

## SOME SICKNESSES AND THEIR SAINTS

**W**HILE St. Vitus's Dance stands in this twentieth century as a term perfectly well recognised, a query as to St. Hubert's Disease would probably puzzle even most doctors in a sort of 'How much do you know' medical examination. But time was when it was quite a common synonym for Hydrophobia. The Saint, of course, was converted while in the hunting field, and so became the Patron of Hunters and incidentally of their Hounds. 'His' disease, then, was the ailment that occasionally attacks the pack. And this is only one out of plenty of similar instances.

In the Middle Ages 'radegoundes' was a recognised and very prevalent disease. It comes over and over again in the literature of the day, a notable instance being a reference in *Piers Plowman*. A kind of running sore, it owes its popular name to the patron saint of Poitiers, in France, Ste. Radegonde, wife of Clotaire the First. So many cures were effected at her tomb—later sacked by the Huguenots in 1562—that the ailment itself began to be called by the name of the saint. In precisely the same way St. Avertin's Disease was an ancient name for epilepsy, so many miraculous cures having been wrought at the tomb of this saint, a friend, by the way, of our own St. Thomas of Canterbury, that in old French the word 'avertineux' figures as meaning epileptics. While on the subject, one might remember that the same malady had two other popular names, 'St. John's Evil' often standing for epilepsy, and 'St. Mathuron's Disease' being one more title sometimes found in the old medical books.

St. Anthony's Fire gives another instance. 'Le Mal des Ardents,' 'Le Feu Ardent,' this was some

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sort of dangerously severe fever that in the early Middle Ages must have been dreadfully prevalent. In the eleventh century we know that Antonine Canons (suppressed in the French Revolution) were founded in Vienna as a Hospital Order with the main duty of caring for the victims of this particular disease. In 1105 the 'Fire' was ravaging all Artois, a sort of Black Death, and thousands were dying daily from it. To two natives of Arras, Itier and Normand, there appeared Our Lady, who commanded them to bear a message to the Bishop of Arras, and with him to watch the night through in the Cathedral. Their vigil was rewarded by a further apparition of the Blessed Virgin, this time bearing in Her hand a lighted taper. Let its wax but drip into water and so be sprinkled on the sick and they should be healed. So was the scourge stayed. Fragments of the Holy Candle (there is in the British Museum a book which reproduces contemporary manuscripts on the subject) found their way to every great Cathedral and Church in Artois and Belgium, one morsel being in the hamlet of Notre Dame du Saint Cierge near Wizernes, where hundreds of Catholic soldiers at 'rest billets' during the Great War must have seen it. The present writer well remembers the tiny church and the sheaf of gaudy-coloured little leaflets on the St. Cierge which stood waiting to be taken away.

Much later in history we have a record of a somewhat similar plague which occurred in 1467 and devastated the neighbourhood of Roquebrune in the Riviera. It was stayed by a Novena to Notre Dame de la Paura. In this catalogue of hagiological-medical nomenclature ought certainly to be mentioned the 'Blessing of St. Blaise' for ailments either present or threatened in the throat. The Blessing is given to-day in at least eleven churches in this country only, and the ceremony at St. Etheldreda's, Ely Place,

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London, has before now achieved the distinction of a complete report (with pictures) in the secular Press.

St. Dymphna is, of course, the Patron Saint of Lunatics and Neurotics, and so far from the belief in the powers of her intercession being something merely mediaeval, one of the biggest and best asylum settlements in the whole world to-day is to be found near Gheel, in Belgium, the place of her death and tomb. From every part of Europe the afflicted in mind are sent here, to be boarded out by the hundred with Catholic peasant families, working on the land for their living and their cure, and all the time under a medical observation that is at once perhaps the closest in the world and at the same time the least obtrusive. There are no 'wards' in St. Dymphna's Colony. On the other hand, there are cures well attested in all the specialist medical books. One well-known lady writer, by the way, produced a charming book on this unique colony, under the title of 'The City of the Simple.' It was followed up by a kind of companion volume on 'The City of the Single,' describing a Belgian Béguinage.

It is probable that some medical scholar might continue far with such a catalogue of saint-named ailments, but one more instance may perhaps suffice here. The tropical disease which is scientifically known as Mycetoma, and which in the East is generally called Madura-Foot, has as an alternative popular title the name of St. Thomas's Disease. This curious name was given to it by the early converts to the Church in India, their theory being that it was a hereditary disease confined entirely to the native tribe that had tortured the Holy Apostle. However their explanation arose, the name still remains current. And lest anyone might rashly set down this curious oddity of nomenclature as being taken from some mediaeval manuscript, let us put on record its precise place of

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origin, the Fourth Congress of the Far Eastern Association on Tropical Diseases, held at Batavia, 1921. It sounds prosaic enough for any conscience!

St. Thomas á Becket as the Patron of the blind, St. Apollonia as the Patroness of those afflicted by toothache, these are only two of several such instances of 'Saint-Protected' ailments to be culled from the books of common reference. But how many readers of to-day could speak off-hand as to the virtues of St. Wilgford? Patron of all poor wives with bad husbands, the saint is to-day forgotten in England. One can only conclude that necessity no longer exists for such a patronage, the offending ailments having been banished by the march of science and progress.

JOHN GIBBONS.