



Smith by English painter James Sharples.

THE DEVIL AND MARY MATHEWS.

It is easy to see that if Cotton Mather had been there to witness and diagnose the medical case of Mary Mathews, the good Puritan father would most probably have interpreted it as a indisputable instance of witchcraft related machinations and or demonic possession.

Not so Elihu Hubbard Smith (1771-1798), fellow New Englander, physician and sometimes poet, who was the one on hand to actually view and record it. Although raised in Connecticut as a devout Congregationalist and later a Yale graduated who had transplanted to New York in the 1790s, Smith had become an adamant Deist; who in the intellectual ferment and fervor of late 18th century enlightenment and progressive ideas had rejected and laid aside Christianity aside as outdated and unreasonable. He wished it instead to be replaced with various measures to improve education and general quality of life; while hoping to instill in individuals and society at large an aspiration towards higher goals and ideals based on science and scientific development, accompanied by a cultivation of polite literature; it being among his several accomplishments to have published the very first anthology of American poetry. Before dying, indeed *martyred* by the Yellow Fever in 1798 (he in effect lost his life, aged 27, trying to save a fellow doctor), he along with two other physicians published *The Medical Repository* (1797-1824), a for it's time first and very influential medical journal, from which (vol. 1, 1797) here the Mary Mathews story is taken.

In the end we might ask: would Mather's view have been the correct one? Smith's? Someone else's? Certainly Smith would have dismissed Mather's take on the subject without hesitation as preposterous. Yet we ourselves can at least in the meantime, and if we so desire, suspend judgment on the question and conclude rather as Smith himself does: "The reader must determine which, or whether any of these conjectures deserve consideration."

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## ARTICLE VI.

### CASE OF MANIA SUCCESSFULLY TREATED BY MERCURY.

By E. H. Smith, Physician.

MARY MATHEWS was admitted into the New-York Hospital, August 16, 1796. She was a native of Ireland, whence she had lately come, and had been in America but a few weeks. Her person was thin, small, and delicate. She was seventeen years old. The accounts given by her brothers, mother, and herself (since the restoration of her reason), though quite incomplete, agree in representing her as having always been a feeble girl; and, as far as I can comprehend them, subject to something like hysteria—though never with that disease in the form of fit or convulsion. She describes it as a wind rising up from her stomach, a struggling for breath, a sensation like swelling of her tongue, heat in all her body, and an universal uneasiness. No more distinct information can be obtained from her relations. She was in good health from the time of her arrival till her present illness.

About a week previous to her being brought into the hospital, as she was walking in a field in the country, some miles from town, she was suddenly taken insane. She was carried home that day, or the next, and her symptoms continued to increase in violence till after her admission.

Her friends who conducted her here, assured me that she had eaten nothing, nor taken any kind of nourishment for a week. Notwithstanding, her efforts were so violent, that it was necessary to cause her to be confined in a cell, and to be strait-waistcoated. In all this week nothing had passed her bowels; but she voided urine as in health. Repeated and careful attempts were made, and for near an hour in my presence, to administer food, with no effect. It was forced into her mouth, but instantly rejected. The same was the case with the purgative powders which were directed: and no exertion, proper to be made, was equal to the injection of a clyster.

Between the mornings of the 16th and 18th, the patient completely tore off and rent apart three strait-waistcoats; neither of which, probably, could have been rent by the utmost combined efforts of two strong men. In one instance, after freeing her arm, she forced off the grating of her cell, leapt into and run across the yard, jumped into the washing-room, and drank some dirty suds. This was the first thing she had been known to swallow since her disease commenced. Five, or six persons were, with difficulty, able to force her back to her cell.

As it was impossible to keep her covered, she went naked. Of the indecency of her nakedness she appeared to have no idea, for she took no pains to conceal it. She disposed herself in various and scarcely conceivable attitudes; and continued, for hours, in postures which well persons could not have assumed, much less have rested in. Meanwhile she noticed no person, not even her mother or brothers; but divided her time

in singing methodistic hymns, and putting up short prayers: yet her insanity did not appear to have any connection with religious ideas, further than the repetition of these verses and prayers—to which she had probably been accustomed from her infancy, and now repeated like any thing else strongly fixed on the memory. That her disease did not proceed from any insane religious impression is evident from her never having expressed any anxiety before, during or after her illness: nor did she seem to suffer from apprehension of any kind. Her only uniform exertion, beside that which has been noticed, was to escape, when the door of the cell was opened: but she shewed no uneasiness to effect this when it was shut; nor did she, at such times, nor at any time, endeavour to hurt her attendants and visitants. No artifice of theirs could engage her attention.

August 18th. She had now been eight or nine days without food, and without a motion of the bowels; during which time she has taken no sleep nor repose, and the violence of her efforts, in singing, &c. was not sensibly diminished. As the vital energy seemed principally determined to the external muscles, leaving the stomach and intestinal canal, in particular, in a state of apparent torpidity, it occurred to me that, notwithstanding her long inanition and violent exertions, any thing which would considerably diminish the muscular force would tend to equalize the distribution of that energy, and would promote a cure. I was, therefore, desirous of bleeding her. But it was impossible to use the lancet. She bent her arm; and no force could open, and preserve it steadily un-bent. We had recourse to the cupping-glasses, which were applied to the occiput, temples, and forehead; and about six ounces of *black blood* taken away. After this she was more calm, for some hours, and willingly took about a gill of broth or gruel, that was offered her. From an expectation that she would continue in her present state, and an apprehension that the sudden use of much food would injure her, the nurse gave her no more at that time, and even neglected to administer the purging powders that had been directed. The patient soon relapsed into all her violence, and opposition to food; and would take only some cold water, which she craved, and which caused her to vomit. She threw up only the water.

On the 20th, the cupping was ordered to be repeated; but, from various delays, was not performed till the 22d; when a small quantity of blood was taken away, with no other effect than to make the patient faint.

23d. No material alteration. She had taken no food; has not slept; and, though her efforts are as constant as ever, her strength is very much diminished. I resolved to try the effect of salivation; hoping that if I could succeed in exciting a powerful action in the absorbent system, it would divert a part of the vital energy from the muscles, and awaken the torpid power of the brain, stomach and bowels. Three drachms of strong mercurial ointment were accordingly rubbed in by the morning of the

24th. And her gums were now slightly affected. As this soreness of the mouth came on and increased, she grew calm and rational: took food, purging powders of jalap and calomel, and an injection. She also had her clothes put on, and was removed to a clean bed, in the nurse's room. The mercurial friction was discontinued.

This interval of reason was only for a few hours. She became as violent as ever; broke every frangible article in the nurse's apartment; and again tore off her clothes. She was re-conducted to the cell. The same evening her cathartic operated freely, and brought off large masses of dark and hardened excrement.

25th. The mercurial frictions were renewed. They excited a gentle salivation, and brought back her reason.

26th. This day she was removed into the principal ward for women, and proper medicines and regimen were directed for the restoration of her strength, which was very much impaired. For several days she continued to be exercised with occasional turns of anxiety and distress, such as accompanied: the recurrence of her original complaint, after the first interval. These were particularly troublesome about two o'clock in the afternoon, when there was increase of heat, and in the frequency of the pulse. But she mended gradually till the 7th of September, when she was well enough to return to her family. Several months after she applied to the hospital for some trifling complaint, for which the physician in attendance did not think proper to admit her; but she had not then suffered any relapse into insanity.

After the recovery of this patient, she said that she was sensible of her nakedness at the time, of the cupping, and some other circumstances. She attributed her conduct to witchcraft, or something of the kind, which made the wind in her stomach, that she used to complain of, ascend into her head; and she said the heat of her body was so intolerable that she could not endure the least covering. But her extreme ignorance embarrassed her account so much, that it was difficult to determine precisely what she meant, and how much she might be depended on. Her skin was never remarkably hot during her insanity; but after the return of her reason, her feet were affected with such a burning heat, that they could only be relieved by placing them in cold water; and she was troubled with irregular flushes over her whole body for several days.

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I feel a greater interest in making the foregoing case public, as, since it came under my care, I have learnt that an insane person, who refused food, starved to death. The facts here related may, at least, suggest a probable resource against an event so melancholy to the friends of the sufferer.

With respect to the disease of Mary Mathews, which I have called mania, it may perhaps be questionable whether it has been denominated so with propriety.—It deserves to be remembered, that the whole duration of her illness, as near as we can determine, was fourteen or fifteen days. Is it possible that this was its period, that it then ceased, from having completed its course, or that it was more easily inclined to stop at that time than another? Is it possible that this is a variety of hysteria?—of intermitting fever, which sometimes assumes the shape of mania, and to which the quotidian exacerbations, after the insanity was removed, may be supposed to correspond? Or, is it possible that the cause of Yellow Fever, whatever it may be, which, in different persons, affects different

parts of the system, and appears under almost every form of disease, to whose operation foreigners seem peculiarly liable, and were so this year, could have excited the mania of this girl, whose period is that of many fevers, and whose cure, supposing it to have been effected by the salivation, is not hostile to the supposition? The reader must determine which, or whether any of these conjectures deserve consideration.



Pine Street entrance of Our Lady of Victory [Catholic] Church on Manhattan, and which is kitty corner from 45 Pine Street where Smith, William Johnson, Charles Brockden Brown lived in Sept. 1798; when they took in the mortally ill Dr. Joseph Scandella.¹

THE LAST DAYS OF SMITH.

“...our own house is a theatre of death...”

The story of how and under what unusual circumstances physician, scientist, and poet Elihu Hubbard Smith came to die is another one of those stories not often told, but is also well worth the hearing. The best and most full version is to be had in William Dunlap’s *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown* (1815), Dunlap, the playwright, stage manager, and painter, being a close friend and sometimes collaborator with both Smith and Charles Brockden Brown. Indeed, there is very little for me or anyone else at present to add to or embellish; so that without further ado, here is that same account.

For such who might want to delve further, see:

¹ The home of Horace Johnson (brother of William), where Smith was later taken and finally died, was located at 111 Liberty Street; some two blocks north of 45 Pine St.

* *The Diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith* (1973) edited by James E. Cronin
* *Collected Writings of Charles Brockden Brown: Letters and Early Epistolary Writings vol. 1* (2013)
by Barnard, Hewitt, and Kamrath, editors.

While for my own earlier introductory article on Brown, see:
<http://www.gunjones.com/Brockden-Brown.pdf>

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In a letter to his [i.e., Charles Brockden Brown's] brother James, dated the twenty-fifth of August, 1798, after mentioning his literary plans, for he was then preparing to publish "Wieland," and the project of a Magazine for his profit had been suggested; he concludes thus: "heavy rains, unclesed sinks, and a continuance of unexampled heat, has within these ten days, given birth to the yellow fever among us, in its epidemical form. Death and alarms have rapidly multiplied, but it is hoped that now, as formerly, its influence will be limited to one place.

"You may be under no concern on my account, since my abode is far enough from the seat of the disease, and my mode of living, from which animal food and spirituous liquors are wholly excluded, gives the utmost security."

This plan was in accordance to the theory of his friend Smith, who rigidly practised it himself at all times. Brown had much reason to rely upon the judgment of Smith, but if he did not feel that perfect security which his letter avows, he assumed the tone for the purpose of quieting the apprehensions of his friends.

On the fourth of September he writes thus to his brother James, justifying his continuance in New York.

"When did you learn to rely upon rumour and news-paper information? As to the state of this city, you might naturally suspect that it would be misrepresented and exaggerated. There is abundance of alarm, and the streets most busy and frequented will speedily be evacuated.

"As to the malignity of this disease, perhaps its attack is more violent than ordinary, but E. H. S. to whom I read your letter, answers for me that not more than one out of nine, when properly nursed, die; and that its fatality therefore is much less than the same disease in Philadelphia.

"In the present healthful state of this neighbourhood it would be absurd to allow fear to drive me away. When there is actual and indisputable danger it would be no less absurd to remain, since even if the disease terminate favourably, or even were certain so to terminate, we are sure of being infinitely troublesome to others and of undergoing much pain.

"E. H. S. has extensive and successful practice in this disease. Through fatigue and exposure to midnight airs, he is at present somewhat indisposed, but will shortly do well.

"If when this fever attacks our neighbourhood I run away, I am not sure that I shall do right. E. H. S. at least, probably Johnson, will remain, at all events; and if I run the risk of requiring to be nursed, I must not forget that others may require to be nursed by me, in a disease where personal attentions are *all in all*."

I trust that I need not remark upon the truth of the above sentiment, or call the reader's attention to the high point of view in which it places Mr. Brown's character. The letters which at this time he wrote to his brother James were in answer to earnest entreaties of his family that he would fly from New York as they had done from Philadelphia, where the pestilence raged with equal malignity.

A few days after he writes thus: "this pestilential air seems to be extending itself to all quarters. Things here wear a very gloomy aspect. Pearl and Water Streets are wholly desolate, and all business at a stand. The lowest computation supposes one half of the inhabitants to have fled. Notwithstanding this

depopulation, especially in the most infected spots, I am sorry to add that the malignity increases and the number of deaths.

“The atmosphere is perceptibly different from former years, and leaves nobody in perfect health, but the quarter where I reside is still free from sickness. All the physicians who have at all attended patients in this fever have been indisposed. Our friend E. H. S.’s indisposition has nearly gone, but he ascribes his preservation from death entirely to his vegetable diet and his refusing his attendance at the beginning of his complaint, to the summons of the sick. He is now nearly able to resume the medical functions. Five physicians much conversant with the sick have died within a very short space.”

On Tuesday the twelfth of September while the ravages and malignity of the pest was hourly increasing, and Dr. Smith had just regained strength to again lend his aid to the accumulating sufferers, an interesting stranger arrived from the equally pestilential city of Philadelphia, whose fate and its consequences, brought the desolation in its most fearful form home to the domestic establishment of the three friends Johnson, Smith and Brown.

Joseph B. Scandella was a native of the Venetian state. Of an opulent and distinguished family, he had been educated as a physician but, had devoted his faculties to general improvement in science. He left home early in life for this purpose, and visited England as secretary to the Venetian embassy. From thence his attention was called to our growing empire in the West; and to a liberal curiosity and ardent mind, no country on earth could be so attractive as that where the great experiment of an almost boundless federative republic had already made such progress as seemed to defy every effort of ignorance and malice to frustrate it.

He first visited the English provinces. When in the United States he made various journies in every direction, particularly bending his attention to the southern and western districts, where agriculture, the foundation of national wealth, is extending with such rapid strides, the happiness of an independent yeomanry, and erecting an empire which must necessarily correct, by its influence upon their interests, the tendency to corruption and European political bias in the maritime states.

After a residence of two years in the United States, Dr. Scandella prepared to return, and in the month of June embarked at the port of Philadelphia. The vessel proved unfit for a sea voyage and returned to port. He then came to New York and took passage in a packet from this port to Falmouth. Here he renewed an acquaintance began in Philadelphia with Dr. E. H. Smith. The detention of his baggage by some accident occasioned him to lose this opportunity of embarkation, and while awaiting another the yellow fever broke out in both cities. Notwithstanding its more early progress and greater malignity in Philadelphia, his concern for the welfare of an amiable family of helpless females, a widowed mother and her daughters, induced him to return to that city. He witnessed the death of every individual of the family.

After enduring the continual loss of rest, and exposing himself to the influence of an infected atmosphere for ten days, he set out on his return to New York, and in crossing the causeway between Newark and this place first felt the deadly disease upon him.

He arrived in the evening at the Tontine Coffee House, and knowing the necessity of a lodging as much as possible removed from the heartlessness of a hotel, he exerted himself to procure admittance at the various boarding houses, but terror steeled every heart, and shut every door against the sick stranger.

The benevolent Smith heard of his arrival, sought him instantly, and found him, under the influence of the pestilence, in bed at the Coffee House. He removed him to his room, resigned to him his bed, and became his physician and nurse.

On Sunday morning the seventeenth of September, Brown writes thus to his brother.

“When calamity is at a distance it affects us but little, and no sympathy for others can realize that distress which does not immediately affect us.

“You have discovered by the public papers the deplorable condition of our city, which in fact exceeds that of Philadelphia, inasmuch as the mortality bears a greater proportion to the population with us.

“Another circumstance greatly enhances our calamity, for the victims to this disease have been in innumerable cases, selected from the highest and most respectable class of inhabitants.

“Till lately, horrible as this evil is, and much conversant with it through the medium of physicians as I had been, I was not much affected by it until during the last week, this fatal pest has encompassed us and entered our own doors.

“On Tuesday last, an Italian gentleman of great merit and a particular friend of E. H. S. arrived in this city from Philadelphia. The disease had already been contracted, and admission into the boarding houses was denied him. Hearing of his situation our friend hastened to his succour and resigned to him his own bed. A nurse was impossible to be procured, and this duty therefore devolved upon us. Many moral incidents concurred to render this a most melancholy case. The disease was virulent beyond example, but his agonies have been protracted to this day. He now lies in one apartment of our house, a spectacle that sickens the heart to behold, and not far from his last breath, while, in the next, our friend E. H. S. is in a condition but little better.

“Extreme fatigues and anxieties could not fail of producing a return of this disease in Elihu. How it will end Heaven knows.

“Sunday evening. Our Italian friend is dead, and Elihu is preparing to be transported to —s, whose house is spacious, healthfully situated, and plentifully accommodated. Our own house is a theatre of death and grief, where his longer continuance would infallibly destroy him and us.

“Before his last attack E. H. S. became sensible of the disproportionate hazard which he incurred, and had determined as soon as his friend Scandella had recovered or perished, and his present patients had been gotten rid of, to withdraw from town.”

Brown had been himself attacked by the first symptoms of the fatal disease, and was removed to the house of the same friend who now received the unfortunate Smith. Brown’s symptoms yielded to medicine, not so his friend’s; he lingered a few days in a state allied to stupor; the efforts of his medical friends Miller and Mitchill were utterly unavailing; he saw the last symptom of the disease, black vomit, pronounced the word “decomposition” and died.

Thus perished, on Wednesday the twenty-first of September, 1798, in the twenty-seventh year of his age, Elihu Hubbard Smith; a man whose whole ambition was to increase his intellectual powers, with a view of devoting them to his fellow men.

In the Medical Repository, a work of which he was one of the most zealous founders and which was conducted after his death by his friends Miller and Mitchill, appeared a few lines devoted to his memory, from which I will indulge myself by repeating to the public the testimony of the enlightened writer.

“There were few who perished during that calamitous season, whose fate excited more universal regret, and whose memory will be more fondly and permanently cherished than Elihu H. Smith. In his domestic relations, the knowledge of his excellence, was necessarily confined to few; but by those few, his conduct as a son and a brother, will ever be regarded as a model of unblemished rectitude. Indefatigable in the promotion of the true interest of those allied to him, a casual observer would be disposed to imagine his whole attention to be absorbed by this object, and that he whose affections were so ardent, and his mind so active for their good, had no leisure for the offices of friendship, and for the pursuit of general happiness. To these valuable purposes, however, no one attended with more zeal and assiduity. To those who were blessed with his friendship, and the number was by no means small, his attachment was unwavering and his efforts for their benefit without intermission. To the cause of general happiness, he devoted his abilities with no less zeal.”



“His talents could not otherwise than slowly surmount the obstacles which were thrown in the way of his professional success by his youth, and by the want of patronage and support. His leisure he however devoted to the best purposes. Besides his medical pursuits, he cultivated with zeal and success, almost every branch of literature. As a physician his loss is irreparable. He had explored, at his early age, an extent of medical learning for which the longest lives are seldom found sufficient. His diligence and activity, his ardour and perseverance, knew no common bounds. The love of science and the impulse of philanthropy, directed his whole professional career, and left little room for the calculations of emolument. He had formed vast designs of medical improvement, which embraced the whole family of mankind, and were animated by the soul of benevolence.”

Upon the removal of Dr. Smith from his own dwelling to the house of a friend, Mr. Brown resigned to him the chamber he had occupied in that friend’s house, and by invitation removed to Dr. Miller’s. Of his feelings at this time we must judge by his letters. The day before the death of his friend, he thus addresses his brother.

“What shall I write? I know that you ought to have frequent information of what is passing here, but I cannot trust myself with the narrative. My labour is to forget and exclude surrounding scenes and recent incidents.

“Smith is not dead, but unless miracles be wrought for him, another day will number him with the victims of this most dreadful and relentless of pestilences.

“My excellent friend Dr. Miller dissuades me from going to you. The journey is too long, and the consequence of falling sick upon the road may be easily conceived. Here then. I must remain.

“The number of physicians is rapidly declining, while that of the sick is as rapidly increasing. Dr. Miller, whose practice, as his skill, exceeds that of any other physician, is almost weary of a scene of such complicated horrors. My heart sickens at the perpetual recital to which I am compelled to be an auditor, and I long to plunge myself into woods and deserts where the faintest blast of rumour may not reach me.

“Thursday morning. The die is cast. E. H. S. is dead. O the folly of prediction and the vanity of systems.

“In the opinion of Miller the disease, in no case, was ever more dreadfully and infernally malignant. He is dead. Yesterday at noon.

“I am well as circumstances will permit, and shall, as soon as possible, leave the city with William Johnson for Amboy or Connecticut.”

In another letter he says “the weather has lately changed for the better, and hopes are generally entertained that the pestilence, for so it may truly be called, will decline. As to myself, I certainly improve, though slowly, and now entertain very slight apprehensions of danger to myself. Still I am anxious to leave the city. To go to Amboy and remain there for some time, will be most eligible. This calamity has endeared the survivors of the sacred fellowship, W. D., W. J. and myself to each other in a very high degree; and I confess my wounded spirit, and shattered frame, will be most likely to be healed and benefitted by their society. Permit me therefore, to decline going with you to Burlington. For a little while at least.”

The next day, September twenty-fifth, Charles addressed his brother from Perth Amboy.

“It is with great pleasure, that I now inform you of my safe arrival at this place. Yesterday I wrote to you informing you of my intention to come hither on the morrow. After depositing my letter, Wm. Johnson and myself, concluded that if a water passage could readily be found to Staten Island, it would be advisable to depart immediately. This being forthwith sought for, was found. We left the city at two in the afternoon, and after a most auspicious passage arrived at Amboy at sunset. I already feel the sensations of a new being, and am restored as it were by magic, to a tolerable degree of health and cheerfulness.

“Here I wish to stay, at least for some weeks, in the enjoyment of the purest air, and wholesome exercise. The change from a pestilential, desolate, and sultry city, to the odours and sprightly atmosphere of this village, is inexpressibly grateful and beneficial; and I believe you may dismiss all uneasiness, henceforth, on account of my safety.

“I seize this early opportunity, to inform you of my removal, because it was due to your generous concern for me.”

After passing some weeks at Perth Amboy, Mr. Brown visited his family, and on the return of winter, took up his abode again in New York.



*William Thomas Sherman*

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For the Lee's Legion on Face Book:

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