

Into this period of physical and mental exhaustion falls the great epidemic of "Dancing Mania."

The malady appeared first in those districts in which wretchedness and want were most severely felt. Men, women and children were debilitated, bowels and other abdominal organs out of order from hunger and bad food.

It was in July, 1374, that the inhabitants of Aix-la-Chapelle were witnesses of the following spectacle: there appeared in streets and public places men and women, their heads adorned with wreaths, who formed circles, hand in hand, and without regard to anything else or any bystanders, danced in wild delirium for hours until they fell exhausted to the ground. They then groaned and suffered from abdominal pains and tympanites. This was relieved by swathing. Clothes were tightly bound round their waists, or bystanders simply jumped and trampled upon their abdomen. Delusions frequently followed and these generally took a religious character. Convulsions also occurred. From Aix-la-Chapelle the disease spread over the Netherlands and Belgium in various modifications, being reported from Liege, Utrecht, Tongres and other towns. But not only the participants were affected, but gradually the whole population through the attention that was paid to the dancers. Peculiar idiosyncrasies were shown. Dancers exhibited a morbid dislike to pointed shoes, red colours and weeping persons. An ordinance, therefore, was issued forbidding the making of any but square-toed shoes. A few months later the disease broke out in Cologne and about 500 persons took part in it in Cologne, 1,100 in Metz. It extended from a dancing mania to other wild enjoyments. Beggars, adventurers, vagabonds joined and exploited the movement for their livelihood and helped to spread the disease, unmarried women used it to satisfy their sexual desires. The disease gradually extended. In 1418 it appeared in Strassburg in magnified and extended proportions accompanied by musicians playing bagpipes; then slowly crept to Switzerland. Report has it that in Basle one woman kept on dancing for a month. Thus it went on, appearing here and there, sometimes abating, sometimes increasing in fury. In some instances persons danced themselves to the very last breath or dashed their brains against walls or rushed into rivers, all of them raving and fuming. A sudden shock, however, like falling over benches or chairs would often stop the paroxysm; thus some were cured or, after a rest, start anew or had periodic recurrences.

This epidemic, as it occurred from 1374 on, was not an entirely new phenomenon, but had been preceded by similar, if not so widely disseminated occurrences. They were all more or less related to religious fanaticism of one kind or another and religious superstitions. But the great epidemic of 1374 seems to have been precipitated by curious