

An extraordinary sleepy person

Stephen Wilson 

Dr William Oliver FRS reports this case in *Philosophical Transactions* 1704–1705. It was sufficiently interesting to attract the attention of Philippe Pinel who included it in his abridged French translation of the Journal published in 1790. The person in question was a 25-year-old man named Samuel Chilton (although Pinel mis-transcribes his surname as Clinton) who lived at Tinsbury near Bath and was said to have been in robust habit of body, not fat, but fleshy. On the 13 May 1694 he:

'happen'd without visible cause, or evident sign, to fall into a very profound Sleep, out of which no Art used by those that were near him, could rouze him, till after a months time, then rose of himself, put on his cloaths, and went about his business of Husbandry as usual, slept, cou'd eat and drink as before but spake not one word till about a month after. All the time he slept Victuals stood by him, his Mother fearing he would be starv'd, in that sullen humour, as she thought it, put Bread and Cheese and Small Beer before him, which was spent every day, and supposed by him, tho no one ever saw him eat or drink all that time.'

Further episodes occurred in subsequent years and in August 1697, Oliver, hearing about Samuel and being nearby, determined to investigate. Having subjected the man to all sorts of unpleasant stimulation he:

'resolv'd to see what effects Spirit of Sal Armoniac would have, which I had brought with me, to discover the Cheat, if it had been one; so I held my Viol under the Nostril a considerable time, which being drawn from Quick-lime, was a very piercing Spirit, and so strong I could not bear it under my own Nose a moment without making my eyes water; but he felt it not at all.'

The case became something of a cause célèbre. A local apothecary let about 14 ounces of blood but the patient did not stir. Nor did he react when:

'carrying him down Stairs which were somewhat narrow, they struck his Head against a Stone, and gave him a severe knock, which broke his Head...'

More heroic efforts to awaken him were made:

'by stopping his Nose and Mouth, but to no purpose; and a Gentleman then with me ran a large Pin into his Arm to the very Bone.'

However:

'he never foul'd his Bed, but did his necessary occasions always in the Pot.'

He woke in January/February 1698 unmoved by his experience and remembering nothing of the intervening events. Oliver concludes:

'I have no reason to suspect this to be any Cheat, because I never heard of any gain to the Family by it, tho so near *Bath*, and so many People went thither out of Curiosity to see the Sleeper, who when awake was a support to his old Mother by his Labour, but now a certain charge to her.'

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