General Remarks

ON THE

PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

BY

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XIII.—TREATMENT.

Difficulties and Anomalies of Practical Experience.

Ευριφών ὁ ἰατρός ἐρωτῆθεις τὸν διδάσκαλον, παρ' ᾧ ἐπαίδευθη, παρατῷ χρόνῳ, εἶπεν. (*Stobei.*) This being interpreted means, "Euriphon the Physician, being asked what preceptor had the teaching of him, made answer that his preceptor was Time." These words are quoted by Dr. Heberden, and stand the last of his *Commentary on the History and Cure of Diseases*. Dr. Heberden's volume contains the condensed experience of his life carried on to his seventy-second year, and left by him for publication after his death. He lived until he was ninety. In this remarkable work the preceptor Time is plainly seen ruling and guiding throughout.

And Time keeps school among physicians still. But he is not, and never was, a popular lecturer. He is slow in coming to the point. He has a cautious, hesitating, self-correcting manner, which is not altogether pleasant, and makes him difficult to follow. Hence a good deal more patience is required to understand his teaching, and profit by it, than most men care to give. That his disciples should value highly what their venerable preceptor has hammered into them is natural enough. But then they are themselves few and grey-headed, and have often caught something of their master's manner, and so do not obtain a ready ear from the world. And I can hardly expect a better success than the rest while I rehearse some of the leadings or misleadings, the teachings, and corrections of my preceptor Time.

Nothing is so difficult to deal with as a man's own Experience, how to value it according to its amount, what to conclude from it, and how to use it and do good with it.

I had been physician to St. Bartholomew's Hospital eight years, and eight years previously physician to the Middlesex, when I ventured to write a book; bestowing upon it as much care and thought as I was capable of. Indeed, it cost me a world of labour, and, at least, it was honestly done. This book contained my own sixteen years Experience of Fever, and what conclusions as to its nature and treatment that Experience would (I thought) fairly sustain; and I was not without a reasonable confidence in their truth.

Fever in those days, written or spoken of singly and without adjunct of any sort before or after, stood for an idiopathic disease. Gaining, however, an accession of many and evil things in its progress, it became a fearful complexity; and earned, before it came to an end, the name of Synocha, Synochus, or Typhus, as the case might be, but without prejudice to its original idiopathic rights.

It was Fever regarded from this point of view that I undertook to write about. But my book never saw the light. For abruptly, or within the short space of a year or two, all that was called Fever suffered the nature of a revolution, and so did its Treatment. What was life and safety to Fever, as it had been, became death and destruction to Fever as it was. Present Experience was in conflict with past. And my poor work, with its truths, its beliefs, its opinions (call them what you will) all rudely shocked and scattered, was ashamed to show itself, and so came to an end. It was a sort of violent end it came to. It seemed as if some force (for such forces there are) indwelling in the nature of things, but latent, and so unseen and unreckoned upon, had suddenly come into action and demolished it; just as one's foot demolishes an ant-hill, scattering the population within, and bringing ruin upon all its toil, and all its instinctive wisdom, and the fruits thereof, in a moment.

We physicians had need be a self-confronting and a self-reproving race; for we must be ready, without fear or favour, to call in question our own Experience and to judge it justly; to confirm it, to repeal it, to reverse it, to set up the new against the old, and again to reinstate the old and give it preponderance over the new.

Belief, opinion, truth! When we cast up the sum of a long Experience, by which of these names shall we call it? Its subject is one of the worthiest, even nothing less than the life and well-being of man. Let it then be spoken of in the handsomest terms it deserves. And it is hard if there be not something in the results of Experience that is, worth the name of Truth. But then it is an infirmity of men, finding a fragment of Truth, to take it for the whole Truth; or, intent upon what may well pass for Truth now and for a few years to come, to account it the Truth which stands fast for ever and ever. We must be cautious, then, not to deceive ourselves, or take the Truth there is in the practice of medicine for what it is not. If what can be apprehended by fragments but not completely, if what lasts safe and sure and trustworthy for times and seasons but not for ever, can be called Truth, this is the Truth, which is vouchsafed us to know and to use in the practice of medicine, and this only. And we must make the best of it, and be content.

Now, my own sixteen years Experience of Fever and febrile diseases and of their treatment, may be taken as a fair sample of what medical Experience really is. It was no fable, but made up of undeniable matters of fact. Time went on, and proved them more and more, and shewed them still consistent and trustworthy. And they were trusted accordingly, and the practice grounded upon them had abundant success. But the facts were constant and consistent only for their own season. They did not hold together long enough (for what is sixteen years after all?) to become one solid Truth. They were but fragments of Truth after all. Yet, fragments as they were, they were not worthless. They go to make up my stock of good working-materials, and are still of use to me every day. They do not serve me for building systems. But they help me to treat diseases and to save lives.

How is it that in medicine Truth is thus measured out to us in fragments, and we are never put in trust of it as a whole? How is it that Experi-

ence, upon which alone we can depend for all the good we do, is continually breaking down under us as a system?

Well, one cannot indeed account for it; but one is not surprised that so it should be. What with inscrutable things within the body and inscrutable things without, and incalculable and incontrollable withal, it is no wonder that Experience should sometimes find itself at fault, and be not always able to shape the future out of the past upon a large scale.

The one fact has been already noticed, of things within the body belonging to life and health and disease, which are hitherto untouched by human knowledge. All medicines give intimation of it more or less in the course of their operation. Specifics present summary proof of it from first to last.

The other fact, too, deserves to be well pondered, of forces without the body exercising dominion over all that is vital within it—forces of some of which we know neither what they are nor whence they come. But they are full of reality and power.

On my first entrance into my profession, and for some time afterwards, nothing was less intelligible to me than the writings of our great Physician. All his discourses about epidemic constitutions, and stationary fevers, and intercurrent diseases, and the same diseases needing different treatments from time to time, were to me dark and mysterious. And just the same, I am persuaded, is the case with every man who studies medicine; and the more so, the more he finds himself thus early in the presence of real disease, and in the society of those who, like himself, are daily watching it, and ministering to it, and comparing notes about it. For then the mind is at its freshest and its best, and is most apt for observation. It holds strongly to its own conclusions: and why should it not? It takes for absolute Truth what has already come to it authenticated by a hundred instances: and why should it not? It is not yet upon the look-out for what may gainsay or invalidate its own well observed facts concerning diseases and remedies: why should it? Tell, therefore, the student and the physician of a few years standing, that there is something more in diseases, and in the effects of remedies upon them, than can be seen and known from any number of individual patients during any given period of time; and he will neither understand you nor believe you. Yet there is something more, nevertheless; and physicians at length come to own it.

Choose almost any febrile disease you please, and question the Experience of honest and well-informed physicians about it, and what it was, and how it was best treated at their own time and place of observation; and you will find them tolerably well agreed. But take this Experience and agreement of theirs to determine its nature absolutely, and fix the canon of its treatment for all places and all times; and you will run into a great practical delusion. Still a man must have lived long enough to see many phases of medical practice, and been himself engaged in it all the while, before he can be in a condition freely to acknowledge what is here implied.

Take Pneumonia. It has been treated by bleeding, and got well. It has been treated by brandy, and got well. It has been left to itself, and got well.

And the bleeders, the brandy-givers, and the doers of nothing at all, respectively have had a vast deal to say for themselves and against their rivals. And which of them are to be our guides and masters in the Treatment of Pneumonia? None of them for a single day, much less for always. Besides, the Treatment of Pneumonia happens just now to be a matter of high controversy; and from controversy often comes exaggeration. And exaggeration often does the work of falsehood unawares. Therefore I would willingly have chosen some other instance, but that I wanted such *internal* febrile disease for illustrating my purpose, as, whenever it exists, declares itself infallibly. And, since Erysipelas well served my purpose, because all about it was plain and unmistakable to the eye; so now Pneumonia will do the same, because, of *internal* diseases, it and all about it are best ascertained by the ear.

Now, we have the best testimony which the ear can afford to the fact that Pneumonia has gone through all its processes of disease and reparation, now advancing, now receding, until the lungs have finally recovered the conditions of health, when it had received no formal medical treatment whatever. Again, we have the sure witness of the ear to the same fact, when the Pneumonia had been treated by brandy; and yet again to the same fact when it had been treated by venesection.

Here the means (for even the doing of nothing may be now deemed to exercise a positive influence)—the means, I say, and the end, are things so obvious, and are found so closely following each other, that it is impossible not to put down their sequence to the account of natural connexion. And this being the case, and there being such vast odds between doing nothing, giving brandy, and drawing blood, there is no wonder, if the current of a man's Experience had run generally in favour of any one of the three, that he should hold one to be absolutely and always right, and the other two absolutely and always wrong.

No wonder, indeed. But then practical medicine is unlike all other things in the world. It has its own conditions; and they prohibit all such summary conclusions as these. Let a man use his own Experience as best he can for the present; but let him not, upon the strength of it, rebuke the Experience of all past times, and dictate to the Experience of all future; for, if he live long enough, nothing is more likely than that he may find himself fallen under his own reproof, and inconveniently confronted by his own maxims. From having been a bleeder, he may become a stimulator or a passive looker-on in cases of Pneumonia. He may find himself interchangeably all three in the course of thirty years.

And what is the explanation of all this? People not over well disposed towards us and our profession (and there are many such) find a sufficient key to the whole matter in the caprice of medical men; and they take this key of theirs, and turn the lock, and bar the door against all further question! "It is neither more nor less", say they, "than the caprice of physicians; so let us have done with it and them."

But let the world think of us as it pleases, there is a rational practice of Medicine nevertheless. And let medical men themselves still be right and wrong by turns, seeing clearly and doing successfully what is at present to be seen and done, yet mistaking the

same for something more sure and permanent than it really is; finding (as it were) a fragment of truth, and learning well what it will now bear, and now safely trusting their own weight upon it, let them foolishly deem it a rock and build a castle upon it. Whatever physicians may be, or the world may think of them, there is, I say, a rational practice of Medicine nevertheless, and there are causes sufficient to explain its greatest anomalies. A cursory glance can only here be given at what these causes are.

The vital being of every individual man has its qualities. What is summarily called his Constitution is full enough of its own conditions to require in almost every case some deviation from the standard treatment of the particular disease. Not seldom are these conditions sufficient to justify great differences, and even contrarieties, in practice. They are never to be lost sight of at the bed-side of the patient; and we consider ourselves as never practising more rationally than when we practise in obedience to them.

Then there are the things which are the commonest and the most inconstant in the world, yet which do and must surround every man as long as he lives; cold and heat, moist and dry, dense and rare, foul and fair. All these reach and rule and qualify the vital being of us all, and so vary the aspect of our diseases and necessitate changes in their methods of Treatment. Here is the very subject which in our own times has especially attracted the interest of the world at large; viz., the influence, upon the well-being of mankind, of the air which they breathe and the places where they dwell. Governments, military and civil, national and municipal and domestic, have expended abundance of study and labour and money upon it; yet not more than it deserves. Practically, what physicians have to do with the subject may lie in a small compass and be reckoned by a few items, or it may expand itself infinitely, and run into particulars innumerable. Our patient may be an individual, a family, a community, or an army. Our concern may be with the cleanliness and ventilation of a single room, the drainage of a town, or the site of an encampment.

It is difficult to speak rightly of things which have no body or form presentable to the senses. But we *must* speak of them, and dwell upon them. Though we know hardly by what name to call them, they cannot be ignored; for they have oftentimes a greater sway over the world without and the world within us, than all things of substantial being put together.

Now, bearing upon diseases and upon their medical management, there is a certain thing which I have thus far designedly suppressed; for I was afraid of darkening the subject with a mystery, and so I kept it out of sight. But this mystery is a truth. Mystery indeed it is to *us*, for we know neither what it is nor whence it is; but it demands notice from its effects, which are full of reality and power. It has been called the "Epidemic Constitution" of certain years, or series of years. And so let it still be called, rather than by any name of more scientific pretensions. For it intimates nothing of the nature of the thing itself. But it acknowledges a reality and a power. This is enough.

The most eminent characteristic of this "Epidemic Constitution" is its levelling influence. Where it

exists, and as long as it lasts, it subdues into conformity with itself all that is peculiar to the individual man's Constitution, as well as peculiar to places and external things. These, which are wont to be so potent in modifying the forms of diseases and ruling and qualifying their treatment, now disappoint our reckoning. Behold, for a season mankind in various places and circumstances require a Treatment for their diseases contradictory to the Experience of former times. Then wait for a season, and behold, mankind, in the same places, and in the same external circumstances, will require a Treatment for the same diseases contradictory to the Experience of the present times. But neither now, nor formerly, nor hereafter, will there be found in the vital being of men themselves, in their places or circumstances, anything to reconcile the contradictions or at all explain them.

But it is not only that diseases, having this, that, or any name, are rendered severally unlike themselves of other times by the Treatment which they now need and bear. This, indeed, would show an agency at work of great power—an agency, however, only of special and partial bearing. But these same diseases, which are thus made severally unlike themselves as they were at other times, become all like one another as they are at the present, by reason of the need they have of now receiving, and their capacity of now bearing, the same or similar modes of Treatment.

Thus febrile diseases—diseases, I mean, which require Fever for their development, and which altogether make up a large number of the sum total of all that flesh is heir to—become types and tests and interpreters of one another at the times wherein they are found, in what concerns their Treatment. Thus all so-called inflammations, in every part of the body, also diseases the products of different contagions and contrasted in their outward forms of presentment, and so bearing different names—Measles and Scarlatina, the Typhoid Typhus-Fevers—all give and take, impart and accept illustration mutually and interchangeably. You read them through one another. In treating one you learn to treat another. What one needs and bears, another needs and bears. These are facts of great significance. They seem to point to some one widespread and pervasive influence ruling and dominating over them all alike.

But do the diseases named denote the limit of the influence in question? I believe that it may be traced much further. I believe that even those diseases which more than others are proper to the individual man, traceable to what he eats and drinks, or does and endures, such as gout when it is a febrile disease, the gout of distinct attacks and paroxysms, even they often own subjection to times and seasons. Now for a series of years the indications, which guide the treatment of particular cases, will generally demand remedies of greater power and of one kind; and then for a series of years the indications will generally be satisfied with remedies of less power, and of another kind. But only let present indications be justly chosen, and fulfilled according to a fit measure, and then the Treatment which they suggest, while it is variable at different times, will be at all times uniform in its success.