A FEW REPRESENTATIVE CASES OF PYROMANIA*

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In our hospital for the mentally ill we are not particularly interested in the crime the patient has committed except when it has some special significance. We are rather concerned about the organic brain disease or personality defects of the individual that may have been responsible for his crime and the unconscious motivation of his act. We are badly handicapped in most cases because of poor cooperation of relatives, by lack of authentic information regarding the personality make-up prior to the onset of the psychosis or the commitment of the crime; also in many cases by a lack of cooperation on the part of the patient, who is unable to appreciate that he is here for treatment and not for punishment. One of the few types of criminal insane that are cooperative and amenable to treatment is the so-called pyromaniac.

Pyromania is a term which in its common usage is very much abused, individuals who have committed arson for any of a variety of reasons being referred to as pyromaniacs. Acts of incendiarism are in the great majority of instances deliberately perpetrated for personal gain of some sort or with a conscious desire for revenge, or in some cases by mental defectives who take a childish delight in producing a conflagration, the destructive force of which they are unable to appreciate. Under pyromania we consider only cases which present no conscious motivation. They cannot as a rule give any adequate reason for the act and seldom even attempt to rationalize it. The act of the pyromaniac is so little his own that even if otherwise of a normal nature he is unable even to display the proper regret. He will tell you he does not know why he did it, that an indefinable something within him forced him to commit the act. His conduct is motivated by an emotional force from the unconscious, the origin of which is not apparent to either himself or others.

The conduct of the pyromaniac may be either impulsive or compulsive in origin. Impulsive conduct refers to actions that are

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accomplished unexpectedly, without reflection and without the assent of the whole personality. There is no conscious aim and such acts are often distinguished by haste, violence and absence of regard for the interests of either himself or others. Some sudden obsessive acts are inaptly called impulsive. These are conscious acts running counter to the will and proceeding from an inner impulse which the personality cannot resist. Notwithstanding the impulsive element, the pyromaniac often premeditates his act and performs it with a certain refinement. Some pyromaniacs, therefore, are not immediately detected.

During the accomplishment of the act some seem to be in a kind of twilight state while others reflect and go through a conscious struggle between the impulse to commit the deed and their morality which tends to inhibit the act. In most instances the individual's resistance against committing the act is connected with fear, anxiety or some other vague uneasiness, to the influence of which the personality finally yields, in the same way as a physical pain forces one to do something he does not wish to do. Anxiety appears as soon as the patient tries to resist the impulse and it is anxiety that makes it impossible for him to suppress the impulse in spite of the fact that he is willing and knows better. Indeed, the execution of a compulsive act may actually be accompanied by a feeling of voluptuous satisfaction.

The impulse to set fire is observed most frequently among young people who find themselves in an unbearable situation. In some cases, the unbearable situation lies in a sexual affair or in ungratified sexual cravings. Others experience direct sexual excitements through setting or watching the fire. Freud would ascribe to all such acts a sexual origin. He has attempted to explain obsessions by assuming that any relatively innocent idea may be connected with another idea previously repressed because of its unbearable content. The former then receives the affective endowment of the idea which has become unconscious and forces itself into consciousness in place of it. Stekel in his book, "Peculiarities of Behavior," cites many cases of pyromania in which the act appears to be motivated by some otherwise unattainable sexual gratification. These also tend to indicate the close association of "fire" and "passion";