

THE SAINTS OF EPILEPSY

by

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EPILEPSY, at least in its grand mal variety, presents so dramatic and, to the lay observer, so terrifying a spectacle that it is not strange that its victims readily resorted to supernatural aid for alleviation. Unlike so many other diseases it offers no external signs of its presence and the horrifying suddenness with which apparently healthy and normal people could be transformed into writhing convulsives must have gone a long way in suggesting that the syndrome resulted from visitations of God or from His temporary defeat by the powers of evil. As we know, the Greeks thought of the disease as a divine intervention in the life of man, although the critical voice of Hippocrates had announced that it was no more divine than any other ailment. In early Christian times, and especially in the Middle Ages, the Devil and his attendant minor fiends came to play a very important role in religious concepts. It has been well said that the people of the Middle Ages loved God but feared the Devil. They had good reasons for their fear, for had not the *Malleus Maleficarum*, an authoritative text-book for the professional witch-hunter, declared 'there is no infirmity, not even leprosy or epilepsy, which cannot be caused by witches, with God's permission'. Certainly many saints especially famed for their prowess over the powers of darkness were also invoked for the cure of epilepsy. It is to be remembered that the Church has always taught that saints cannot by their own powers work miracles or cure disease. They act only by mediation with God, who in His wisdom may or may not approve the appeals of the faithful who have approached Him through those whose sanctity is of universal repute. Despite these clear statements of doctrine there is no doubt that in the Middle Ages superstitious practices appeared in which the aid of the saints was invoked in a manner suggesting that they had powers of working miracles and effecting cures similar to God. The abuses which grew up merited their condemnation by the Council of Trent. In the same way undue importance was given to the relics of the sanctified. The relics of a saint, like his representations in painting or sculpture, could have no talismanic or therapeutic value in themselves; the power of God is the only force that can effect a miracle, and He may do so through the intercession of the saint who is honoured when his relics are honoured.

It will be seen below that many of the legendary happenings on which belief in the curative powers of saints was based were ridiculously improbable or impossible. These tales had their origin in times far removed from the present when education and the dissemination of knowledge have lead to a healthy sceptical reaction to the occurrence of any happening inherently improbable. Modern writers on religious biography are well aware of this, and a critical approach to the legends of their subjects has pruned the romantic details, just as modern historical research has denied the truth of many famous anecdotes

of the great ones of history. To the students of medical hagiology factual biography is very unhelpful! If he wishes to link up the lives of the saints with the diseases for which they were invoked he must go back to the older chronicles to seek information of miraculous cures or strange occurrences which present-day hagiographers would dismiss as nonsensical.

St. Sebastian, of much greater fame as a patron against plague, was also invoked against epilepsy. Born at Narbonne in Gaul, in his youth he became an officer of the Praetorian Guards and though intensely loyal to the Emperor Diocletian secretly became a Christian. On his heresy being discovered Diocletian encouraged him to abandon the new faith but when Sebastian courageously refused the Emperor sentenced him to be shot to death by Mauritanian archers. Despite the many wounds inflicted by these picked marksmen the saint survived and was nursed back to health by St. Irene, whose husband, St. Castulus, another officer of the Imperial household, had also been martyred by burial alive in a sand-pit. On his recovery Sebastian was urged to flee from Rome, but denouncing flight as cowardice he presented himself before Diocletian, upbraided him for his cruelty and begged mercy for the Christians. Determined that there should be no mistakes this time the Emperor ordered that he should be beaten to death with clubs and his body thrown into the *Cloaca Maxima*. In its fall into the sewer the body was caught by a hook in the wall of the shaft and hung there until a pious lady, Lucina, instructed by the martyr in a vision, had it secretly brought to the catacombs on the Appian way. All these biographical details are highly untrustworthy, but there seems no doubt that Sebastian was a Roman martyr who was buried on the *Via Appia*. The reason for his patronage of epilepsy is not clear but it has been suggested that the association lay in his recovery from the attempted execution with arrows, for just as the epileptic recovers from a seizure which may seem mortal to the lay observer, so Sebastian when left for dead was restored to health to renew his efforts for the Christian faith. It will be understood why St. Sebastian appears so frequently in painting and sculpture when it is remembered that his was one of the few nude forms depicted in Christian art. Statues and pictures of the saint were popular all over Italy, especially on its Eastern coast whose ports were very likely to suffer epidemics of plague as a consequence of their commerce with the Levant. His representations were not often seen in Spain because of ecclesiastical disapproval of the undraped form.

During the Middle Ages St. Mathurin had an enormous popularity as a protector against epilepsy. His patronage arose from his legendary power of driving out demons and calming the possessed. Mathurin's life is almost entirely legendary. It is thought that he was born at Larchant in the French diocese of Sens. Unlike his father who adhered to the old religion and persecuted those who abandoned it, Mathurin became a Christian and was baptized at the age of twelve. After his ordination as a priest he converted his parents and evangelized his native district. He obtained a special reputation as an exorcist and so widespread was his fame that he was asked to go to Rome to deliver the Emperor Maximian's daughter from a devil which sorely tormented her.

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Her distraught father had tried the whole gamut of pagan modes of disenchantment without success. It would seem that the devil possessing the maiden was as anxious to depart from her as she was to be rid of him, or else he would not have cried out in her voice: 'I will not depart from hence till thou has brought hither out of France Mathurin, the Servant of God, which by his prayers shall get health to thy daughter.' The saint could not ignore such an unequivocal declaration of his merits and on reaching Rome quickly freed the girl from her demon. When he died his body was repatriated to his native place, where the Huguenots, whose zeal for the destruction of such pious trophies seems to have been even more ardent than that of their fellow-reformers in England and Ireland, destroyed his relics. Mathurin was also a protector of idiots and patron of buffoons or those whose business it is to amuse the public.

The eponymic usage of St. Valentine's disease or *St. Veltins-Sucht* seems to have originated in Germany. There were two St. Valentines, both Roman martyrs executed in 269, so it seems highly probable they were identical. One is thought to have been a priest and physician who was imprisoned during the persecution of Claudius the Goth. He restored the sight of the daughter of his jailor who, with his family, was thus persuaded to embrace Christianity. Furious at these missionary efforts the Emperor ordered the saint to be beaten with clubs and beheaded. He was buried on the Flaminian Way and in A.D. 350 a church was built over his tomb. The other martyred Valentine is said to have been a bishop of Terni and he too was buried on the Flaminian Way. There is a story that he demonstrated the truth of Christianity by healing an epileptic but this seems to have been a later interpolation in his legend. It accounts for his representation in art with a crippled or convulsed child at his feet. Like other popular saints Valentine's aid was often requested for scourges very different from that with which he was primarily associated. In the twelfth century the district of Jumieges was overrun with rats and the people invoked St. Valentine who responded promptly by driving all the vermin into the Seine. Up to the last century visitors were shown the spot where the rats immolated themselves. Another Valentine (c. 470), of Passau in Bavaria, was associated with the two Roman martyrs as a protector of epileptics. It is probable that the patronages arose from the similarity of the saint's name to the German words '*fallen*' or '*fallende sucht*'. This was suggested by Martin Luther who declared that the legends of the Valentines contained no references to the disease (Temkin, 1945). Valentine's name as a succourer of epilepsy survived until after the Reformation and Von Storch (1930) quotes a rhyme of 1570.

St. Valentine, besides, to such as does his power despise,
The falling sickness sends, and helps the man that to him cries.

In the Middle Ages the three Magi obtained a widespread reputation as protectors from epilepsy. In the New Testament they are called 'sages' and the idea of their being kings first appeared in Christian tradition in Tertullian.

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Their names, Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar were first mentioned in the sixth century. The association with epilepsy may have arisen from their 'falling down' before the Christ Child. The supposed relics of the Wise Men were enshrined in Cologne Cathedral in 1164 and became the goal of many pilgrims seeking cure of convulsive diseases. The sages' names were often inscribed on rings which were worn as talismans against these disorders and it was considered especially beneficial to whisper their names into the ear of an epileptic during a fit. In England in the fourteenth century the verses below were often written out as a pious charm:

Gaspar with his myrrhh beganne
these presents to unfold
then Melchior brought frankincense
and Balthazar brought gold.
Now he that of these Holie Kings
these names about shall bare,
the falling yll by grace of Christ
He never need to feare.

St. Bibiana (date unknown) was a virgin martyr of Rome, and according to her *acta*, which are a medieval romance, she was martyred under Julian the Apostate. After many efforts to persuade her to renounce Christianity had failed she was beaten to death with whips whose thongs were armed with lead plummets. Bibiana was honoured as a protector of the insane and epileptics because her legend states that during her imprisonment she was confined with mad people. In Italy she was regarded as an equivalent of St. Swithin, the weather prophet, and, presumably because of her name, as a protector against the evil results of alcohol. According to an old French legend, now universally rejected, Aphrodisius of Beziers (first century) was an Egyptian who sheltered the Holy Family during their flight into Egypt. In later years he became a disciple of St. Paul by whom he was sent to France to evangelize that country where he was soon martyred. Children baptized in the font of the church dedicated to St. Aphrodisius at Beziers were thought to be protected during their lifetime from epilepsy. It is not known why this belief originated but the font was thought to be situated over the holy man's grave.

St. Albanus of Mainz (c. 400) was a Greek priest of Naxos who, when forced into exile by Arian heretics, journeyed to Germany and spread the Gospel in the Rhineland. Here the Arians were also strong and they eventually succeeded in executing him at Mainz. He was beheaded and his behaviour after decapitation suggested the association with epilepsy, as it did his patronages of those afflicted with headache, sore throats and stiff necks. After the beheading the saint's trunk arose and carrying its head in both hands walked to the site which he had chosen for his grave. He was always represented with his head in his hands or with it on a book. Albanus was often confused with St. Alban (third or fourth century), the first martyr of England, who was also depicted with his head in his hands. There is no mention of this unusual post-mortem activity in the English saint's legend, although his execution was attended with an equally

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miraculous occurrence as the swordsman's eyes fell out and lay by the martyr's head on the ground!

St. Lupus (d. 623) was a monk who became Bishop of Sens in 609. False accusations having been brought against him he was exiled by Clothaire who ruled Burgundy at the time. Later he was vindicated and by royal decree restored to his see. Many miracles were attributed to St. Lupus, not the least of which was the recovery of his episcopal ring from a fish caught in the river in which the ring had been accidentally dropped. However this prodigy is one of the most frequently encountered in medieval hagiographies. After the return to Sens it is related that the saint showed not the slightest malice towards his traducers but this sanctity does not seem to match with what happened to a bishop who was visiting his tomb. This envious prelate showed his ill-humour at the graveside and his sacrilegious behaviour was immediately punished by his becoming epileptic; before he became cured he had to show indubitable evidence of repentance.

A later protector of epileptics was St. Vincent Ferrer (1350-1418). A native of Valencia, he joined the Dominican Order at an early age and became the most famous preacher of his time. He journeyed through Spain, Switzerland, Italy and France converting multitudes and working countless miracles. His evangelistic efforts must have been very necessary in France where faith had declined so much that in some parts of the country the people had reverted to worship of the sun which they had canonized as St. Orient! The saint's *acta* relate that he cured many people of the falling sickness but it is probable that his reputation was based on his prowess in healing the possessed. St. Vincent's success in this aspect of clerical activity dated from an occurrence early in his religious life which must have caused him some personal embarrassment. A young girl named Ines Hernandez fell passionately in love with him. Desire for a saintly celibate was obviously prompted by the Devil and so it proved, as the demon demonstrated his power by shaking her with horrible convulsions. Thus diagnosis was made easy and the saint soon exorcized the victim. St. Vincent resembled St. Lupus in that he was willing to punish persons who behaved contrary to his wishes. At Lerida he condemned to a seven years' fever a friar who had taken the liberty of letting King Ferdinand have a glimpse into the saint's cell when he was in ecstasy. However, the legends of his sanctity were so renowned that a century after his death a secret expedition was organized in Valencia to steal his relics from Vannes, where he had died, and restore them to his birthplace. The relic-robbers reached Vannes but were foiled by a resourceful canon of the Cathedral who hid the body in his own house. Even as late as 1854 during a cholera epidemic, the relics were carried through the streets of Vannes in order to allay the disease and some beneficial effect was thought to have resulted from the exhibition.

There were many other saints renowned for their patronage of epilepsy whose *cultus* was local although the benefit produced in their clientele often lead to pilgrimages being organized from far-away districts. St. Gerard de Lunel (1275-96) was a French pilgrim, of the order of St. Francis, who, like

so many of his fellow-pilgrims, died in Italy when returning from the Holy Land. His relics were preserved at Monte Santo, near Ancona, and there the monks cured many epileptics by the touch of the saintly bones. St. Adam (d. 1212) was a Benedictine monk who became abbot of San Sabina near Fermo. His relics were preserved in the cathedral of Fermo and epileptics were sometimes cured by depositing a coin on his grave.

In medieval days it was a common custom, especially in Brittany and Belgium, for epileptics to spend the night before St. Bartholomew's feast-day dancing in or around their parish church as this strange activity was held to be an infallible cure for fits. In the fifteenth century Franciscus Florentinus, a Franciscan inquisitor, condemned those sufferers who danced all day long on St. Bartholomew's day in the hope that they would be free from seizures for the rest of the year. Instead of this happy result, he said, some of the dancers became so exhausted that they died and went to Hell immediately. It is not certain why St. Bartholomew (first century) was invoked by epileptic patients. He was one of the Twelve Apostles and legend states that he travelled to India, and was martyred there or in Armenia. His association with convulsions probably results from his power of casting out devils. The Golden Legend tells of his freeing the daughter of an Indian king from a devil which so troubled her that she bit anyone who approached her, and had to be kept in chains. Bartholomew was also invoked against twitching and other involuntary movements. This association may have been due to his being flayed alive during his martyrdom. Knowledge of his having been subjected to this torture was widespread in medieval Europe, and later Michael Angelo, in his Last Judgement, painted Bartholomew carrying his skin hanging over his arm.

St. Willibrord (c. 658-739) had a wider fame. Born in Northumbria he entered a monastery at Ripon at the age of seven and in 678 travelled to the famous abbey of Mellifont in Ireland where he was ordained priest. Thence he went to Friesland accompanied by eleven other English monks. His missionary efforts amongst the Friesians were very fruitful and Pepin granted him a site for a cathedral at Utrecht when his zeal had been recognized by his consecration as Archbishop. His most famous foundation was the monastery at Echternach in Luxemburg. Here annually takes place the procession of the *Springende Heiligen*, the Dancing Saints. In 1906, when Willibrord's remains were removed from one church to another, over 15,000 people danced, accompanied by 3,000 singers and hundreds of musicians. The ceremony is said to have taken place since 1553 and legend relates that when an epidemic was raging in the cattle around Echternach, the main symptom of which was a kind of nervous shaking, the peasants thought that by imitating these strange motions while praying at the same time, they might persuade the saint to prevent the disease spreading. This happy result was secured and the procession became an annual festival just as the Passion Play of Oberammergau is enacted to express gratitude for the cessation of bubonic plague in 1633. A more likely reason for the procession to St. Willibrord's shrine may lie in the story that the saint delivered the district from an epidemic of St. Vitus' dance. The 'dancing mania' had appeared in the

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fourteenth century—in 1374 at Aix-la Chapelle—and dancing would seem more akin to the abnormalities of chorea than to the motions of staggering cattle. The procession takes place on Whit-Tuesday and its intention is to invoke the saint's intercession on behalf of those afflicted with epilepsy and other convulsive disorders. The dance begins at 9 a.m. and continues into the afternoon. Those engaged in it march four or five abreast, taking three steps forward and two back. On arrival at the church the dance is continued around the saint's tomb and the rite concludes with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The music is thought to be hundreds of years old and to have been composed specially for the strange ceremony.

St. Giles was one of the most famous saints of the Middle Ages and his legends, although wholly untrustworthy, were known all over Europe. He was said to have been a native of Athens but being dissatisfied with his worldly life he invited all his friends to a festival in his palace and, having drugged them, escaped in order to beg his way through the world. Fleeing to France he became a hermit in a forest in Provence where he restricted his diet to herbs and the milk of a tame hind. One day when the King of the Visigoths was hunting in the forest, one of his courtiers shooting at the hind wounded St. Giles with the arrow. The saint would not allow his wound to be dressed and prayed that it would never heal, 'for he knew well that virtue should profit to him in infirmity'. In art Giles is pictured as a monk with a deer pierced by an arrow at his side, or himself wounded by an arrow while protecting the hind. The wound was in his leg, so naturally he was acknowledged as a patron of cripples. Over 160 churches were dedicated in his name in England alone, and *St. Giles*, the site of his burial, became a town of 30,000 people owing to the growth of pilgrimages which became almost as important as those to Santiago de Compostela. The hind being, as it were, a wetnurse to the saint he became a patron of nursing mothers. Giles' aid against epilepsy was invoked because of his fame in combating demoniacal possession. He was thought to have cast out devils when he was in Athens and later, during a church service, he calmed a man who, by reason of his being possessed, was raving. The poor fellow made such a brawling noise that the voice of the preacher could not be heard. The saint prayed and the devil going forth, the man remained, at least to the end of the service, peaceable and devout.

In France and Belgium convulsions and epilepsy were commonly known as *le mal de St. Jean*. 'Why exactly St. John was brought into the connection is just as little known as whether the name related to St. John the Baptist or St. John the Evangelist' (Temkin). The latter's legends mentioned his healing the lame and paralysed, so it may have been thought he had a similar power in epilepsy. That both saints were widely known and loved is shown by the fact that John was, and is, the most popular proper name in Christendom. The Baptist's decapitation may have been responsible for his patronage of convulsive ailments since, as we have seen, other decollated saints were invoked in these diseases. His connection with epilepsy in France may also have derived from sufferers having being cured through prayer before his head which was said to be

preserved in Amiens Cathedral. Temkin suggests that John originally was patron of the dancing mania and later, when St. Vitus became the protector of that neurosis, his care was transferred to epilepsy.

Another helper against convulsions was St. Avertin (? 1180). He is said to have been born in England and was a disciple of St. Thomas of Canterbury. After his mentor's murder he went to France and took up eremitical life in a wood near Tours. His relics were installed in the church of *Saint-Pierre de Vency* (the village then changing its name to *St. Avertin*) and were destroyed by the Huguenots in 1562. In the church there was a statue of the saint which had a great reputation for curing pains in the head, vertigo and epilepsy. Avertin's name was preserved in an old French adjective *avertineux* which was defined, in 1632, as 'dizzie, giddie, franticke, lunaticke, moodie'. The word is now obsolete in its original sense, but is used in veterinary medicine to describe the staggering movements of sheep with cysticercosis of the brain. Temkin suggests that from the Latin *vertigo* the word *avertin* was derived and introduced as a synonym for epilepsy. The disease became known as the *maladie d'Avertin* and it was from a misreading of this description that the saint's protection was invoked.

In ancient Ireland epilepsy was called St. Paul's disease on the assumption that the saint suffered from the disease. It has been suggested that his fall on the road to Damascus was an episode of grand mal, although blindness for three days must be a very rare post-ictal phenomenon. The Apostle mentioned his 'thorn in the flesh' and to explain this malaria, trachoma, migraine, and various skin diseases have been suggested in addition to epilepsy. Much ingenious speculation has been devoted to the subject but in the absence of precise information efforts at retrospective diagnosis seem futile.

In Italy St. Gerard of Gallinaro (? date), whose existence is very doubtful, was much invoked against headaches and epilepsy. His cult, at first confined to Italy, was brought to France by priests who had taken refuge in Italy during the French Revolution. His *acta*, for what they are worth, relate that he was born in Montpellier and was only five years old when formally admitted to the Franciscan Order. When he grew up he and his brother made a pilgrimage to Palestine but on their return the fatigue of the journey were too much for Gerard. His head caused him so much pain, that arriving at Gallinaro they were obliged to rest in a miserable hut where the saint died in the absence of his brother who had gone to look for help. A chapel was built over his tomb and his fame grew from year to year because of the relief which his intercession brought to sufferers from headache and epilepsy. His feast-day, 11 August, is still celebrated by large crowds of supplicants visiting his tomb.

Edward the Confessor's patronage of epilepsy may explain one synonym of the disease, *morbus Sancti Iohannis*. A legend relates that towards the end of his life the King was one day asked by a pilgrim for alms for the love of St. John. Having no money with him the charitable monarch took a gold ring from his finger and gave it to the beggar. Some time after, in France, an aged man accosted two English pilgrims who had become lost during their return from the Holy Land. He gave them directions and asked them to bring a ring to the King

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of England, saying: 'I am John the Evangelist and you are to tell my servant Edward that in a few months I will come and fetch him to lead him to Heaven.' The ring is said to have been deposited with the Confessor's body in Westminster Abbey in 1066 but the earliest records of rings for curing epilepsy date from the time of Edward II. These 'cramp' rings were usually made from gold or silver but other types were formed of coffin nails or dried umbilical cord. The issue of the rings became part of a religious service. On Good Friday when the King went to adore the Cross, he made an offering of money and this was later converted into rings which were subsequently hallowed by him. In 1462 it was stated that 'epileptics and persons subject to the falling sickness are cured by means of gold and silver devoutly touched and offered by the sacred anointed hands of the Kings of England upon Good Friday during divine service.' The gift of hallowing the rings was not thought to be bestowed on Queens as they were not anointed on the hands. (Crawfurd, 1917.)

Kanner (1930) states that thirty-seven saints' names were associated with convulsive ailments but we have mentioned above those of widespread fame. We cannot wonder at the sufferers invoking spiritual aid when we recall the general feeling in past centuries that disease was often the product of supernatural malignance which could only be relieved by the superior power of God manifested in answer to the requests of the saints. The Catholic Church was not alone in this belief. Luther said of melancholy: 'I conclude it is really the work of the Devil' and described epilepsy as the *morbus demoniacus*. Even such a gifted anatomist as Caesalpinus (1524-1603) held that nocturnal epilepsy resulted from the activities of *incubi* and *succubi*. No doubt the fervent belief in the intercession of the sanctified was reinforced by 'cures' at their shrines of persons suffering from hysterical states resembling epilepsy. The medical remedies available gave no hope to the sufferer. Petrus Hispanus (1215-77), later Pope John XXI, advised vulture's liver taken with its blood, or the gall still warm from a dog who should have been killed the moment the epileptic fell to the ground in a seizure. Such disgusting remedies lived on long after general belief in the intercession of saints had faded and as late as 1852 a French work on epilepsy recommended dried mole powder as being very efficacious!

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