

A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO

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SPECTRAL ILLUSIONS DUE TO PHYSICAL DISORDER

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IN CERTAIN CASES spectral illusions may be due to physical disorder of sight rather than to psychical causes as these cases demonstrate.

‘A signal warning’: the case of the widow

An old widow woman, living in a retired village, came one day to the parson of the parish in a state of great despondency. She said she had had ‘a signal warning,’ and she was sure she would soon be in her grave, for she was continually haunted by ‘a skeleton’. The parson having in vain tried to convince her that she was under a delusion, set about a systematic examination of her eyes. He first made her shut her left eye, and then he asked her if she still saw the skeleton. ‘Yes, there it was still.’ He then made her close her right eye and open her left, when to her astonishment the apparition had vanished.

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After several repetitions of this experiment the old woman became convinced that the dreaded skeleton was due to some defect in her right eye. She returned home much consoled, and all the better for her ‘signal warning’ and its lessons. She no longer dreaded the “bogey,” for whenever she wanted to get rid of it she had nothing to do but to wink at it.

‘The image of death itself’: the case of the lawyer

A very singular story is related by Sir W. Scott, but with a more tragical termination.

A gentleman, a lawyer of good standing in his profession, and possessed of high intelligence and good sense, was observed by his friends to be suffering from a profound despondency. Being at length prevailed upon to confide to his physician the secret of his depression, he declared himself haunted by persecuting vision, so painful and so abhorrent, that, to use his own words, ‘his reason was totally inadequate to combat the effects of his morbid imagination,’ and he was sensible that he was dying, a wasted victim to an imaginary disease.

The vision, it appeared, had first begun to haunt him some two or three years before. First from time to time the presence of a large cat, which within the course of a few months was succeeded by a gentleman usher in full court dress, with bag and sword, tamboured waistcoat, and *chapeau bras*. After some time this visitant was followed by one far more horrible to the sight and distressing to the imagination – a grisly skeleton, the image of death itself. ‘Alone or in company,’ said the poor

invalid, ‘the presence of this last phantom never quits me. I in vain tell myself a hundred times over that it is no reality, but merely an image summoned by the morbid acuteness of my own excited imagination and deranged organs of sight: science, philosophy, even religion, has no cure for such a disorder, and I feel too surely that I shall die the victim to so melancholy a disease, although I have no belief whatever in the reality of the phantom which it places before me.’

‘In what part of the chamber,’ inquired the physician, ‘do you now conceive the apparition to appear?’ ‘Immediately at the foot of my bed,’ answered the invalid. ‘When the curtains are left a little open the skeleton appears to fill the vacant space.’

‘You say you are sensible of the delusion,’ said his friend. ‘Have you firmness to convince yourself of the truth of this? Can you take courage enough to rise and place yourself in the spot so seeming to be occupied, and convince yourself of the illusion?’

The patient heaved a sigh and shook his head. ‘Well,’ continued the physician, ‘we will try an experiment.’

Accordingly, he arose from his chair by the bedside, and placing himself between the two half-drawn curtains at the foot of the bed indicated as the position of the phantom, inquired whether the apparition were still visible. ‘Not entirely so, but I observe *his skull* peering above your shoulder!’

The doctor, despite his philosophy, made an involuntary start on hearing of the proximity of the spectre to his own person. He resorted to other remedies, but without success. The sufferer sank deeper every day into dejection, and not long afterwards he died in the same distress of mind in which he had lingered on through the closing years of his melancholy life.

How can an accidental opacity within the eye give rise to a clearly defined object such as a cat, or a skeleton, or a gentleman usher? It may be taken for granted that in each instance the sight was more or less impaired, and that all external objects were seen with a dim and hazy outline; everything, in fact, was seen through a mist or fog. It is well known that objects are much altered in shape and appearance when seen through a misty atmosphere or in the dusk of the evening; and it is almost always under such circumstances that ghosts have been seen. The imagination fills up the picture, and the mind, once deluded takes a pleasure in keeping up the illusion, and being either unwilling or unable to explain the phenomena in any other way, puts them down to supernatural agencies.

