That dread disease, tuberculosis, seems to reward its victim even as it drives him to a premature death, and compensates the wasting away of the body with a spiritual fire which in many of the world's great has resulted in a genius enriching our civilization. Dr. Lewis J. Moorman (right), dean of the medical school, in the sixth of the public lectures series of the university, has brilliantly recounted how tuberculosis has fed genius

Tuberculosis and genius

BY LEWIS J. MOORMAN

In many individuals suffering from tuberculosis there seems to be a strange psychological flare, a phenomenon not fully accounted for, not of established scientific lineage, yet quite evident to the student of clinical tuberculosis. Everyone who deals with tuberculous individuals in institutions for the treatment of this disease knows how patiently they bear their lengthening burdens; how courageously they are, often in the face of insurmountable obstacles; how optimistic they may be when life is literally being cut down by the inevitable sweep of the Great Reaper. What a precious paradox this, with death so near and life so abundant. Thus we see, while tuberculosis may literally demand its pound of flesh, the demand is peculiarly tempered with mercy. This unusual display of courage and optimism has been termed *sperhisica*.

Charles Dickens must have recognized the subtle power of this intangible fraction of the tubercle bacillus when he wrote as follows:

There is a dread disease which so prepares its victim, as it were, for death; which so refines it of its grosser aspect, and throws around familiar looks, uncertain indications of the coming change—a dread disease, in which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn, and the result so sure, that day by day, and grain by grain, the mortal part wastes and withers away, so that the spirit grows light and sanguine with the lightening load, and, feeling immortality at hand, deems it a new term of mortal life—a disease in which death takes the glow and hue of life, and life the gaunt and grisly form of death.

In the first chapter of his book on the Development of Our Knowledge of Tuberculosis, Dr. Lawrence F. Flick says:

In individuals in whom the tubercle bacillus grows meagerly, is whom it has produced but slight toxemia and in whom it has set up no serious changes in the tissues, it not only may give no discomfort but may stimulate the functional activity of those organs of the body which have to do with the enjoyment of life. In this way the tubercle bacillus may make life more pleasant and make the individual more profitable to society than he otherwise would be.

John B. Huber, in his work on Consumption and Civilization, makes the following statement:

It appears to me that the quality of the genius of a great man, if he be consumptive, may be, in some cases at least, affected by his disease.

The incomparable Arcataeus, Cappadocian anatomist and physician, who lived in the first century A.D., in describing death from the "pouring out of blood" said:

Really, this is not much to be wondered at; but what is most wonderful is that in a case where the blood comes from the lung, in which the disease is the most serious of all, patients, even when it is about to come to the end, do not give up hope.

We also find the following reference to chronic lung conditions:

Such patients are hoarse; they are short of breath; they speak in a weak voice; their chest walls are dilated yet they do not seem to be broad enough, because a great deal of humor is pent up within them; the black part of the eye flashes; in such cases it is simply wonderful how the strength of the body holds out; the strength of the mind even surpasses that of the body.

The beloved physician, Dr. John Brown of Edinburgh, author of *Rab and His Friends*, also observed this mental exacerbation as he studied the psychology of his patients. In the latter part of the nineteenth century he recorded the results of his observations in a beautiful tribute to his young friend and colleague, Dr. William Henry Scott, who died at the early age of twenty four. The conclusions of this careful observer are quite obvious as shown by the following:

He died of consumption and had that vivid life and brightness—as his eyes showed—which so often attend that sad malady, in which the body and soul, as if knowing their time here was short—burn as if in oxygen gas—and have "Hope the Charmer" with them to the last—putting into these twenty years the energy, the enjoyment, the mental capital and raptures of a long life.

Of the same "marvelous boy, whose sun went down in the sweet hour of prime," Mr. George Sim said: "It is difficult to imagine how it was possible in so short a life to acquire so varied an amount of knowledge as Doctor Scott possessed, especially when we consider his delicate constitution and toilsome course of education." Nevinson said of Schiller, "it is possible that the disease served in some way to increase his eager activity, and fan his intellect into keener flame." It would be easy to place on record here many testimonial the unusual manifestations of genius in those who have suffered from active tuberculosis. In many cases the mental activity and creative powers seem to vary directly with the progress of the disease. As striking examples of this we might mention Voltaire, Robert Louis Stevenson, Marie Bashkirtsev, Keats, Shelley and Sidney Lanier.

As Dickens has suggested, even after the body becomes a mere mummied crucible, the fires of genius may be observed to burn with an effulgence not often seen in the nontuberculous. On this point it would be interesting to let some of the sufferers speak for themselves. Robert Louis Stevenson, while suffering from an exacerbation of his disease says:

There is nothing more difficult to communicate on paper than this baseless ardour, this stimulation of the brain, this sterile joyousness of spirits. Yet, it is noticeable that you are hard to
root out of your bed; that you start forth singing, indeed, on your walk, yet are usually ready to return home again: that the best of you is volatile; and that although the restlessness remains till night, the strength is early at an end.

To continue, we find the following references to this same puzzling exuberance. After enumerating all that Heaven and Earth can do to accentuate the beauties of an enchanted landscape, Stevenson exclaims: "And yet you have gone no nearer to explain or even to qualify the delicate exhilaration that you may feel—delicate you may say, yet excessive, greater than can be said in prose, almost greater than an invalid can bear. Is it a return to youth, or is it a congestion of the brain?"

Sidney Lanier, lyric poet and psychic counterpart of Poe, furnishes a striking example. His creative powers were not in evidence until after his disease was well under-way and his capacity for mental work increased as the disease advanced. He well expressed the peculiar psychology of the tuberculous when, in 1873, he wrote as follows:

Were it not for some circumstances which make such a proposition seem absurd at the highest degree, I would think that I am shortly to die, and that my spirit hath been singing its swain-song before dissolution. All day my soul hath been cutting swiftly into the great spaces of the subtle, unspeakable deep, driven by wind after wind of heavenly melody. The very inner spirit and essence of all wind-songs, sex-songs, soul-songs and body-songs hath blown upon me in quick gusts like the breath of passion and sail'd me into a sea of vast dreams, whereof each wave is at once a vision and a melody.

Think what a sacrificethis, for one whose forebears were builders of light-houses, toiling in "the surly haunts of seals and coromants." Certainly the spirit of the sea was in his soul and, in all probability, it was this hereditary urge that unfurled psychological sails which were ultimately to carry him across the limitless stretches of southern seas to his beloved Samoan Islands, placing the breadth of two seas and a continent between him and his native land. For fourteen years, he was better now, have been rightly speaking, since first I came to the Pacific; and still, few are the days when I am not in some physical distress. And the battle goes on—ill or well, it is a trifle so as it goes. I was made for a contest, and the Powers have so willed that my battlefield should be this dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the physic bottle. I know, through the fiercest tests of life, that I am in soul, and shall be in life and utterance, a great poet.

Marie Bashkirtsev, whose frail young body was constantly overtaxed by the sheer exhilaration of her exceptional mind, when only twenty years of age, was cut down to the very bud of her life by a fitful fever of a type described by Dr. J. F. Faucit as follows: "It isto keep a man awake, to be willing to give up fame and all its riches; to love a distant land and virtually become a native of it; to long for home and the literary life; and to be ready to make a sacrifice of all else for the love of the work." She was the daughter of a Russian Count and was so happy and full of life that her contemporaries were astonished by her death. She died at the age of twenty-two of tuberculosis, in 1871, just fourteen years after her father had been made a Count. She was cut down in the prime of her life, just as her father was.

Cicero, Demosthenes and Marcus Aurelius might be added to the above list. It would be possible to add a large number of artists, sculptors, actors, statesmen, scientists and representatives from the professions who have suffered from tuberculosis and manifested unusual mental qualities.

Just how far back we are justified in carrying our speculations is difficult to say, however your attention is called to the fact that when the search for the Golden Fleece was barely launched, Peleus said:

"Mount Pelion, not alone in order that he held up the good ship Argo and climbed Golden Fleece was barely launched, Peleus say, however your attention is called to carrying our speculations is difficult to see him upon earth; famous he will be, of this favoriteson whom the spell of his Master, not alone in order that he held up the good ship Argo and climbed Golden Fleece was barely launched, Peleus say, however your attention is called to carrying our speculations is difficult to see him upon earth; famous he will be, of this favoriteson whom the spell of his Master, or that less saintly and less sensitive John the Baptist. However, his father, returning from the fray, his dreams of horse and arms and romantic adventure and chivalric deeds, was delighted with the lively boy and would have "no John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair," but would make of him a Frenchman in character and name, so he called him Francis. No doubt these divergent desires had little to do with the spontaneous flow of his indomitable spirit. While attempting to bring children up in the way they should go, parents should never lose sight of that "divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may." Many fond parental hopes fade before the sweep of this invisible Captain who sits at the helm and directs the course of human life.

The child Francis was not robust, and his mother watched over him with anxiety. One of his biographers has given us this suggestive picture: "He was a slender boy, delicate of limb and feature, with the straight nose, smooth low brow, and thin tapering cealed by the veil of uncertainty, he met mind, while presumably stopping because of his love of the dear old hill and his fear of the last, of this favoriteson whom the spell of his Master, or that less saintly and less sensitive John the Baptist. However, his father, returning from the fray, his dreams of horse and arms and romantic adventure and chivalric deeds, was delighted with the lively boy and would have "no John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair," but would make of him a Frenchman in character and name, so he called him Francis. No doubt these divergent desires had little to do with the spontaneous flow of his indomitable spirit. While attempting to bring children up in the way they should go, parents should never lose sight of that "divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may." Many fond parental hopes fade before the sweep of this invisible Captain who sits at the helm and directs the course of human life.

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TUBERCULOSIS AND GENIUS

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for him to recognize his physical deficiencies, he now flung himself into the pursuit of divine love, accepting poverty, fasting and suffering as stepping-stones to higher plains of living, ever marching forward with songs of praise in his heart until in his death agony he wished to lie bare on the bare ground to show that he had nothing and was nothing. Without attempting to catalogue his thoughts and deeds, it is easy to see that the life of St. Francis was consistently inconsistent, conventionally unconventional. Evidently St. Francis was chief pathologist at the crusades by the conversion of Islam, *seeming inconsistency was constant.* When he now flung himself into the purgation of his physical debility and his failure to "end his days in the Portiuncula. With the strang psychic energy which often accompanies the tuberculous into the depths of the valley of death, he emphasized this final sense of place and possession by saying to those about him, "Never give up this place. If you would go anywhere or make any pilgrimage, return always to your home: for this is the holy house of God." After having the brethren sing canticles and psalms in which he joined, he requested that his body be laid on the bare ground in order that his soul might mount unhampered to its source. With the silencing of song and the lowering of the frail body from its couch, there must have been a penetrating stillness punctuated by every footstep on the porches of the Portiuncula, as the brown figures suddenly saddened, moved cautiously and aimlessly about.

It was the third of October, 1226, when tuberculosis won the final victory and forced the separation of spirit and body. Just what the toxins of tuberculosis had to do with the creative energy of this impetuous mind and to what extent it was influenced by the restraining effects of disease upon his physical activities, we can never know, but it is certain that tuberculosis played a part in this unprecedented expression of genius.

St. Francis was chief pathologist at the death of the Dark Ages. With the accuracy which could come only through a fine dissection, he discovered the maladies which had dragged humanity down, and set about to free society from their ravages—as a consequence, he has been called "the morning star of the Renaissance." In the words of Gilbert K. Chesterton:

*From him came a whole awakening of the world and a dawn in which all shapes and colors could be seen anew. The mighty men of genius who made the Christian civilization that we know, appear in history almost as his servants and imitators. Before Dante was, he had given poetry to Italy; before St. Louis ruled, he had risen as a tribune of the poor; and before Giotto had painted the pictures, he had enacted the scenes . . . He was the spiritual essence and substance that walked the world before anyone had seen these things in visible forms derived from it: a wandering fire as if from nowhere, at which men, more material, could light both torches and tapers. He was the soul of medieval civilization before it even found a body. His charity was as spontaneous, as far reaching, as godlike as the blue heaven vaulting the plains of Umbria—as refreshing as a perpetual fountain in an ancient market place. A spiritual genius walking in the shadow of the Dark Ages, yet delicately attuned to all the needs of modern mankind. We bow our heads in humble recognition of his influence in the world today.*

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