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DR. SAML. A. TANNENBAUM

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PSYCHE & EROS

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Vol. I

SEPT.-OCT., 1920

No. 2

Analysis of a Case of Bird Phobia

By DR. WM. STEKEL,

Vienna

Animal-phobias [zoophobia] are amongst the commonest phenomena to come under the observation of the psychotherapist who treats anxiety states. The fear of snakes, mice, rats, and toads is so extraordinarily common that it may almost be regarded as a normal phenomenon. The fear of snakes has some semblance of reasonableness about it owing to the fact that there are such things as poisonous snakes. But the unnaturalness of such a fear is at once apparent if we consider its absurdity and exaggerated affectivity. I treated a woman whose whole life was influenced and shaped by her fear of snakes. Because of it she insisted on living on the upper stories of hotels and always entered her room apprehensively, fearing that a snake might possibly have climbed up into it. Consequently she carefully kept away from roof-drains. (A snake might crawl down such a leader!) In most cases this apprehensiveness, which manifests itself in such an over-emphasis and in erotic symbolism, is explained when we know that the snake is a phallic symbol as well as the Biblical symbol for sin. Mice, rats, and toads are, to be sure, unappetizing animals whose symbolic utilization as a "defense" against a sexual desire, by virtue of the disgust they generate, is comprehensible. But, as a matter of fact, there is no animal that may not become the object of a complicated phobia. I know neurotics who are afraid of horses, cats, dogs, leeches, monkeys, etc. Fear of dogs is not necessarily always combined with lysophobia [fear of hydrophobia].

In most cases an analysis will easily bring forth proof that the malady is a matter of the psychological fixation of an infantile attitude, i. e., a variety of

"psychosexual infantilism." But the matter must not be taken too lightly and a case must not be considered analyzed when the sexual symbols have been identified. Otherwise the analyst will suffer the humiliation of learning that the symptoms continue notwithstanding all his analysis and all his explanations and that the phobia continues unabated and is immune against all his psychotherapeutic efforts—a fact which once caused Freud to declare a phobia "psychically unassailable" and, consequently, not psychically determined.

The following analysis will show how dangerous it is to conceive of such an analysis as a purely sexual matter. Most phobias are much more complicated than the novice in *psa.* imagines. Symptoms, like the neuroses, have a manifold determination and are built up, as it were, in several planes. This will be made clear in the analysis of a bird-phobia that follows.

Mr. I. K., 41 years old, a manufacturer, has been suffering since his childhood from various apprehensions which centered about an almost unconquerable topophobia (fear of places) and a "fear of birds." The roots of the topophobia are indissolubly linked with those of the bird-phobia and we shall therefore for the present devote all our attention to the latter. Since his childhood our patient has feared birds of all kinds. He is uncomfortable even in the presence of a caged bird in the homes he visits. He is pained on encountering any member of the bird family (cock, goose, duck, etc.) in the street; there is something uncanny about them. This vague kind of discomfort, corresponding to an attack of anxious anticipation (apprehension of misfortune), assumes the character of terror if he sees a bird flying about in a room. Birds in the air also become objects of anxiety to him. The sight of birds flapping their wings is unendurable. He experiences intense fear at the possibility of a bird approaching him or hovering about him with the wings extended and moving up and down. The fear that a bird might perch on his shoulder is equally great.

The physician who treated him before me, a very competent and skilled psychotherapist, thought of the sexual significance of this phobia. The German vulgarism ("vögeln") for cohabitation suggested defences against sex and more especially against fellatoristic phantasies ("penis in ore").* The patient did not directly reject the interpretation, but neither did he accept it—and he experienced no relief.

When we question our patient about the commencement of his phobia he recalls certain important facts. He is reminded of a parrot that his family

*Freud has given us a thoroughgoing study ("A Childhood Memory of Leonardo da Vinci's," pp. 25-6) of the significance of this phantasy in connection with the pleasurable memories of sucking the mother's breast. As to the bird as a sexual symbol cf. F. S. Krauss in the *Internat. Zeitschr. f. ärat. Psa.* Vol. 1, p. 288; 1913.

owned and which was subsequently presented to one of his aunts. He had forgotten all about this bird until one day he suddenly saw it flying about in his aunt's residence. Filled with terror he begged the animal should be removed. He also recalls two "inséparables" [turtle-doves] that his family owned. He thinks that one of these died and that then the other one died, too. Finally it occurs to him that one of his aunts was photographed with a dove in her hand.

More important than this old material is the recollection of a remarkable impression he experienced lately and which repeats itself often. To make a short-cut from his home to his office he walks through the zoological garden—a practice that was made easy for him by the possession of a pass. Like all victims of phobias he was constantly contending with his fear and seeking to conquer it by practice and habit. A mysterious power seemed to draw him to the birds he feared so much. So he would pass the bird-houses every morning, trembling and quaking with fear and terror. Thus it happened that one morning he discovered a parrot whose peculiar expression and form reminded him of an old man. The stooping position, the care-worn face, the mournful look in the eyes—that was not a bird but a human being in the shape of a bird! He could not look at this bird without a shudder but he could not help looking at it again and again.

Before explaining this remarkable phenomenon we must describe two other phobias our patient suffered from. The first is a fear of falling in love. He has had this fear for twenty years. He had then made the acquaintance of a girl in a sanatorium who had been harassed and annoyed by her mother. He sympathized with her and, quick as a flash, fell in love with her while he was attempting to console her. But he took the precaution to make a remark before the girl's companion which would make the thought of marriage impossible. "He would remain a bachelor, would never get married, his circumstances precluded the possibility of marriage." Notwithstanding this, he feared that his sympathetic attitude had given rise to the impression that he was wooing the girl. He shut himself up in his room and suffered such an attack of apprehension that his physician declared that he was suffering from "hysteria." After a few days he left the sanatorium and went home. But he was destined to meet the girl several times after that. He was always on the lookout not to give the impression that he was wooing her. He never visited her alone, sent her a letter of congratulations in partnership with his brother and once sent her some flowers bearing his own and his brother's visiting cards. But ever since then he is afraid of falling in love or of exposing himself to an impression that might "get" him. He did not dare look a woman in the face or speak to one. He is just as much afraid of falling in love with the manicure and the typist

as with the maid, the cook or the housekeeper. He must be especially on his guard against new female acquaintances. He is therefore very careful to walk or travel only along certain particular roads near his home and only in the company of his valet or his father or his physician. For short distances he can bear to be accompanied by a certain lady friend.

This woman is acceptable to him because he is quite sure he won't fall in love with her. He keeps her at a proper distance from him. In fact he did not choose her himself. His brother had found her. He had not staid a single night in her house. He only visits her occasionally and sleeps in her house, but without undressing. They exchange no confidences and do not speak in the language of intimates. Notwithstanding all this, he indulges in phantasies of marrying this girl for he considers her a very fine and respectable personage; and the absence of any likelihood of falling in love with her seems to offer great advantages. He is quite sure she will never "get" him. Perfect "potentia cotundi" with her; orgasms wholly satisfactory. In addition to this form of sexual indulgence, performed semi-weekly (on the advice of physicians—"as a hygienic measure"), he indulges in another mode of erotic gratification which has a thoroughly infantile character.

In his family's employ there is an elderly housekeeper by whom he loves to be petted. She sympathizes with him for his sufferings and when he is troubled with sleeplessness she strokes him like a little child till he falls asleep. This often results "in emissione"—a form of gratification which recalls the playful practice of a governess whom they employed during his boyhood (between his eighth and thirteenth years) and who evidently had much to do with the genesis of his fear. She also was in the habit of playing "cum membrum virile." His present housekeeper thus only brings about a re-experiencing of a former pleasure.

Another circumstance gives our patient's case a peculiar aspect. He is impelled to bring all misfortunes into connection with his own guilt. If, for example, an acquaintance becomes afflicted with any ailment, e. g., pneumonia, he is compelled to search through his own whole past life to convince himself that he was in no way responsible for the ailment. Woe to him if he should find that his acquaintance had caught cold at some resort which he had recommended to him! or if he had advised him to consult a certain physician or undertaken a journey on his advice, or anything that did not turn out well! He therefore keeps the names of his physicians secret and never recommends them to his friends. So, too, he maintains a discreet silence when his advice is solicited about anything. In this way he saves himself from the possibility of holding himself responsible for anything that goes wrong.

If some indifferent neighbor, Mr. X, should die of the grippe, let us say, our patient's sufferings at once begin. He broods and worries. When had he last met Mr. X? What had he said to him? If he had not come personally in contact with Mr. X, he might have exerted his malign influence indirectly through the intervention of a mutual friend or acquaintance. He cannot find peace. For even after he has excluded all possibilities, there yet remains the horrible possibility of something uncertain and inexplicable to accuse him and make him feel responsible. In some manner or other he must have had a share in bringing the misfortune about!

This peculiarity is associated with another one. He cherishes a secret belief that a business must fail if he predicts failure for it. E. g., his firm contemplates opening a branch office; he is opposed to the plan but is out-voted. Then he gets the conviction that it cannot succeed and, as a matter of fact, *in all such instances the venture failed.*

He is frank to admit that he really *wished* such ventures to fail and that these wishes of his always came true. His predictions are the wishes of an oversensitive, envious, revengeful, malicious and ambitious man who will not acknowledge harboring such hateful desires and who devotes himself to doing deeds of kindness and to showing evidences of sympathy on every possible occasion so as to be able again and again to reassure himself as to his good-heartedness. His exaggerated ambition is being fed by a depressing feeling of inferiority resulting from a malady which cripples him and makes of him only half a man. What would he not accomplish if he were well? But his sickness also does away with the necessity of accomplishing something great and he can continue to cherish his secret belief in his "great historic mission." But he looks with envy on the achievements of others, especially his brothers' (whose health, energy and joy in life oppress him sorely when he compares his poor self with them). Some of these brothers do not treat him well and do not believe in his illness, declaring it altogether imaginary.

His neurosis is a sacred thing with him and any doubt concerning it he looks upon as a great crime. His whole life is a conflict with his malady.

But he knows that no one may insult or humiliate him with impunity. Such offences always bring illness or some other grave misfortune to his wronger. Why, even his mere thought that something bad might happen—and how often does his resentment express itself in such a wish!—results in something bad happening.

He cherishes a secret belief in the omnipotency of his ideas. Deep within the inner recesses of his soul he is revengeful, egotistic, and never forgets an