

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE
SALEM WITCHCRAFT
EXCITEMENT OF
1692, AND ITS PRACTICAL
APPLICATION TO OUR OWN TIME**

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THE
PSYCHOLOGY
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1692

AND ITS PRACTICAL APPLICATION TO OUR OWN TIME

BY
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PREFACE.

A FEW years since, I was walking the streets of Salem, in company with a friend who showed me the relics of witchcraft days in 1692, and pointed out the spot where—as is believed—the innocent victims were executed—in the name of religion and under the forms of law—for the protection of society.

It was while studying these bloody object lessons of history that I formed a resolution to search out and solve, if might be, the psychological problems that were the basis of that delusion; and to present the solution in such a way that it should be at once an original contribution to science and a practical guide for the present and the future. This promise I attempt to fulfill in the present treatise, and—so far as I know—this is the first systematic attempt that has ever been made to lift the general subject of witchcraft—or this special manifestation of it—out of narrative and tradition into the science of psychology; for although now, for nearly two centuries, this country has been on its knees in repentance for what

was done in Salem during this cyclone of fanaticism ; and while a large and special and most interesting literature has grown up around those conscientious and ferocious procedures, yet, to no one of psychological training apparently has there come the thought that there was here a mine of psychology from which ore of high value could be obtained, which should be brought out milled and stamped in the name of science and humanity.

In the writings of Lecky, of Hutchinson, of Cotton Mather, of Calf, of Upham, of Poole and of Mudge, from which mainly the facts relating to the Salem witchcraft excitement are derived, we shall find no solution and no attempt at a solution of the phenomena, and scarcely a hint that such a solution is called for or would be welcomed. Science is beginning, however, to look in this direction. A series of papers on witchcraft by David Nicholson are being published in the *Journal of Mental Science*, during the present year. Just as the work is going to the press Mrs. Erminnie Smith, of Jersey City, N. J., a member of the New York Academy of Sciences, is preparing a report on sorcery among the Iroquois Indians, a subject that she has had and has improved unusual opportunities for studying.

Even Mr. Lecky—the best and most philosophical of all the writers on witchcraft, whose chapter on that subject in his “History of Rationalism,” is the best

contribution to its literature—has no explanation of its phenomena beyond the general fact of the untrustworthiness of human testimony; but he establishes very clearly that the delusion died out, gradually and—in the main—quietly, as the result of the general advance of the human mind, rather than of any interpretation of the mystery. Mr. Lecky, however, is enough in advance of all other writers on this subject to see that a scientific study of this subject is demanded, and in a most remarkable passage in his "History of Morals" (p. 167, Am. ed.), he asserts that the bringing of these and allied phenomena into science is one of the world's greatest and most pressing problems.

Great trials of this kind are landmarks of human non-expertness, measures of the cerebral force of nations; they tell us how low we stand, how slowly we advance; they are educators of the future, and may most wisely be studied, in scientific detail, by the psychologist and philosopher.

There are times in the evolution of delusions, and in the history of nations—in which delusions are organized—when non-expertness in any special line—long restrained through circumstances or negligence—becomes a volcano; the low mutterings and reverberations that are at once so frequent and so slight, but so harmless as to cause no alarm, suddenly cease, and from the long quiet crater an eruption appears, darkening

the sky and burying the earth in its fiery streams. Such was the witchcraft excitement in Salem in 1692; such was the Guiteau excitement in Washington, in 1882; the one marking the death of the dogma that the innocent should be condemned to death for the fancied crime of witchcraft, on spectre-evidence; and the other marking the death of the dogma that ability to know right from wrong is proof of responsibility, and that the insane who commit murder should be hanged.

As the twenty victims of the Salem judicial massacres were nearly the last of the immense army of murdered witches, so Guiteau will be nearly the last important lunatic ever hanged on this continent; and through all time his trial will stand—as the Salem Witchcraft trials have stood—as a historic memorial of the power of passion reinforced by superstition.

The researches, the results of which are given in these pages, have occupied at intervals a number of years. Their publication at this time is especially appropriate, on account of the increasing frequency with which questions relating to the judicial treatment of insanity and allied states are coming before the courts and the people. Two important trials, with which from first to last I was professionally connected, that of Cadet Whittaker and that of Guiteau, have impressed on many minds besides my own the need of a study and a re-study of psy-

chology both in its scientific and its political relations. The parallelism between the Salem witchcraft trials and the trial of Guiteau is especially instructive, and, as the two excitements throw light on each other, the case of Guiteau is often referred to in this treatise.

Our country is indeed just now passing through an epidemic similar to that of Salem, though in a milder and modified form. Guiteau, as is shown in these pages, is in one sense the successor of the victims of witchcraft; the scenes of Salem have been in a degree repeated in Washington. This attempt of the nineteenth century to duplicate the non-expertness of the seventeenth has succeeded only in part, and for a brief period; and it is pleasing to be able to say that this comparative study of these two mental epidemics—that of 1692, and that of 1882—gives on the whole potent encouragement to those who believe and hope for progress of the nation and the race.

The substance of this work was first presented in the form of a lecture with experiments—a kind of moot court—after the manner of the trials at Salem, before the New York Academy of Sciences, April 3, 1882. The experiments, illustrating spectre testimony, were made on two of my trance subjects on whom I had previously experimented and whom I knew to be genuine. One of these young men, while