General Remarks

ON THE

PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

BY
P. M. LATHAM, M.D.

VII.—CURE.

Remedies to be accepted for Specific or Special only on the concurrent Testimony of the best and the most experienced Men. Such Remedies few. Great Value of those few: 1. From their Positive Effects; 2. From the Hints they furnish or confirm of the Deeper and more Occult Elements of Diseases. Their Mixed Use. Faith in them gained in Acute rather than in Chronic Diseases.

THE abuse of specific or special remedies, whether by physicians or by the world, is a heavy clog and drag upon the credit and fortunes of our profession. How it came to pass, and how it always has prevailed largely, and always will and must prevail, may be gathered from the explanation which has been given. Should this be deemed too much of an explanation, let its motive be its excuse; namely, that thoughtful physicians may be made more fully aware how great the evil is, and may guard against it in their own practice and discountenance it by their example, and thus hope to abate it a little. But they must never hope to put it down until they can persuade all their brethren to practise medicine wisely, and all the rest of the world not to practise it at all.

Now, let us resume the subject of *cure* and special remedies where it was left off, and let us speak no more of their abuse. For, have we not seen an obligation to use them in their own unaccountable success; and have we not seen within themselves promises and prophecies of future knowledge? (*Vide article III.*)

The *specific* remedy and its certain *cure*, and the *special* remedy and its probable *cure*, will bear to be called "great facts"; and, indeed, they are much to be admired. But, to be so called and so thought of, they should bear the royal stamp—the stamp of experience. They should be current at sight among the wise and prudent, and pass with them for as good as gold. And, verily, such specifics and special remedies there are. But they are few; few and precious—precious in themselves and beyond themselves. For it cannot be that they should stand alone; they must have kindreds enough of worth and value, if we could but find them out.

True it is, that these same remedies officiate something which we do not understand, and in parts of the body where we cannot follow them. We know neither what they do, nor where they do it; yet the effects of their operation are positive and unequivocal. They have been fairly surmised to have to do with those first elements of disease, which are peculiar objects of interest and research in our own times, and which have their seat within the blood. Perhaps there would be no harm in following this surmise a little way in the direction to which it points.

For, to be long busy about some spot where truth has seemed to dwell, and to take up often and examine often the curious things that are to be found

there, and join them and separate them, and separate and join them again and again, skilfully or unskilfully, is not this the common lot and probation of those who have happily made them fit at last? And this fitness have they not welcomed for a notice of some truth, which they sought, being not far off, and have gone on their way rejoicing?

In like manner we would deal with these great remedies, even the special instruments of *cure*; and, before we take leave of them as a formal part of our subject, we would take some of them up and handle them a little, and try what fitness they have, or seem to have, with the things they approach, or touch, or mix with, and so gain what better insight we may into the manner and place of their surprising operations.

Let us begin with the most familiar instance. No remedy does its work so summarily and well as Peruvian bark when it cures an ague. And when it cures other diseases, as sometimes it does, it still does its work summarily and well. But how and where does it do it? The man who finds out that, will make a great discovery. But already one cannot help but see much plausible fitness of things that cluster about the matter, which tells of truth being somewhere near at hand.

All know it for a fact that, by accident or design, noxious elements are constantly gaining entrance within us, from which it is the perpetual business of the body to set itself free. If the element be such as specific or special remedy can reach *curatively*, the body is spared a world of trouble, pains, and perils in regard of it.

There is a certain noxious element of great activity and power, and wide-sweeping operation, which seems to be *sui generis*, and Peruvian bark is its antidote.

It belongs to intermittent fevers essentially and inseparably, making Peruvian bark their remedy always and everywhere, and in every body. And it seems to mix itself with other fevers and other forms of disease accidentally and occasionally, calling for Peruvian bark to aid their cure at certain places and seasons, and in certain men.

But this same material morbid element, which has Peruvian bark for its antidote, goes, after its entrance within the body, nobody exactly knows whither; yet we guess it goes into the blood, and that there the special remedy reaches it and deals with it, and somehow renders it harmless. And whoever chooses to adopt this theory of its *curative* operation, may have the satisfaction of knowing it to be in respectable conformity with pathological views now commonly entertained.

Let us briefly run over these views, and so judge of their fitness to furnish us convictions or surmises of the place and manner where and how our specifics and special remedies have their operation.

Pathologists are coming more and more to the belief that diseases are developed from elements which have their first existence in the blood. And, indeed, there is sure proof of the fact in a few instances, as where sugar, or urea, or pus, are found therein; and there is next to sure proof of the fact in contagious eruptive diseases. We know that they have a material element. Entering the body, whither can it go but into the blood? Where can it germinate and increase but in the blood? Whence can it be diffused throughout the body, and be finally separated by the skin, but from the blood? Further, by a very strong

analogy, it commends itself to our reason to believe that malarious diseases, from the least to the greatest, from the headache a man has suffered for a few days while a drain has been offensive in his house, to the fevers contracted in the Pontine marshes, have all their origin from a foreign and noxious element gaining access to the blood.

All this, and more than this, the popular language of medical men has already sealed and certified as true. We talk of almost all diseases as blood-diseases, and of their elements as poisons; of the scarlatina poison; the typhus and typhoid poison; the cholera poison; the poison of gout, of rheumatism, of erysipelas; the poison of boils and carbuncles. We speak even of chronic constitutional diseases as live-long poisons, as the poison of struma and cancer.

Without doubt this language may be taken in some extent to express plain and almost demonstrable truth; and, again, in some extent to express truth of very high probability. But then, in a much larger extent, it means nothing beyond surmise.

Now surely there is an evil in using language more precise than our knowledge. If this were the place, it would be easy to shew that medicine had partaken especially of it. Its language has almost always outrun its knowledge. And the evil has been nothing less than this: our language, by ever persuading us that we are wiser than we are, has wedded us to many a capital error for half a century.

The theory which we have been propounding is sober and plausible enough; but it has its weak points. Yet some would think it complete throughout. Let us, however, beware: for, accept it in its totality and without reserve, and give it free play, and see what a wide extravagant sweep it will presently take. The theory is this; that the bark and all other remedies whatever, which *cure* without any intermediate operation being apparent, do in fact work their *cure* by finding each that element of disease in the blood for which it is the natural antidote, and there dealing with it and casting it out. But let us beware: for the theory would go to creating as many elements or quasi-elements of disease in the blood, as there are specific or quasi-specific remedies in the world; and a precious nosology we should have of it! It is all very well to hold the belief that diseases and cures are largely transacted within the blood; there are facts enough pointing to it and confirming it. But there are not facts either enough or of a fit kind to furnish out anything like the perfect theory contemplated. The thing must wait.

The number of facts within the knowledge of every experienced physician is enormous; and every thoughtful physician has it perpetually in mind to put them in their natural order, and to learn their true meaning. But then comes the temptation common to all minds that are speculative (and what mind that can think at all is not speculative in some degree?)—the temptation, namely, to press known facts a little further than they will bear, when that little is all that is wanted to establish a theory. Even sober minds are too apt to yield compliance to this temptation. But we tread upon tender ground. Let it be enough to notice the extremes which are, and always will be, found among the best of those who study and practise medicine.

There are those who are ready to work every bit of new knowledge they pick up into the common fabric of what they have in daily use and exercise:

this is a great temptation, and a great fault. And there are those who, always busy in acquiring knowledge, are yet so religiously on their guard against erroneous theory, that they are afraid even of generalising. Is not this sometimes the case with Heberden? Doubtless this too is a fault; but then it is so rare, and, where it exists, it so often springs from that charming union of a modest with a powerful mind, that it easily claims for itself a merit, and even passes for virtue, in our esteem. The great and frequent fault of our profession is of the other kind—to be premature and precipitate in systematising new knowledge; for thus some of the best minds have been lost to the advancement of practical medicine.

Something remains to be added respecting Special Remedies; but it would be altogether a mistake to attempt any orderly account of them. A pretty sure insight into things, be they what they may, is required to systematise them profitably. To be exact beyond our knowledge is the worst of pretences. All arrangements of facts aim at being didactic; but then they must be arrangements into which they naturally fall, not into which they are forced. The facts which concern Special Remedies are far too interesting and important not to be spoken of; but they must be spoken of somewhat discursively.

Now, have these remedies anything like a domain to themselves, be it large or small, in the cure of disease? It is difficult to say whether they have or not. The disease preeminently deemed curable by its own specific will, in a few instances, refuse to be cured by it without the help of some remedy suited to emergencies of the individual patient. Ague commonly yields to quinine; but occasionally it does not until some mercurial be given to redress a present wrong-doing of the liver. Gout is often cured by colchicum single-handed; and erysipelas single-handed by bark. But gout from colchicum, and erysipelas from bark, often obtain something short of cure, which remains to be completed by common or non-specific remedies. Or take the converse, which perhaps shows the fact as it more frequently appears. Gout is treated by remedies suited to the requirements of the particular case; and they fulfil this, their immediate intention, and bring the whole disease *nearly* into subjection. The patient is almost, but not entirely well; a trifle of gout still lingers, and vexes him pertinaciously; you give him colchicum and at once he is well altogether. In like manner, erysipelas is treated by remedies suited to the particular case, and they answer their immediate purpose. Moreover, the whole disease is manifestly kept in check; it is reluctant to spread; it fades; but it does not yet disappear until the patient takes quinine, and then it at once disappears altogether.

Thus, brought to the test of how they demean themselves under the trial of certain special remedies, diseases have much that is mysterious to tell us concerning their nature. Truly, in this regard, they would seem to change their natures from time to time; or the same disease to partake of a double nature, as when it is curable in part by a special remedy, and treatable in part by common ones; or to share that double nature in variable proportions, being now almost curable by a special remedy with very little help from any common one, and now almost treatable by common remedies with very little help from a special one.

How the two orders of remedies seem conjointly to analyse the nature of the diseases with which they have to do!

There is a good deal of difference how we regard the effects of the same special remedy, according as it is brought to bear upon an acute or a chronic disease, and as its own operation is rapid or slow. The nearness or remoteness of the result strengthens or weakens our faith in the power of the remedy. If some sure earnest of the coming result follow the first use of the remedy, and the result, even the cure, be complete within a few days, then we have all that reason can ask for faith in the special remedy from first to last. But if the result be postponed for weeks, and still postponed for months, and the earnest in the meanwhile, upon which hope likes to lean and to refresh itself, be few and long between—then, though the result arrive at last, even the perfect cure, the reason gives but a hesitating faith to the special remedy for its share in procuring it.

So when quinine is prescribed for an ague, or for any rapidly progressive disease to which fever belongs, such as erysipelas or acute rheumatism, and it ceases abruptly or soon, or in a few days, our faith in the remedy as of special efficacy is complete. But when quinine is given for strumous ophthalmia, or for swelled absorbent glands of the neck, or for any complaint of whatever name which has the accompaniment of a weak and cachectic constitution, and the ophthalmia or the swelled glands disappear and health follows after the lapse of months, then our faith in the special remedy, as such, gets a good deal frittered away or is exchanged for the more moderate expectation of good which waits upon the use of tonic medicines. It sinks from a specific to a tonic, which is a great fall. In like manner colchicum, given for the paroxysm of gout, and at once abating its severity and finally abolishing it in a few days, is justly regarded and trusted as a special remedy; but given and continued week after week for chronic pains of doubtful pathology, and those pains in the meantime slowly and reluctantly yielding, and at length giving in altogether, we thus lose faith in colchicum as a specific for gout. If we allow it any credit in the result, it is of another kind. It sinks from a specific to an alterative, which is a great fall.

But let us beware of all debate about "tonic" and "alterative"; which, whether applied to remedies or to their operation, are most without meaning of all the terms in use among physicians. Tonics and alteratives include a countless heap of things, and get much of the credit they have as a class from a few remedies, passing by their names, which better deserve to be called special or specific; as cinchona when it cures other diseases besides ague, and sarsaparilla when it cures chronic syphilis. As to quassia, and gentian, and cascarrilla, and cusparia, and orange-peel, they should rather be reckoned as condiments for food than as medicines.

This may seem a hard sentence to pass upon time-honoured remedies, and so to disserve them from the art altogether. Within the memory of man, bitters were in high esteem, and their virtues were nicely studied. There were those who could tell you which was to be preferred to which, and were not to be caught confounding their effects, and giving one when they ought to give another. The abundance of drugs to be taken was a chief characteristic of medicine as it was practised forty years ago, and not

unnaturally it did its best to believe or make-believe in their efficacy.

Here we take leave of Cures and Special Remedies as a formal part of our subject; but they will still be meeting us at every turn. In truth, what we have called *special* and *common* remedies never so well display their powers as when they are seen at work concurrently or in conflict with each other. Remedies, indeed, are our great analysers of disease; common remedies more plainly and sensibly, special remedies more intimately and profoundly, but both alike in fact. Of *living* disease hardly any analysis is possible but by help of both.

Observations

ON

TYPHOID OR INTESTINAL FEVER: THE PYTHOGENIC THEORY.

BY

WILLIAM BUDD, M.D.,

SENIOR PHYSICIAN TO THE BRISTOL ROYAL INFIRMARY.

"So the ordinary face and view of experience is many times satisfied by several theories and philosophies; whereas, to find the real truth, requireth another manner of severity and attention."
(*Advancement of Learning.*)

PART II.

Intrusion of Sentiment into the Domain of Science. Miss Nightingale's Views. The Idea that the Specific Poison of Fever is generated by the Processes of Common Putrescence, irreconcilable with the intensely Specific Conditions which attach to its Reproduction in the Living Body. The enormous rate of this Reproduction adequate to all the Phenomena.

SOME years ago I was taken severely to task by one of the first literary men of the day for contending that cholera is contagious. After observing that the idea had been discarded by all the great authorities, including the Royal College of Physicians and the General Board of Health, who, after an elaborate investigation conducted by men of the highest scientific eminence, had lately reported on the subject, he added that he wondered I was not ashamed to teach such an "immoral" doctrine. And, following up the taunt, he proceeded with great fervour to depict the social horrors that would ensue were such a doctrine generally adopted. Although it was evident that my opponent carried the sympathies of the audience with him, the slightest reflection would have shown that his attack was not only unjust, but absurd. For, clearly enough, this is not a question of morality or immorality at all, but simply a question of evidence, to be judged by the laws by which all evidence must be judged.

Strange as it was to hear such language from a great popular teacher, it was still more strange to meet with it in a medical work. Whatever may be the case with men in other callings, physicians are supposed to know something, at least, of the principles on which all science must be based.

Be this as it may, in the official report of the New Orleans Commission appointed to inquire into the origin of the great epidemic of yellow fever which ravaged that city in the summer of 1853, the same