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# AN ANXIETY DREAM OF AN 8 YEAR-OLD BOY AND ITS RESOLUTION

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## *Introduction*

The dream presented here has a certain directness of representation of unconscious wishes and of the dangers coming from the wishes and their realization that is reminiscent of Freud's discussion of the case of Little Hans. As with Little Hans, the material is derived from direct observations by the boy's father. This dream is presented as an example of (1) the breaking through of phallic and oedipal material during the latency period, (2) the emphasized homosexual direction of the libido which can be found in a boy in latency when the mother is absent, (3) the extremely simple and direct form that dream symbols can take in a boy as old as 8 years, and (4) the resolution of a nightmare by supplying missing reality data to the child.

## *Background*

The background events contributing to the dream are as follows: On a Friday, day number 1, the father went to the hospital and had a herniorrhaphy. On day 4, the boy visited his father and saw him in bed under morphine for pain. On day 8, the father returned home to convalesce, still in obvious pain when moving. On day 9, the mother and the boy's older brother left on a trip of six weeks' duration. It was that night that the dream occurred. Neither the operation nor its consequences had been discussed with the boy, and he had not asked any questions. The father went to bed in the parents' bedroom at one end of a hall and the boy in the guest room at the other end of the hall.

## *Observations. (1) The nightmare.*

At 2 a. m. the father was awakened by the boy's screaming. The father ran down the hall, turned on the light and saw the son up on his knees on the bed. He was moving rapidly in a tense upright kneeling position on the bed, his eyes wide open, apparently fending something off from himself; and screaming in obvious terror. Father called to him, using his name; there was no response and no modification of the activity or screaming. Father went over to the bed, sat down, and held the boy close. As he held him, the boy came closer, and his screaming changed to violent crying. Suddenly he looked directly into father's face; the boy's face suddenly expressed extreme terror, and he started screaming again. He pushed away from father, moved on the bed back against the wall, and started once more his terrified watching of moving things not seen by father.

At this point, the boy made a gesture past his own lap, very quickly touching his pajamas over the lower abdomen in passing, while his terror continued.

The father, without reflection, immediately said, "Do you want to hear about my operation?"

The boy stopped screaming and moving, lost his terror, and looked curious; he said, "Yes", in his normal tone of voice, meanwhile watching his father intensely.

The father said: "In the hospital, the doctor operated on my lower belly; he did not cut or injure my penis or testicles. The cuts in my belly are healed up; the scars are here." (Father indicated positions lateral to the incisions).

Immediately the boy climbed back under the covers, pulled them up around his ears, and closed his eyes contentedly.

Father, taken off guard by this sudden change, said, "Don't you want to hear any more? Are you all right?"

The boy said, "I'm sleepy."

The father said, "What was your dream?" No answer. Father kissed him, said, "Goodnight", and turned off the light and left.

(2) *The report of the "dream"*.

The next morning when the father awoke, the son was already up, bringing orange juice to father. Sitting up in bed, the father asked his son to sit down beside him.

Father: "What was the dream you had last night?"

Son, with a characteristic "secret-understanding" smile: "I don't know; I didn't have a dream."

Father, cajoling: "Yes you did; what was it?"

Son, in light humorous tone: "Well—I didn't have a dream *last* night — but *a long time ago* I had a dream about a jungle with big trees and an elephant and a tiger. The elephant was mad at the tiger and they had a fight. The tiger bit the elephant's trunk off and there was lots of blood. The elephant stepped on the tiger and smashed him."

Father: "More?"

Son: "That's all." He acted as if the matter was closed.

Father: "Do you miss mother and brother?"

Son, non-committally—: "No."

#### *Other episodes.*

Three similar nightmares had occurred previously, one three years before and two the year before. The one three years before had yielded to turning on the light and holding him.

The nightmares the year before occurred on two successive nights. The first nightmare was treated first by the mother and then the father by holding and petting him and saying, "We love you." This did not work effectively; it took three quarters of an hour before the boy came out of it and could go to sleep. The next night the mother, after trying for several minutes, became rather desperate and called the father; he tried a thought-out interpretation: "I will not hurt your penis. I won't let anyone else hurt you either." The nightmare yielded immediately.

There have been no subsequent episodes in the four years after the one given in detail above.

### *Interpretation.*

The father, at the time of asking his son the question, had a strong transient feeling of being the little boy and experiencing the child's activity himself; a momentary regression back to his own nightmares when he was six years old had occurred just before the son passed his hand across his abdomen. Seeing the action, the father, without thinking it through, asked, "Do you want to hear about my operation?" This "partial identification" of the father served to give the father the key to the terror and its treatment.

The main unconscious theme in the boy's thoughts seems to be as follows: "Dad has had his penis taken away. I want to take it — and injure *him*... The doctor did it because I wish it — therefore Dad will take mine away and kill me. The elephant is Dad, and yet the son also. The tiger is the doctor — and then is the son — smashed."

The account by the son of the dream was given in a humorous tone, as if he knew that the father knew the 'true' story underneath. This report by the son was obviously not that of the son's experience in the nightmare: the actions and gestures during the nightmare were those of a direct battle between the boy and his father. Apparently, he was repressing or at least not reporting the true dream. In the above analysis, we may regard the report as the manifest content and the true dream as the latent content. The latent content has an extremely close relation to the manifest content: the disguises are far less devious, the emotion far more direct, and the uses of the outlets to motility far stronger than one sees in adult dreams.

The son had had real experiences related to the 'manifest' content: He had seen operations on pets; on trips to the zoo, he had seen elephants and tigers which intrigued him and the father; and in his books there were pictures of these two animals in the jungle. It is not strange that he chose these figures for disguises.

### *Discussion*

This episode has as its essential structure a wish and the resulting danger: The wish to castrate father; a fantasied realization of the wish — the operation; retaliation by father; and castration and death.

The absence of his mother and brother allowed the boy's relation to his father to become intense enough to key off the wish, his belief in its realization, and the retaliation; his libido-objects had been reduced to one.

The sudden resolution of the nightmare by the father's question is apparently due to the father's love for the boy, shown him in many ways, including the interpretation of the previous nightmare a year before; and, in turn, the boy's trust in his father.

A basic mechanism is visualized in this case as follows: The boy knew *something* had been done to father, but not specifically what. He filled in the gap in his knowledge of reality with a fantasy, determined by his unconscious wishes, with the above consequences. As soon as an offer from the trusted father to fill in his reality picture with the missing data occurs, the boy can give up the fantasy. When the reality data

are seen to fill the real gaps and are not dangers in themselves, he can relax and sleep.

The synthetic functions of the young ego need a relatively complete reality picture of libido-objects, if unconscious fantasies are not to break through to complete the gaps in the picture in an extreme and terrifying way. If at the time the ego is overwhelmed a loved object can supply the missing data, the ego can resume control.

### *Summary*

Observations by a father of an 8-year-old boy having a nightmare and the resolution of the nightmare, are presented. A verbal account by the son of a "dream" is reported. The assumption is made for purposes of analysis that the observations (and the deductions from the observations) and the account by the boy are analogues respectively of the latent content and the manifest content of adult dreams. An interpretation of the "dream" is derived: An operation on the father was fantasied as being the realization of a wish to castrate father; the nightmare is the realization and the retaliation for the wish. Two reality factors led to the occurrence of the nightmare: The absence of the mother which intensified the relation with father, and the missing real data about the father's operation. The resolution of the nightmare by the father is explained by (1) the mutual trust between the son and the father; (2) the "partial identification" of the father with the son, allowing the father to detect the identification of the son with the "injured" father; and (3) a theory of the synthetic functioning of the young ego.

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