REPORT OF CASES OF FOLIE A DEUX

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Special interest has always attached to cases of folie a deux because of the light which they throw upon the problem of environment and heredity, as well as upon the way in which false ideas may be developed.

Folie a deux is not very well defined. One definition states that it is a ‘A broad term which has been applied to the occurrence of mental disturbance in two or more individuals who have been intimately associated with each other.’ The literature would lead one to believe that there is, as a rule, in cases to which the term is applied a similarity in the manifestations of the disorder or the acceptance by one of the ideas held by the other. Three forms have been described, namely:

1. Imposed mental disease, in which an inferior or submissive individual is brought into intimate contact with a mentally ill person of a more positive make-up, and accepts the false ideas of the latter. Such ideas are usually persecutory in type. It has been said that if they are separated, the weaker individual tends to drop the beliefs of the stronger personality.

2. Simultaneous mental disease, which is characterized usually by depression or delusions of persecution which appear simultaneously in two morbidly predisposed individuals.

3. Communicated mental disease, in which the second individual accepts the ideas of the first after prolonged resistance and the psychosis persists even after they have been separated.

These forms are mentioned in order to make more clear the type of cases that comes under the term folie a deux.

It is not my purpose to discuss the forms mentioned, but it may be said that much criticism has been made of attempts to separate these forms.

Two sisters who present an identical psychosis have come under my observation. Their history follows: They were admitted to a State hospital June 2, 1923. Practically nothing is known concerning their early life, as it has been impossible to locate any of their relatives, and they are so taken up with their delusions that no
reliable account of their development can be obtained from either of them. There is probably a difference of about ten years in their ages—the older being about 50 years of age. The janitress of the house in which they lived said that they had lived in the house 14 years but she had only known them 6 years. She said they never visited with the other tenants of the house and scarcely answered their greetings of the day. They would never allow anyone to enter their home. They seldom went out except to purchase food and other living necessities which they usually purchased in large quantities.

A former landlord described some of their peculiar habits, such as dressing in clothes "which must have been 50 years old," and of their wearing gaudy colors on their hats which appeared to be three hats, one on top of the other, covered with a veil. Their appearance was so fantastic that whenever they went out, which was seldom, a crowd always followed them. He spoke of them, however, as very refined women and said their house was always in excellent order. They frequently talked about their ideas—the "invisible machine" and the "machine cavalier."

About five years before their admission, a married sister who lived in the south visited them. She said they were very peculiar; that she and other members of the family had offered them a home but they refused to accept the offer. The funds which they needed for their expenses came from two sisters who lived somewhere in the south. The day they were admitted to Bellevue they were dispossessed for non-payment of rent. As soon as their household belongings had been set out on the street they left and later were found wandering in Central Park talking in an incoherent manner. At the hospital they were found to have a bizarre trend of thought to which they have constantly adhered during their residence in the hospital. They believe they were made by a machine which they refer to sometimes as "it," other times as "he." Each one says that neither she nor her sister was ever born but that both have lived for thousands of years. They feel very sure that all their activities are controlled by this machine; that they will never die; that sometimes one and sometimes the other is the older. They remember some things; but not other things because the machine takes it out of their minds.