



SCIENCE LOOKS at OUR strange FEAR COMPLEXES

By Marjorie Van de Water

"STONE walls do not a prison make," but the unsubstantial barrier of fear can and does pen in many persons as closely as could the iron bars of a cage.

Many an unpublicized recluse remains for a lifetime confined to his house and yard because of an overwhelming fear of open spaces, a fear common enough to be given a special name by psychologists: agoraphobia.

This particular fear received a great deal of public notice lately because of the unusual case of John Hewins Kerns, Long Island writer, who after suffering for seven years with this mental ailment was reported to have recovered when led about by the hand of a young lady who became "therapeutically interested" in him.

Such compulsive fears are known to psychologists along with various obsessions under the convenient term "fixed idea." Every normal person has certain fears. He has to in order to stay above the ground.

Early in childhood, city dwellers must learn a wholesome respect for fast-moving automobiles, armed gunmen, and even icy pavements. Country children must avoid angry bulls, poisonous snakes, and maybe poison ivy.

It is when these fears become so dominant that they take up a person's whole thought and time and rule all his behavior that they become obsessive.

Probably one of the most common of the obsessive fears, in fact, is one that brings only the encouragement and approval of all the friends and neighbors. That is the fear of dirt.

Many a woman suffers from it, and is merely known as a rather exceptionally neat and thorough housewife. No one dreams that all her constant scrubbing and sweeping and polishing is more than zealous application to her duties. They do not know that she is driven day and night by a relentless horror of dirt that has become a nightmare to her.

THERE are any number of such obsessive fears, although some are much more common than others. Here is the list of frequent unreasonable, or unreasoning, fears:

Blood, dirt, crowds, lightning, open places, germs, electric appliances,



The exceptionally thorough housewife may actually be a person who is haunted by a hidden fear of dirt, which has become a nightmare to her.

drafts, high places, bats, mice (also dogs, cats, worms, spiders or other ordinarily harmless creatures), moonlight, closed places, black cats, owls.

You will recognize some items on the list as superstitious fears. Superstitions seem to be related to obsessions and compulsions. And both the latter are very common in children, who are also very much inclined to superstition. This is pointed out by Dr. Lloyd H. Ziegler, who has made a special study of these mental abnormalities at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

"It seems common for children to have compulsion-like tendencies to step on cracks of the sidewalks, or to avoid them, to touch posts or pickets of a fence, to count, to sing the same tune for long periods, or to think of the same word or phrase many times, without adequate reason," he says.

"Repetition is a method employed by most children in learning a school lesson. Indecision and hesitation are seen

frequently during play and school life. Fears of various kinds may be prevalent, but especially those of darkness, of heights, of being left alone, of strange persons or animals, of punishment, of storms, and of diseases.

"By adult life, most of these fears and other tendencies have ceased, or exist only as vestigial persistences which do not annoy or distract but are part of the phenomena of life."

Perhaps by this time you feel that you yourself are free from all these obsessions and compulsions—that you never have had any fixed ideas. But wait a minute.

Did you ever have a bit of popular music go around and around in your mind, "running in your head," as the saying goes, so that you could not rid yourself of it but would have it recur time and time again even when your thoughts were busy with other matters?

Or did you ever work with numbers, colors, names, or a machine for a long

The fear of lightning, illustrated strikingly above, is one of the most common obsessions.

time and then have these things pop up in your mind after you were done with them and even haunt your sleep?

If so, you too have been suffering from the sort of harmless obsession that is so much a part of life that it never comes to the attention of the physician.

TREATMENT is an individual matter, in any event, and consists largely in re-education and psychotherapy. Sometimes help comes to the patient from an unexpected source when physicians have failed in all their efforts.

A woman of 35 had suffered for about 15 years from agoraphobia—that fear of going outside her home which was the difficulty that afflicted Mr. Kerns. In this case, however, the origin of the fear was known.

The young woman, whose name is kept a medical secret, had been very much in love when she was in her teens, or just past them. She was engaged to be married and very nappy. But then she learned from acquaintances that the man of her choice was not true to her. She began to hear various stories of the other women with whom he was running around.

At last she broke the engagement, but that broke her heart. She brooded over it constantly. On top of that her mother died and that added to her misery.

The result was that she began to stay at home more and more to brood. Finally, she found herself unable to leave the house, and right there she stayed for years and years. Many physicians were called in, and they did everything they could to try to induce her to go out, but still she remained a prisoner of her strange fear and depression.

After a while, her financial condition made it necessary for her to take a boarder into her home. This boarder eventually proved to be the solution to the problem. It happened that he was a young man about her own age and very attractive.

He bought an automobile and one day induced the girl to take a short drive in it with him. Then he took her to the movies. Now they are married, and she goes anywhere she likes with perfect freedom.

Disease is the object of many an obsessional fear. Usually it is some particular disease—tuberculosis, heart disease, syphilis, or the common cold. These people may wash many times a day, or go to great lengths to have food, dishes, and clothing sterile. They are the natural prey of vendors of patent medicines.

