General Remarks

ON THE

PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

BY

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X.—FEVER. *What is Fever?*

STAHL's Phlogiston looked very like the truth for its time. Chemistry wanted a something in aid of its facts, to complete a theory of combustion; and it had recourse to this figment. And figment as it was, the facts and it fitted into one another so well, that it soon passed for a reality; and Phlogiston kept its ground for half a century.

Now the world in general invests Fever with a quasi materialism and personality, and regards it as offspring and parent by turns of almost all diseases. And a great many facts fit in curiously with this conceit, and make it a plausible piece of pathology. Thus Fever has been our phlogiston.

But one would not like to let drop a hint that Fever is nothing better than a figment! Far be it from me. Only take me round a hospital, and you will have me acknowledging Fever in half the poor fellows I see. Just so. But what is Fever, and what the thing or things contained in it? If a single thing, it must be very large; if several things, they must be very numerous. But, without saying which it really is, let us, for the present, be allowed to take it as a *single* thing; for there are facts of practical moment belonging to it, which can be most conveniently regarded from this point of view.

It would have a formidable look, if we began by requiring a definition of Fever. There are things which will not be defined, and Fever is one of them. Besides, when a word has passed into every day use, it is too late to lay a logical trap for its meaning, and think to apprehend it by a definition. Vain, too, is it to hunt after it in dictionaries, or consult antiquaries and etymologists about it. After lapse of time, even common language comes to vary its signification from mere custom. It is not likely, therefore, that in a profession like ours, which, itself and all belonging to it, suffers perpetual change, language should be constant to its meaning, and the same word continue for ever to express the same thing. Practical medicine must not be overnice about the language it uses, or it will be brought to a standstill altogether.

The term Fever is as old as the hills, and it must remain. What it meant formerly, it may not mean now. But our business is with the sense it bears at the present day, and to give it and take it according to common acceptance. We *must* use it. So let us make the best of it, and ask no curious questions about it. Listen to the fellows in the street, how they bandy about some vulgar word from morning to night, giving and taking it in its now unmistakable sense, and little thinking of all the trouble some antiquarian philologist has had with it. It, a mere monosyllable perhaps, has cost him a chase of cen-

turies over half the world to find out whence first it came, whither next it went, and where it has been, and what it has been doing and meaning ever since, down to the present time.

Without retrospect or regard then of other times, if there be any sense in which Fever is now popularly understood by physicians and the world, the same may be safely adopted. And such a sense there is.

In casting our eye over the subject of Fever historically, we find this remarkable circumstance, that it fills a much larger space in medical books, both ancient and modern, prior to the century in which we live, than it ever has done since, and than it does at present. In these days, physicians talk about Fever as much as ever. They have it perpetually on their lips, and keep up still a pretty vociferous report of it throughout the world. But they do not now *write* much about it under *that name*.

A fact like this must have its reasons. Verily, writing and talking are different things. Is it that they of old studied the subject more, and we less? No! But each of us has studied it in our own way; and our way is different from theirs.

They dealt with the subject more bravely and adventurously than we, and more comprehensively too; also, more with the aim of coming to conclusions and constructing systems; and, so far, more successfully than we. For this bold and intrepid thought of theirs upon the large subject of Fever took with it such a sweep of things innumerable, and things of every sort near and remote, as contrived to drag in almost all diseases. And so it was that, readily and almost naturally, their theories, and cure, and treatment of Fever, became their theories, cure, and treatment of all the rest. It is, indeed, plain that most of the doctrines, which aforetime have borne grandiloquent names, and made professors and universities famous in their day, have been expansions and reflections of what had been thought, and taught, and practised, concerning Fever.

But our studies are, and have been for some time past, more about it and about it than of Fever itself. And no disparagement to us on that account! Search has been made by us after places that engender Fever, or rather the noxious things which are the proper elements of diseases that involve Fever; and this search has engaged some of the best minds. And it had need of them; for it is difficult beyond measure. And it has had great success. Nevertheless, it is not exactly the study of Fever; perhaps, it is something better. For better, indeed, it may well be to prevent the whole pernicious work from being set agoing, which carries Fever along with it, than to understand what this Fever is when it arrives. Think what it is to know the elements of certain diseases before they have entrance within the body, and then to be able to lessen them and reduce them to nothing; or, failing the ability to do either, to give warning where they are, and save communities their perilous or fatal exposure to them.

Our studies also have been of contagion and its doctrines; and thus we have become conversant with the proper elements of certain other diseases which, however originally engendered, are now kept existent in the world by having human living bodies to accept, and nurse, and multiply them, and impart them to others. Many of these have Fever involved

in them from first to last. But the study of them, and the conditions of their spread, is, strictly speaking, something beyond and beside the study of Fever.

Further, our studies have been of diseases which begin and end with the individual man. With naked eye and scalpel, and microscopic and chemical tests, we have been hard at work of late years, and have searched out many wonderful things within the body, claiming to be the *proper* elements of diseases which in their vital progress involve Fever; but they are not Fever themselves.

Behold us, then, circumventing and closing in upon our subject on every side. And are we none the wiser after all what Fever is? Yes! far the wiser. For thus we have come to know all that can be known of it; and that it is neither malarious, nor contagious, nor scissile, nor microscopic, nor chemical; but that it is vital. Fever is not the man's disease, but his life assailed by his disease; even his life on a large scale.

Let me, however, be careful what I say. Pure life is a thing inapprehensible and unimaginable by human thought. But the actings and feelings of the parts and structures which compose our body are, many of them, apprehensible enough. And, as it is by them that the man shows that he lives, we must be content to deem them identical with his very life. For we cannot penetrate further.

With this explanation, let us come close to the bedside, and there see and judge for ourselves what ails the patients who are said to have Fever.

Well, then, some are said to have Fever, while, to outward view, nothing ails them more than that they are hot above measure. Others, that they are hot and cold by turns, after some strange fashion. And others, that they are perspiring too; hot and perspiring or cold and perspiring at the same time; or none of the three together, but each by turns.

All this is apparent enough; and in outward show there is nothing more than this. But there is something more, and no trifle either. Question the patients about their feelings. And, if it be really Fever that they have, whether their heat, cold, and perspiration, be much or little, or in whatever manner occurring, they will all testify to a consciousness of something wrong within them. What it is they feel they cannot exactly tell. Perhaps they can say no more than that "they are ill," or "that they are downright ill."

But people in perfect health are hot and cold and perspiring by turns; and all because they *are* in perfect health. Take them whose lot is labour. Whatever they have to do is by voluntary muscle and limb; and they do it with all their might. This is their outward life put forth day by day and every day in all its power and energy. And their inward life shares the vigour of their outward life, and co-operates with it. They put forth glowing heat and free perspiration; and as for cold, if it be felt at all, it is but for a short season, and as a stimulus for more heat and more perspiration. They testify to nothing wrong within. All their consciousness is of health and power.

Here, then, we have our specimens of life healthily actuated, and of life injuriously assailed. In each case, it is through its same embodiments that we are enabled to judge now of its health and now of its illness; viz., through the entire vascular and nervous

systems, and the great central organs of both. For these, as far as mortal insight goes, are the prime movers and ministers of all function, and feeling, and consciousness within us, ready to answer whatever calls or emergencies await them, as they are able. If, from things not out of harmony with themselves, and not of more force than they can bear, they answer (as we have seen) boldly, according to the nature of their office, by putting forth the simplest and surest manifestations of health; if, from things essentially baneful or simply overstrong, then they answer (as we have also seen) still according to the nature of their office, but strangely and confusedly.

It is upon life that we are looking; upon life embodied in the entire vascular and nervous systems, and on this large scale injuriously assailed, whenever we contemplate Fever.

Is Fever, then, one thing or many? The question has been answering itself as we have gone along. Show me Life as a single thing, and I will show you Fever as a single thing taking forcible hold of it. But to contemplate either this or that as a single thing is utterly impossible. Fever must be taken to stand for the sum and aggregate of many particulars.

But all general terms in use among physicians had need to be jealously watched. Even strength and weakness, simple and innocent as they look, have by turns been the marring of us. The terms themselves cannot be dispensed with; and as long as they truly represent (as they always ought) an aggregate of things real, and verifiable in their details, they serve an useful purpose. But, failing this, they become pernicious abstractions. In my time medicine has been going through a speculative crisis of two opposite kinds by turns; and strength (so-called) has ruled the one, and weakness the other. Beyond all question, during its critical ascendancy, abstract strength cost the world many lives by its practice of blood-letting; and abstract weakness, in its turn, has cost the world many also by its practice of brandy-giving. I have not statistics to show with exactness which of the two has levied the larger mortal tax upon mankind. My impression is that the bad preeminence belongs to the latter.

Now Fever is a general term, and as such, carries with it the danger, as far as its meaning is concerned, of degenerating into a vague abstraction. And this danger is the greater, the more it is thought of and talked of, apart from the patients who suffer it. Therefore, in what remarks we have yet to make about Fever, let us still keep close to the bedside. And not only so; but let us choose some large hospital, and conceive ourselves to make daily visits to it for some three or four years in succession, and there and then make acquaintance with the real things, which Fever represents in its natural and necessary alliance with bodily hurts and diseases.

AMERICAN WAR NEWS. After the battle at Fort Donnellson, the Chicago Sanitary Commission sent eighteen surgeons to assist in the care of the wounded. The citizens of Cincinnati contributed a large sum of money, and furnished a cargo of hospital stores, and a number of its most competent surgeons. These acts of generous care of the wounded relieve war of some of its most unpleasant aspects.