

THE EVIL EYE AND THE AFFLICTIONS OF CHILDREN

S. LEVIN, M.B. (RAND), M.R.C.P. (EDIN.), D.C.H., Johannesburg

'And Saul eyed David from that day and forward'

1 Sam. 18 : 9

About a year ago our Bantu servant Christina decided that she could no longer live in her room on our premises, as it was haunted by the *Tokoloshe*, the Zulu evil spirit. This is a matter of concern in South Africa, for a house once branded as the haunt of the *Toklooshe* cannot easily retain a servant, and its market value may depreciate considerably. Accordingly, her diagnosis was regarded with some seriousness. Now the exorcism of the *Tokoloshe* by a witch-doctor is an expensive undertaking and not always successful, so I decided to do the procedure myself.

Late at night I asked her to leave her room while I walked inside holding a lighted candle. I demonstrated to her that I possessed some powerful white man's *muti* in the form of an attractive red capsule (polycycline) wrapped in gold foil—a free sample. It looked impressive, and I assured her that it was most effective against the *Tokoloshe*. I opened the capsule and sprinkled some of the yellow powder on the window-sill and in the doorway, muttering a few home-made spells and incantations the while. Henceforth, I confidently told her, the *Tokoloshe* could not enter either by the door or the window.

The exorcism by polycycline was highly successful. The *Tokoloshe* was banished and has not returned.

This is not an indication for smiling at the naïveté of the Bantu. We, the sophisticated Whites also have our witchcraft, though it is often difficult to discern it as such. Who realizes, for example, that when a doctor heads his prescription with the familiar *R̄*, he is invoking the aid of an amulet against the Evil Eye?¹ The mother, singing a lullaby to her babe, is warding off the influence of evil spirits.² We rarely give a thought to the tens of thousands who regularly have their horoscopes read, or who seek admittance to the esoteric wisdom of mystical societies. What of the millions who carry around amulets in the form of stones, beads, ornaments, crucifixes or *mezuzoth*? The local parlour magician who mutters the magic term *abracadabra* is but repeating the incantation of the wonder workers of ancient Chaldea, while the Jewish mother who intones *ken ayin hara* is bringing 40 centuries of magic into the Sputnik age.

THE EVIL EYE

For the Evil Eye is surely at least 4,000 years old, and perhaps as ancient as the very serpent that enchanted Eve. The Hebrew *ayin hara*, the *böse blick* of the Germans, the *jettatore* of the Italians, have their origins in the mysterious East.

To 'look daggers' at an individual, is, after all, to wish him ill, *via* the medium of an Evil Eye. In all ages, to boast, to admire, to covet, to envy or to praise an object, an animal, or a person, was to invite disaster through the Evil Eye. This pernicious influence was commonly directed against the young, although it could also cause animals to abort or to produce sour milk, while it might make crops wither and die.

When man first considered the world about him, he peopled the earth and the heavens with gods and spirits, with angels and devils, for only thus could he explain the vagaries of nature, the terrors of the unknown. In this fertile soil of ignorance and fear, intermediaries arose whose function it was to interpret the gods to man. Thus flourished the magicians, the wizards and sorcerers, the soothsayers, astrologers and witch-doctors. Man and his brothers in magic thereupon developed a protective mechanism consisting of the secret word, the spell, the incantation, the charm, the talisman, the amulet. And the function of all these devices was quite simple and uniform: it was that of self-preservation, and preservation of the family and tribe, and of the home, the women and children, the cattle, crops and possessions. Extended, the function of these diverse mechanisms became more general—to bring man good fortune and to drive away bad luck, ill health and death. It was magic for coercing the mysterious forces of nature to do man's will, to assist him to beget children, to overcome his enemies and to prosper. And of all the malign factors that were constantly poised to assail man, none was more awesome, none was more feared by primitive man, than the Evil Eye—the malevolent glance—the belief that there were certain spirits, people or even animals whose very gaze was so potent that they could harm or even destroy and kill, merely at a glance.

When the concept of gods became more crystallized, the powers of the spells and amulets were ascribed to them. The gods worked through them. Thus not only man needed the magic of the amulets, but the gods also needed them. Indeed the gods could not exist without the help of magic. Thus religion and magic are intertwined. It is hardly necessary to point out that the author of Judaism, while decrying magicians and sorcerers, was no mean magician himself. Moses outsmarted the very elite of Pharaoh's court!

The Evil Eye was a condition which might be present in man himself, in animals, or even in a personification of the forces of evil. The effect of this evil glance was to fascinate the object looked at, to enchant it, to cast a spell on it, to hypnotize it. Thus we have the origin and understanding of the term 'fascination' (*fascino*, I bewitch). It is related to the mesmerizing effect of the Evil Eye. A relation exists with the fascinating power possessed by the serpent, a reptile whose wiles were known in the folklore of many peoples. The diabolical glance of the serpent could stiffen and paralyze birds and animals. It is no coincidence that the Hebrew term for an enchanter, one who fascinates people, is *menahesh*, derived from the term *nahash* (serpent).

HISTORICAL

The belief in the Evil Eye originates in the East, and has spread widely, from China to the lands of the Mediterranean and to the West. It is unknown among the early indigenous populations of the Americas and Africa. Apparently first recorded in *Babylonia*, where fascination was thought to be the cause of most

diseases, the belief flourished and spread. The demon *Utukku* (noted in the Gilgamesh epic) could cause injury to a man by a mere glance. There are distinct references to the Evil Eye in Assyrian writings of the 7th century B.C.

The Egyptians also believed in the Evil Eye, even though their writings do not allude to this matter directly. The god *Ptah* brought forth all the gods from his eye and men from his mouth.

In ancient Persia, the 99,999 diseases afflicting man were ascribed to the Evil Eye of *Ahriman*—the Zoroastrian satan, the Force of Darkness. The belief in the Evil Eye is common in India, China and Abyssinia.

The Evil Eye is somehow inseparably bound up with evil spirits and in antiquity was often equated with them. The Evil Eye is thus sometimes clothed in a personality, and the form especially taken was that of *Tiamat*, the ancient Sumerian personification of evil. Another form adopted was that of Lilith, the night monster who is referred to in Isaiah (34 : 14, see also Ps. 91 : 5). It has been suggested that the term 'lullaby' may be derived from *lilli aby*, a lullaby being an incantation against that arch-fiend Lilith, the monster who specialized in afflicting infants and children.²

The eyes have held the interest of man from earliest times. In their clear transparency are portrayed man's hopes and fears and feelings. They are the windows of the soul. They were thought to emit rays in the direction of the object which they were examining; and the rays might be ones of love—in which case good, or white fascination might result, or the rays might be malicious, so causing evil or black fascination. People with ocular deformities were especially prone to be fascinatons. The common English term for squint is 'cast'; a squinting person cast his rays in a particular direction when he gazed at an object.³ The modern Italian term *jettare* also means to cast or throw—but a *jettatore* does not necessarily have a squint.

The wealthy especially had cause to fear a glance of enchantment, for their possessions aroused envy, and envy is indissolubly linked with the Evil Eye. The very term is derived from *invidere* (to look maliciously upon). Jealousy, admiration, praise and boastfulness are likewise linked with the Evil Eye. To have oneself or one's possessions praised was an open invitation for the Evil Eye. Some of the symptoms which this malevolent glance might occasion were ophthalmia, trachoma, colic, fever, hiccough and yawning. Children were particularly predisposed to the diabolical stare, as were also pregnant women and nursing mothers.

The possessor of an Evil Eye did not necessarily know that he was so afflicted. Indeed, involuntary fascination was much commoner than deliberate enchantment. An instance is recorded of a man who believed himself to have an Evil Eye and blinded himself in order to protect his children from harm.

The early Greeks and Romans were great believers in the Evil Eye, and their myths and literature abound with reference to it. Plato (429-327 B.C.) believed in it. Theocritus said it was necessary to spit three times into the breast of a person who feared fascination. Herodotus, Ovid and Horace refer to it. Heliodorus, a Greek writer (3rd century A.D.), described the case of a very sick girl afflicted with a wasting disease, who explained her illness as due to the lavish praise which her beauty had brought upon her by admiring friends, among whom were several possessing the Evil Eye. In Rome, Pliny (23-79 A.D.) reported that special laws were enacted to prevent injury to crops from the Evil Eye. He said that there were certain women who could cause plants to wither by a mere glance. Plutarch (46-120 A.D.) writes, 'Some men by looking upon young children hurt them very much, their weak and soft temperature being wrought upon and perverted, whilst those that are strong and firm are not so liable to be wrought upon'. Among the Romans, when praising anything it was customary to add a special phrase in order to counteract the influence of the Evil Eye.

In Abyssinia, the pagans wore stones and beads to avert the evil glance, but the Christian Ethiopians used a spell in the form of a legend written on a parchment amulet and worn on the person. The legend relates how Jesus demonstrated a woman with the Evil Eye sitting at the banks of the Sea of Galilee. He mentioned that if the gaze of her eye chanced on a cow that was being milked, then the milk went sour and turned to blood, and 'when this Eye looketh upon a woman with child, a miscarriage taketh place, and both mother and child are destroyed'.

In the medieval world, the Evil Eye, or the *oculus fascinus*, played a prominent part in everyday life. It occasioned plague, smallpox and cholera. Contagion was transmitted by the glance

of the afflicted. Several medieval writers wrote about the Evil Eye. A work known as the *Malleus Maleficorum* (1489), which was the official text-book of the Inquisition, served as a guide to the interesting subject of the discovery, examination, torture, trial and execution of witches. It has the following long-winded reference to the Evil Eye: 'It may so happen that if a man or woman gaze steadfastly at some child, the child, owing to its power of sight and power of imagination, may receive some very sensible and direct impression. An impression of this kind is often accompanied by a bodily change, and since the eyes are one of the tenderest organs of the body, therefore they are very liable to such impressions . . . and so it may happen that some angry and evil gaze, if it has been steadfastly fixed and directed upon a child, may so impress itself upon the child's memory and imagination that it may reflect itself in the gaze of the child and actual results may follow, as, for example, he may lose his appetite and be unable to take food, or he may sicken and fall ill . . .'

During the Renaissance, a Spanish physician called Gutierrez, believed that fascination produced a characteristic syndrome viz. loss of colour, heavy and melancholy eyes with tearfulness or unnatural dryness, frequent sighs, a depression of spirits, apprehension, bad dreams and loss of weight—a pretty good description of the hyper-ventilation syndrome! Things were seriously written about the Evil Eye as late as 1800.

In modern Arabia, China and Turkey, it is still a hazardous undertaking to praise a horse or camel. In parts of Europe, when looking at a child, it is usual to add 'God bless it'. Among the Italians the *jettatore di bambini* (fascinator of children) is especially feared. A famed fascinator was Pope Pius IX (died 1878). Kaiser Wilhelm was also believed to possess an Evil Eye. An instance is recorded in England, perhaps 30 years ago, where a woman with a squint requested operation, because at her sight, people would cross their fingers, spit ceremonially, and even ask her for spells to stop babies getting bronchitis. It is perhaps credible that certain people wear spectacles for no other reason than to protect themselves from the Evil Eye.³ In India, all witches and wizards are said to be possessors of the Evil Eye, and foreigners particularly are believed to have the power of fascination.

The belief in the Evil Eye appears to be limited to the East and to the cultures that sprung from the East. It is not found among the Indians of the Americas or among the Bantu of Africa unless there has been some Mohammedan influence. Gelfand,⁴ in his book on the magic of the Mashona, refers only once to the Evil Eye.

AVERTING THE EVIL EYE

In all ages the commonest means of averting the Evil Eye was by means of an amulet. The origin of this term is unknown, but it might be derived from the Latin *amuletum* (means of defence). An amulet is an object endowed with magical powers, and uses these powers ceaselessly on behalf of its owner—whether it is carried on his person or placed in his house or among his possessions. It protects him and his belongings from the Evil Eye and from malign influences in general. A talisman on the other hand is an amulet with a specific and limited function, e.g. that of increasing fertility. The origin of this term is also uncertain. Sexual talismans were common in antiquity.

It might be expected that a picture of an eye with the effects of good or white fascination might serve admirably as an amulet against the Evil Eye. This is in fact the case. The Egyptians made use of an eye as an amulet, and through some means it exerted protection from fascination. In addition it typified good health and good fortune generally. This ocular symbol, called an *udjat*, looked like this:

Enormous numbers of *udjats* have been found in tombs. They were made of gold, silver, copper, stones, wood or wax. And somehow this *udjat* bears a relation to the eye of Horus, a child-God who lost his eye as a result of an attack by the evil Seth. In the middle ages, the *udjat*, or perhaps the eye of Horus, reappeared in a new form resembling the numeral 4, and doctors and alchemists scribbled it on prescriptions to invoke the aid of Jupiter.¹ The similarity between the *udjat* and the familiar \mathbb{R} is readily apparent, and it is quite conceivable that they are related, so that the modern doctor in prescribing the very latest in -mycins, is still invoking the aid of an amulet against the Evil Eye.

Texts from the Koran are commonly used as amulets against the Evil Eye. They are painted on houses or carried on the person. In the 18th century, an eminent Talmudist, Jonathan Eyberschütz (1690-1764) dispensed a number of amulets against the Evil

Eye in Metz, Hamburg, and other cities over which he predeceases as chief rabbi. He prepared amulets for expectant mothers and sick children and as remedies against epilepsy and nose-bleeding.

In the Near East, alum is a favourite means of protection against the Evil Eye. Bits of alum are placed in the child's garment. Various stones are highly effective. Indians and Persians consider that wearing an onyx eases the pangs of labour. In the Near East the blood-stone counteracts fascination. Jaspis, a jade-like stone, was also effective and at the same time helped pregnant women and increased the milk of nursing mothers. Amulets of malachite are common in the East and West, and when attached to the necks of children the stone protects them from the Evil Eye and eases their pain when cutting teeth. In some parts of Europe people believe that if a piece of malachite is tied over the umbilicus of a woman in labour it will facilitate the birth of her child. Milk stone is used as an amulet to protect children, and women wore it when suckling their babies. Near Bethlehem there is a 'milk grotto' where a drop of milk from Mary is believed to have fallen on the ground while she was suckling Jesus, and milk dust (suspended in water) from this grotto is used by Christian and Moslem mothers in order to increase lactation.

Spitting in a baby's face was a frequent method of averting fascination. Greek nurses commonly spat towards approaching strangers in order to protect the infant should the stranger have an Evil Eye.⁵ Protection of children could be afforded simply by disguising them. A simple method for a boy was to dress him in girl's clothes, or to put rags on him, thus making him undesirable. They might be called unpleasant names, or even have their names changed. It is interesting that Hebrew folklore relates that Noah was not known by that name to his contemporaries. His grandfather Methuselah, knowing of the great mission awaiting him, and doubtless fearful for his safety, suppressed his real name, and called him Menahem instead.⁶

Inscriptions on amulets were sometimes intended to cure one particular disease. Thus the formula *Shebriri* was used to heal diseases of the eye and to act as an influence against the Evil Eye. It had to be pronounced according to this scheme: *Shebriri, Briri, Riri, Iri, Ri, I*. Similar is the magic term *Abacadabra*, which was used for reducing fever. As the letters were reduced, so the fever would abate. It was pronounced *Abacadabra, Abacadabr, Abacadab, Abacad, Abrac, Abr, Ab, A*. The term is possibly derived from the Chaldaeic *Abda kedabra* (perish like the word).

On a number of occasions the *Bible* itself refers to the Evil Eye, while also noting the potential injurious effects of eyes. Prov. 28 : 22 notes the Evil Eye, as does Matt. 6 : 23, Mark 7 : 22 and Luke 11 : 34. Prov. 23 : 6 advises: 'Eat thou not the bread of him that hath the Evil Eye.'

A number of non-specific references to personalized eyes and evil eyes are to be found in Deut. 15 : 9, 28 : 54, Job 7 : 8, Ps. 33 : 8, 34 : 15, 35 : 21, 54 : 7, 59 : 10, 92 : 11 and Matt. 20 : 15. We note that when David became too popular, 'Saul eyed David

from that day and forward' (1 Sam. 18 : 9). Isaiah thunders (13 : 17-18): 'Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them . . . and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children'; while Ezek. 9 : 5 orders ' . . . smite; let not your eye spare'. Deut. 18 : 10 refers to fascinators or enchanters, while 2 Kings 21 : 6 notes that the evil King Manasseh 'used enchantments', both terms being derived from that for 'serpent'.

There is a belief that the matriarch Sarah had an evil eye. When Hagar fell pregnant and became arrogant to her mistress, Sarah caused her to be banished, during which period she had a miscarriage. When she returned, she again became pregnant and gave birth to Ishmael. When he in turn displeased Sarah, she had him and Hagar sent into the desert, where he became ill with thirst and fever as a result of the influence of her evil eye.⁶

ADDENDUM

A personal note may perhaps not be out of place. I was born in a small village in Lithuania, and as an infant I was sometimes afflicted with the Evil Eye of an old woman bearing the name of Faigeh Haiah Nahash. Oddly enough, the name *Nahash* means 'serpent' in Hebrew. Now when Mrs. Nahash entered a household in which there was a child, she would preface her entry with a quick remark: 'Don't worry, I won't give him an evil eye.' Nevertheless, she was not trusted, and when she left, it was usual to spit 3 times on the ground. When she saw me, I would often begin to cry or yawn, and if this was unduly prolonged, my grandparents would consider it necessary to break the spell (*opshprehen an ayin hara*). This was done by bringing a handkerchief to the beadle of the local synagogue (the *shamash*), who would then whisper some magical words into it and give the instructions, 'Now hurry home, speak to nobody, and place the handkerchief on his forehead, and the effects of the evil eye will be nullified. Should you speak even one word on the way home, the spell will be broken'.

I have never in practice come across a clinical instance of the effects of an Evil Eye. However, when I am seeing a sick child, should a foreign-born grandmother be present and she ask the cause of the illness, I sometimes put my tongue in my cheek and blandly suggest an Evil Eye. Invariably the response to this is a moment's incredulity followed by smiles or laughter.

REFERENCES

1. Bettmann, O. L. (1956): *A Pictorial History of Medicine*. Springfield, Ill.: Chas. Thomas.
 2. Smith, H. W. (1953): *Man and His Gods*. London: Jonathan Cape.
 3. Graves, B. (1944): *Brit. J. Ophthalmol.*, 28, 305.
 4. Gelfand, M. (1956): *Medicine and Magic of the Mashona*. Cape Town: Juta.
 5. Garrison, F. H. in Abt, I. A. (1923): *Pediatrics*, vol. 1. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co.
 6. Ginzberg (1956): *Legends of the Bible*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Other References*
 Budge, E. A. W. (1930): *Amulets and Superstitions*. London: Oxford University Press.
 Thomen, A. A. (1938): *Doctors Don't Believe It*. London: Dent.
 Tourney, G. and Plazek, D. J. (1954): *Psychiat. Quart.*, 28, 478.