

Revival of Freak Religions.

CLERICAL students of the daily press cannot have failed to notice the increasing number of freak cults that are springing up throughout the country. Practically every State is furnishing a contribution. Chicago has its Gluckites, with their idea of perfect children as a solution of the world's ills; Ohio, Kansas and Texas, have within the year past incubated several colonies, including two attempts at an Adamless Eden, and in New Jersey and New York enthusiastic socialists have tackled the problem in a variety of ways.

The "Holy Rollers" continue to flourish in various parts of the South and West. Theosophy claims an increasing number of adherents, and the various strange cults of New England are sharing and benefitting in the wave of moral unrest that appears to be sweeping over the country. No doctrine so humble but it can find supporters; no prophet so crazy but he can attract converts. And it is significant that this ferment among the unstable minds is also in evidence in socially conservative quarters, both political and religious. It is the inevitable reaction from an excess of material prosperity, and it is seen not only in the civic awakening in the so-called war on the trusts and the "bosses," but also in the remarkable religious revivals that are being carried on in fervent appeal in every part of the country. When, as recently in Cleveland, men leave their business to march in huge processions chanting hymns and psalms, it shows that the movement is more operant than hysteria.

Kentucky's Great Revival.

While the progress of this national wide revival is being conducted in the large cities with conservative enthusiasm, yet, reports from isolated country districts show a tendency toward the passionate frenzy that characterized the camp meetings of the first half century of the nation. In the country press now and then, one finds references to the "jerks" and to the "holy laugh" in descriptions of successful revivals, and other eccentricities are mentioned as legitimate and commonplace. These uncouth words are the names of practices that have persisted with conservative tenacity in the more backward portions of the country for more than a century and the mental states they denote are as highly prized by the believers as Nirvana by the Buddhists.

It was in Kentucky in the early days of the nineteenth century that the "jerks" had their origin. Then, as now, a wave of moral unrest was sweeping over the country. The war of independence had shattered old ideals that had died a stubborn death with Federalism. French leonocism had made thousands of converts in the new nation, and the old Puritan and caste landmarks were submerged. Then, as now, a multitude of freak social organizations sprang up like mushrooms, their leaders preaching new dispensations and new ideals. And of course, legitimate religious activities were vitally quickened.

A Stronghold of Satan.

No section of the country held out less promise of becoming a religious vineyard than Kentucky. The inhabitants were the cowboys of 1800. Pious visitors were horrified at the vice, drunkenness, gambling, fighting and endless duels. The boatmen, says McAllister, was more dreaded than the Indians. He was reckless, fearless, and law-despising, and was commonly described as half horse, half alligator, and tipped with a snapping turtle. Preachers called Kentucky the stronghold of Satan.

In 1799 a young minister on his way to Ohio, turned aside to attend a sacramental service on the Red River. He was asked to preach, and did so with astonishing fervor. His auditors were strangely moved. Tears streamed down their faces and one woman began to shout. The exhorta-

tion was continued for hours and at the end the floor was "covered with the slain." Their cries for mercy were terrible to hear. Some found forgiveness but many went away "spiritually wounded" and suffering unsufferable agony of soul.

This was the beginning of a revival that has no equal in the history of the country. The excitement spread like a prairie fire throughout the State. Men fitted their wagons with beds and provisions, and traveled fifty miles to camp upon the ground and hear the magnetic preacher speak. Other camp-meetings were established. Historians of this period say that neither distance, lack of houses, nor scarcity of food nor daily occupations, prevailed to keep the people away. Families of every Protestant denomination hurried to the camp ground leaving crops half gathered, every kind of work undone. Cabins were deserted and in some large settlements not a single soul remained.

Camps in the Forest.

The camp meeting was always held in the forest near some church. A rude stage was erected at the end of a clearing and around it the stumps and fallen trees were utilized as benches for the auditors. About the clearing tents and wagons were arrayed in rows like streets. The praying, preaching, and exhorting would sometimes last for seven days, and would be prolonged every day far into the night. Men, women and children took part as exhorters. The old records tell of a little girl of seven who sat upon the shoulder of a man and preached to the multitude until she sank exhausted on the bearer's head. It is related that at Indian Creek a boy of twelve mounted a stump and exhorted until he grew weak, thereupon two men supported him, and he continued his preaching until further speech was impossible. Scores of "sinners" fell prostrate before him.

It was at these meetings that the "falling exercise" the "jerks," and the holy laugh had their origins and became part of the religious worship of the time, persisting in isolated localities down to the present day and breaking out with fresh vigor in the new wave of revivalism. The "falling exercise" is thus described by McMaster from investigations of the original documents.

"At no time was the 'falling exercise' as prevalent as at night. Nothing was then wanting that could strike terror into minds weak, harassed and timid. The red glare of the camp fire reflected from hundreds of tents and wagons, the dense blackness of the flickering shadows, the darkness of the surrounding forests made still more terrible by the groans and screams of the 'spiritually wounded,' who had fled to it for comfort; the entreaty of the preachers, the sobs and shrieks of the downcast still walking through the valley of the shadow of death, the shouts and songs of praise from the happy ones who had crossed the Delectable Mountains, had gone through the Fogs of the Enchanted Ground, and entered the Land of Beulah, were too much for those over whose minds and bodies lively imagination held sway. The heart swelled, the nerves gave way, the hands and feet grew cold, and motionless and speechless, they fell headlong to the ground."

Fell by Thousands.

This was the "falling exercise," and in a moment crowds would gather around them, praying and shouting. Some lay still as death; others passed face and limbs. At one camp meeting so many fell that, lest the multitude should tread upon them, they were taken to the church and laid in rows. At another campmeeting it is recorded that 3,000 people had the "falling exercise" at the same time. Some beat the floor with their heels; some shrieking with agony, bounded about like live fish out of water. Many rolled over and over for hours at a time. Others, recovering would spring wildly to their feet, jump over stumps

and benches and disappear in the forest, wailing, "Lost! Lost!" Twenty thousand people at times would be present at one camp meeting.

It was not long before the nervous excitement took more terrible forms, exhausting itself in the "jerks," the holy laugh, and the barking exercise. The "jerks" began in the head and spread rapidly to the feet. The head would then be thrown from side to side so rapidly that the features would be blotted out and the hair would snap. When the "jerking" reached the other parts of the body the sufferer would be hurled over hindrances that came in his way and finally dashed upon the ground to bounce about like a ball. It is said that at many of the campmeetings, saplings were cut off breast high for people to "jerk" by. Many marvelous tales are told by scoffers and cynics, particularly physicians, who were attacked by retributive "jerks" and bounced and dashed about until they cried for mercy and were converted.

Entire Community Demented.

Travelers in Kentucky at this time say that the entire community seemed demented. The high nervous tension and the morbid excitement drove many insane. Men dreamed and saw visions. A peculiar prevalent form of mental disorder was "treating the devil." Men and women who had been aroused to the highest frenzy of excitement fancied themselves dogs and went down on all fours and barked until the voice refused to act. During this outbreak, it was a common sight to see half a dozen or more men around a tree barking and yelping. They had "treed" the devil and were driving his Satanic majesty out of the community.

One of the weirdest and most uncanny features of this strange revival was the "holy laugh." Sometimes under the strain of exhortation, the preacher would suddenly break out into uncontrollable laughter. In a moment, as if by contagion, his great crowd of auditors would follow him, until thousands would join in a Titanic laugh that shook the depths of the forest with hoisterous guffaws. It became a recognized part of the revival service after 1803, and can be found in isolated districts of the South even now.

A strip of territory extending from Vermont, on the east, through Central New York to Pennsylvania was during the first fifty years of the republic a remarkably fertile breeding ground for all manner of freak cults. The lake country in particular was saturated with the bacillus of innovation. Innumerable prophets sprang into the limelight and issued clarion calls to converts, for a new dispensation. In practically all of which new relations of the sexes were declared by "divine inspiration." In this district Dorrillism, Mormonism, anti-Masonry, the Rochester Brotherhood, Spiritualism, the Oneida Community, the Pilgrims, and a host of forgotten minor cults germinated and thrived. And it was in this district that the great reforms voiced in prohibition, abolition and woman suffrage found courageous leaders and aggressive converts. It constitutes a remarkably interesting problem in effect of environment that would have fascinated the genius of Buckle.

Thrashed The Holy Prophet.

Dorrillism was one of the first of these fungus growths. A stout cane wielded by a vigorous veteran of the War of the Revolution put the waxing colony out of business and cut short the career of a prophet whose propaganda, if undisturbed, might have outlived, if it had not been prevented, the birth and evolution of Mormonism.

It is alleged that Dorrill's cotemporary success was inspiration for Joseph Smith.

Soon after the close of the War of the Revolution there appeared in the neighborhood of Gullford, Vt., a Jeseter from the British army by the name of Dorrill. He was a man of little education, but of considerable personal magnetism. He had been endowed with a powerful aversion to hard work, and had acquired a smattering of Bible lore. In addition to this, he had a strange influence over women, and his tastes, like those of most "prophets," were strikingly polygamous.

The rapidity with which he gained converts, particularly among the women, was a cruel shock to the conservative New Englanders of position and substance. He preached the doctrine that there was no hell other than the one on earth, and produced many Bible texts to prove that men were free to act as the spirit moved, particularly in their relations with women. The Dorrillites wore wooden shoes, because their leader declared that leather was injurious to the health. Milk and vegetables were their only diet; to eat meat was a contamination and a sin. Opposition to war was one of their tenets, derived from the Biblical "Thou shalt not kill."

Their Worship as Orgy.

Their weekly worship was described by their critics, as an orgy. Strange religious observances were mixed in with feasting and dancing, for Prophet Dorrill was something of an epicurean witual. Fiddling, singing and embracing, were also features of the cult's religious ceremonies, innovations that particularly scandalized the susceptibilities of the pious Vermonters.

As the cult grew by leaps and bounds, Dorrill's vaulting ambition outdid itself. He declared that both he and his followers were immortal, and that he himself possessed supernatural powers and attributes. His word was absolute law. Soon he established a communism in which all land and property, and women to a certain extent, were held in common, with Dorrill as the high priest and, in reality, the only owner of the commune's property. He was an absolute dictator, but with craft enough to keep his dupes satisfied and pleased, by providing for their physical comfort and pleasures, but at the same time exacting arduous labor from them that made it possible for him to live on the fat of the land. His disciples made the colony prosperous, and a large number of churches were built. As time passed he attracted into the ranks of his cult, not only the hot polo of the countryside, but also he made many converts among the respectable farmers and prosperous townspeople.

But at the height of his success as a prophet he was rapidly nearing his Canossa. His colossal egotism was his undoing. Declaring that he was possessed of supernatural powers, he boastfully asserted in his sermons, which attracted great crowds, that his body was invulnerable as well as immortal. Neither bullet nor blow, billet nor bludgeon, could harm or even touch him, was his oft repeated defiance from the pulpit, while his converts believed and wondered.

Stout Cane His Undoing.

One fateful Sunday, Captain Ezekiel Porter, of Gullford, attracted by curiosity, attended Dorrill's service. Porter was a scarred veteran of the Revolution, and was mentally equipped with a rude cynical logic. When Dorrill preached, the dramatic climax of his sermon, with the words, "No arm can hurt my flesh; no weapon can take my life," Capt. Porter was ready with a still more direct anti-climax in the shape of a startling argumentum ad hominum.

With a stout rattan cane in his hand, Porter strode rapidly up to the pulpit, gripped the astonished professor by the slack of the prophetic breeches, stood him on his head in the twinkling of an eye, and while he was in this undignified position, bestowed upon him anatomy several vigorous kicks. Then Porter yanked Dorrill to his feet, grabbed him by the coat collar, and gave him such a drubbing with the rattan cane, that the prophet, writhing in agony at every whack of the stick, shrieked for mercy.

When Porter was satisfied with his logical demonstration, he made Dorrill confess to the stupefied audience that he was an imposter, fraud, and an all-round scoundrel.

A year afterward it was difficult to find a single person who would confess having had any connection with Dorrillism. The cult was as dead as the worship of Osiris, and the erstwhile "immortal" and "invulnerable" prophet settled down to the real business of life as a humble cobbler in a neighboring village.

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