside her delusional system is good. Both as teacher and as journalist she was most successful.

When the patient was 18 yrs. old there came the great experience of her life. Already early in life she and her sister had begun to print newspapers which were circulated among the circle of friends and relatives. The mystery of anonymity amused her. In fun, she inserted a marriage advertisement in a public newspaper. An answer was the beginning of a correspondence which lasted 20 years, without in all that time any meeting between them even tho her correspondent lived in Stockholm. Her relationship to the unknown was her happiness and she awaited his letters with all the expectancy and joy of intense love. She was not only bound to him with her whole soul, but he gripped also in a peculiar way her erotic life. His letters were to her as bodily contacts. She dreamed of marrying him, of giving herself to him. He was her fairy prince.

During these twenty years she made the acquaintance of a young man who was sympathetic to her and whom she loved. They were betrothed, but after seven years of doubt and inner struggle she broke with him. She felt that she could not part with the writer of the letters. She was with mysterious bonds united with him forever. Even yet she cannot speak of the correspondence without tears and she emphasizes the fact that inspite of everything this was the most precious thing in her life. It was for her an ideal relationship which filled her entire life and determined her attitude toward men and toward the world. Those letters were the sunshine of her life and thanks to them she was able to carry the burden of work and sublimate a strong sexuality. It is to be noted that her biography abounds in sexual symbolism and sex to her was something dark and cruel. At the age of seven she hears of the curse on women and she and her sister take an oath never to marry, and thus to come under the domination of a man. Adolescence was for her a period of great stress, which was to some extent relieved thru the practice of masturbation. But thru the correspondence the tension is relieved and during the twenty years this correspondence continued she was completely free from this practice.

The breaking up of this relationship she describes as the bitterest experience of her life. This happened gradually. Several factors entered in but one was decisive. When she was in her 38th year she met this man at a party and understood at once that she was entirely mistaken. The ideal which she had seen behind the letters did not exist. Instead she saw a commonplace fellow who was even mixed up in a love affair with her younger sister. She did not wish to see any more of him. She began not merely to hate the man who had disillusioned her. She became also bitter against everybody. And she even gave up the work in which for fifteen years she had been engaged and on which her existence depended. For this step she gave as her reason that she felt the strength to do it. It is furthermore to be noted that with the breaking up of her ideal relationship she resumed her practice of masturbation.

In the winter of 1898 - 9 she began a relationship with a certain Hen. C. She had to visit him in Stockholm at his hotel. Even with the second visit he made advances to her and she yielded - not because she loved him but because she wished to live her life and she seized the opportunity which came to her. Instead of the happiness which she had lost she wished to have experience. This was her right and she had not regretted it. In April 1899 she followed C. to a city on the continent in order to take a position in his office. There she remained until November. Then the relationship came to an end. There was however no outward disturbance and she was able to take up a responsible piece of work and to put it thru. And for ten years she continued to do productive work.

But already in Stockholm she had begun to notice people spying upon her. Once while leaving a hotel, the bar-keeper made a grimace at her. He had surely been watching the door. From him the persecution spread.

After considerable difficulty Bjerre succeeded in overcoming her evasiveness and unwillingness to speak frankly of certain things. Finally he got from her the following account of the first indications of persecution.

She went to a horse race in Åburg in order to write a report for a newspaper. On the reporters' bench she made the acquaintance of an elegantly dressed lady who sat near her. She noticed that this lady attracted much attention from the men & that one after another made a peculiar sign - especially little movements with the tongue. At first she did not understand this. Then it became clear to her that it had a hidden sexual meaning. She parted from the lady without leaving her name and she saw no more of her thereafter. But with terror she began to notice that people on the streets were making similar signs to her.

(At this point Bjerre points out to her the general tendency to identify one's self with those who have made a deep impression upon us. He shows that altho quite clear in her own mind that she was acting within her rights in entering into the relationship, there was yet a conflict and she was afraid of being found out. This lady probably attracted her unconsciously because she recognized her as one who was not entirely innocent and she identified herself with her. Hence she begins to see directed against her the peculiar signs which she thought she saw directed against the lady.

B. then questions her as to painful experiences in the past in which the tongue has played a part. She remembered having seen an insane man who stuck out his tongue.

He then points out that one is constantly making little movements of which one is not conscious and which others also do not notice. Among these movements are the moistening of the lips with the tongue. But when under the influence of a dominating idea, attention is called to such movements, then one sees them all the time. A dominating idea attracts with the same certainty that a magnet attracts.

Furthermore a strong idea is accompanied by action. If, for example, you think intently of the tongue it is difficult to keep it still. And when one person does a thing, others are apt to do it too. Thus, when one yawns, others yawn too.

She then declares the sexual significance of the tongue movements to be unmistakable.

When she left Xburg, she hoped that the affair had been known only there. Soon, however, she discovered that the sign language was known also in Sweden and used against her. Her affair was therefore known. That was clear to her also in other ways. Wherever she went, people talked about her and laughed behind her back. An article which she had written was rejected - something which had never happened before. Her former acquaintances became cold.

Then in February 1900 the persecution became general. The storm broke in all its fury. Wherever she went, there were signs and everywhere people talked about her. It was her fate to be hounded to death all because she had asserted her rights. She became therefore more and more bitter against everyone and drew within herself. In time, the conspiracy covered the whole of Europe and went even to America.

B. now takes up detail after detail and has her describe the facts accurately. Among those details was the caricature of Punch. He send for the exact number and discovers that in that year Punch was not in existence. She then herself looks up the article "Was Neues" and finds it to be wholly impersonal thing.

He now proceeds steadily and shows her the groundless character of one idea after another. After seven weeks of this, the ground was pretty well prepared. A change was taking place in the depths of her unconscious. B. then takes the important step of telling her that he begins to doubt whether, after all, she was really the object of a conspiracy.

Finally, of her own accord, she relates two incidents:

When she was seventeen, she had a friend several years older who was in love with a young man. Her father opposed the marriage. Finally the friend went to a distant city. She then received a letter telling her that the friend was expecting a baby. When the child was born she visited her friend and saw also the young father. Their happiness made a deep impression upon her.

Among the girls with whom she was confirmed she was especially intimate with one who was later imprisoned on account of the murder of her child. She was convinced of her friend's innocence and was greatly excited by the false accusation which was spread - broadcast thru the press. Later it was shown that the child had never lived. This incident had made the most profound impression upon her.

Bjerre then shows her how she had identified herself with these two friends and was in constant dread of her own possible pregnancy.

In April the patient was to all practical purposes cured, the final difficulty disappearing with the conviction that a certain friend had no knowledge of a conspiracy against her.