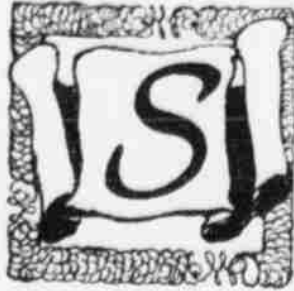


# HYSTERIA in CHILDHOOD

By H. ADDINGTON BRUCE



SOME TIME AGO, a little girl, a pupil in a German school, made her appearance one morning with a bandage about her head. In answer to her teacher's questions, she said she had been operated upon for ear trouble at a local hospital the day before. She described every detail of the operation,

which, it seemed, had been exceedingly painful.

For some time, she wore the bandage to school every day, and frequently complained that her ear was still troubling her. Her teacher was properly sympathetic, and, chancing to meet one of the girl's relatives, expressed her anxiety for the child, and the hope that she would soon be completely cured.

"Cured?" repeated the relative. "Cured of what?"

"Why, her ear trouble — the disease that has made it necessary for her to keep her head bandaged."

"But," said the other, obviously puzzled, "I do not understand you. I did not know she had any ear trouble, and I have never seen her with a bandage."

It was the teacher's turn to be astonished. She could not believe that the girl had been deceiving her; but, to get at the truth, she decided to take her immediately to the hospital where the operation was supposed to have been performed. There, the child made her way about as if perfectly familiar with the place and greeted in a friendly way the surgeon in charge. He, however, did not seem to recognize her, and when told the circumstances by the teacher, said:

"I can assure you I have never operated upon this girl."

He then made a thorough examination of her ear, and found it to be quite sound. After which, careful investigation developed the fact that her sole knowledge of the hospital was derived from detailed information given her by a friend, a lady who curiously enough, had been operated upon a little while previously for precisely the trouble that the girl had attributed to herself.

In other words, no doubt remained that she had for weeks been acting a lie, from what motive neither the teacher nor her parents could fathom.

## A Mischievous Ghost

AGAIN, a clergyman writing to the Society for Psychical Research from a little English village named Ham, urgently requested the dispatch of a skilled investigator to look into certain strange occurrences in the house of a Mr. Turner. This house, the clergyman asserted, was haunted by a "veritable ghost," which amused itself by playing all sorts of mischievous and annoying pranks. Remaining invisible, it hurled boots, shoes and other small objects through the air, upset chairs and tables, and on at least one occasion pitched the family cat into the fire. All this was done, according to both the clergyman and several other intelligent eye-witnesses, under circumstances that rendered it impossible that the "manifestations" could be the work of any human agency.

"No one can explain it," the clergyman declared. "It is quite a mystery, and is causing great excitement through the countryside."

The task of laying this "poltergeist," or troublesome ghost, was assigned to Mr. Ernest Westlake, F.G.S., an able psychical researcher. Proceeding to Ham, he found that the Turner family consisted of Mr. Turner, his wife, one son, and a deformed little daughter, Polly, not quite twelve years old. So impressed was he with what he heard that his first report indicated a belief that the phenomena reported might be genuine evidences of some mysterious and unknown force. But, after a few hours of careful investigation, he sent word that "the Ham ghost is a humbug now, whatever it may have been." In detail Mr. Westlake afterward added:

"After posting my first letter, I went to the Turners' and sat on a bench in front of the fire. No one else was present besides the child. She sat on a low stool in the chimney on the right of the fire. On the other side of the hearth there was a brick oven in which, much to Polly's interest, I placed a dish of flour, arguing that a power capable of discharging the contents of the oven (one of the first disturbances) might be able to impress the flour. After a time, I went to the oven to see how the flour was getting on, stooping slightly to look in; but I kept my eyes on the child's hands, looking at them under my right arm. I saw her hand stealing down toward a stick that was projecting from the fire; I moved slightly, and the hand was withdrawn. Next time I was careful to make no movement, and saw her hand jerk the brand out on to the floor. She cried out. I expressed interest and astonishment; and her mother came in and cleared up the debris.

## Juggling the Kettle

"THIS was repeated several times, and one or two large sticks ready for burning, which stood near the child, were thrown down. Then, a kettle that was hanging on a hook and chain was jerked off the hook on to the coals. This was repeated. As the kettle refused to stay on its hook, the mother placed it on the hearth; but it was soon overturned on to the floor. After this, I was sitting on the bench that stood facing the fire in front of the table. I had placed my hat on the table behind me. The little girl was standing near me on my right hand. Presently the hat was thrown down on to the ground. I did not on the first occasion see the girl's movements; but later, by seeming to look in another direction, I saw her hand sweep the hat off on to the floor. This I saw at least twice. A Windsor chair near the girl was then upset more than once, falling away from her. On one occasion, I saw her push the chair over with both hands. As she was looking away from me, I got a nearly complete view. After one of these performances, the mother came in and asked the child if she had done it; but the latter denied it."

Unquestionably, Mr. Westlake concluded, Polly was the "ghost." Yet, why she should have assumed so singular a rôle he found it difficult to conjecture. Neither she nor her parents — whom he exonerated from all complicity — had profited a penny's worth from her exploits. Indeed, her parents had been put out of pocket by the damage to household furniture and utensils.

## "Played" His Arm Was Paralyzed

CONSIDER, also, the case of a little Chicago boy who had fallen out of a play-wagon and hurt one of his arms. The injury was in reality very slight; but his mother, becoming greatly alarmed, declared her belief that the doctor would say the arm was broken. What the doctor — D'Orsay Hecht, of Northwestern University Medical School — did say was that a few applications of witchhazel would speedily remedy matters.

The mother, nevertheless, insisted on bandaging the arm, talked of having an X-ray examination, and broadly hinted that a wrong diagnosis had been made. Within a few days, as Dr. Hecht had expected, all signs of injury disappeared. But now, the boy complained that the hand of the injured arm felt stiff; and, in a day or so, his mother reported that both hand and arm were paralyzed.

This was the situation when, passing along the street one day, Dr. Hecht was astonished and amused to see his "paralyzed" patient romping with a number of children, quite as if nothing were the matter with him. He used his injured arm freely, pushed and pulled his playmates, and was pushed and pulled around by them.

"Ah," thought the physician, with a feeling of relief, "evidently this youngster is going to give me no more trouble!"

He was mistaken. Within a week the mother sent for him, reporting that her boy was suffering agonies, that he could not eat, and that his arm had become contracted at the elbow. In fact, on visiting the boy

he found that at every attempt to flex the arm the little fellow screamed with pain.

But on his next visit, when the child chanced to be asleep, Dr. Hecht noticed that there was then no contracture of the arm, and that he could move it about without disturbing the boy in the slightest. So soon, however, as he awoke, the contracture returned, and he wailed and shrieked when his arm was touched. To the astonished mother, the doctor said:

"I see what the trouble is. Your son needs a certain kind of treatment that I can administer only at my office. Bring him there as soon as possible."

The treatment in question consisted in the application of a succession of slight electrical shocks, just painful enough to frighten the boy. These, the doctor assured him, would cure him completely.

"If they do not," said he, "your mother must bring you back, and I will give you a stronger treatment next time. I don't think, though, that that will be necessary, do you?"

"No," said the boy, between his tears, "I don't."

And, in point of fact, no second treatment was needed. From that moment, the boy ceased complaining of his arm, the contracture and paralysis entirely disappeared, and he was like any normal, healthy child.

## Hysteria a Serious Disease

I HAVE cited these three cases, not because of their singularity, but because they afford concrete illustration of some little known facts with which every parent ought to be acquainted. In each case, it will be observed, an element of deception was present; and, moreover, in each case the deception was seemingly motiveless. The child who pretended that she had been operated upon had apparently nothing to gain from the deceit practiced by her; neither had the little girl who played the part of a *poltergeist*, nor the boy with the sham contracture and paralysis. Besides which, in two of the three cases the children subjected themselves to considerable inconvenience and even pain; and, in all three cases, they ran the risk of severe punishment. None the less, they systematically and persistently kept up their deceptions until discovery ensued.

Now, why did they do it? They did it, as recent medical and psychological investigation into the inner life of childhood has conclusively demonstrated, because they were so constituted that they could not help doing it. And for the same reason, hundreds — nay, thousands — of children, before and since, have been doing much the same thing. It is not that they are merely "naughty." The ordinary naughty child will, to be sure, lie and cheat and otherwise deceive; but only from readily ascertainable motives, and never in the way of an elaborately sustained deception. When a child's "naughtiness" takes this latter form, medical authorities are today agreed, it is in reality indicative not of "innate depravity," but of the presence of a serious disease — hysteria.

Than this disease — of which most people, unfortunately, have next to no exact knowledge, mistakenly confusing it with, and confining it to, uncontrollable attacks of weeping or laughing — there is unquestionably no malady more insidious, peculiar or dangerous in the variety of its possible consequences. Its peculiarity lies in the fact — discovered only within recent years — that it is always rooted in an extreme "suggestibility" on the part of its victims; and that the symptoms it develops are invariably conditioned by the character of the suggestions received from the surrounding environment. Hysteria is, in a word, pre-eminently a mental trouble; and this although, not infrequently, its only outward manifestations are wholly physical.

A child with a hysterical tendency; that is to say, an unusually sensitive, impressionable child, of undisciplined will, and quickly overwhelmed by whatever it sees, hears, and feels, is always liable, when brought into contact with a person suffering from any serious ailment of picturesque symptomatology, to manifest in some degree the symptoms of that