

MEDICINE AND MUMBO-JUMBO

IN 1546 occurred the great plague which ravaged Marseilles, Lyons, and Aix. So terrible was the scourge that all the doctors fled and left the dying to their fate. The Comités of the towns assembled in despair, ignorant even whether they too were not already in the grip of the disease. Just as the inhabitants of Elatea received the news in the eventide, so the desertion of the doctors struck their bewildered minds with horror. Although they turned to the Church with groans of supplication, the people died, and dying gave to their neighbours the seeds of death. They died as they had died in the past, and they continued to die until the world of medicine perceived the squalor of their living. And it is of this dawning perception that I wish to speak.

The plagues which ravaged the world in the course of the Middle Ages were probably all offshoots of that form of plague known as Bubonic, Oriental, Levantine, or Miliary, and the symptoms were a high fever, accompanied by glandular swellings and carbuncles. It was generally supposed to have originated in Northern Africa, and to have made its first appearance in Europe at Constantinople in the reign of Justinian. The great plague of Athens described by Thucydides seems from its symptoms to have been of a different nature, although equally destructive. In Constantinople, ten thousand persons were carried off in one day; in 1352 Oxford lost two-thirds of her academic population; at about the same period thirteen millions perished in China from the same disease. At the time of the plague of Marseilles, little was known about its cause or cure. Apart from the usual quack remedies, the only scientific treatment was that of red

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light, invented by John of Gaddesden, a graduate of Merton College, whose chief medical work, the *Rosa Medicinæ*, was published in 1316. In some colleges the study of medicine was not encouraged; indeed, in Merton it was expressly forbidden by statute. 'But,' says Gunther, 'such was the spirit of contrariness among the members of Merton College that they early began to seek medical knowledge and degrees.' In 1284, only ten years after the foundation of the college, when a visitation was held by Archbishop Peckham, among the abuses which had to be corrected was that of the admission of medical students, on the plea that medicine was a branch of physics. This innovation the Visitor absolutely prohibited. 'Happily,' remarks a recent Warden, 'his injunction was neglected, and many were our Doctors of Medicine who have carved their names for ever on the scrolls of fame.' The long list of eminent doctors who held fellowships at Merton was sustained by the pretext that medical science was a branch of Philosophy.

Not only was medicine bound by the weighty shackles of pedantry, but it also suffered from its inseparable connection with the science of astrology. Although Church and State alike were engaged in extirpating the abominable practice of witchcraft, astrology was considered permissible but dangerous. All too often the two sciences degenerated in combination into the mumbled curses and spells of night-hags in their squalid hovels, or the outrageous poisonings of a Deshayes or a Brinvilliers. In the Bodleian there is an old book by one Leonard Digges, printed in London in 1555 by Thomas Gemini, which shows the close connection between the two arts, and which incidentally gives an excellent example of the decline in medical knowledge since the days of Dioscorides and Galen. In a paragraph entitled 'A conducive note for letting bludde,' he states: 'Let bludde at no tyme

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without great cause. Beware before all maner exercise, bathinges, watchings, etc. These signes are mooste daungerous for bludde letting, the Moon beyinge in them, Taurus, Gemini, Leo, Virgo, and Capricorne, with the laste half of Libra and Scorpius. The rest are all good, so the Moone beare no dominion in that member whyche ye cut; as followeth :—

‘ From the change to the firste quarter, a mete tyme to let yonge men bludde.

‘ From the firste quarter to the ful, good for middle age.

‘ From the ful to the laste quarter, apt for aged folke.

‘ From the laste quarter to the change, best for old men.

‘ Signes mete for the complexions :—

‘ Aries and Sagittarius for the fleumatic; the head and thyes excepted : Libra and Aquarius for melancholike; buttocks and legges excepted : Cancer, Scorpius, and Pisces for cholerike; brest, members and fete excepted.

‘ Heare cutte groweth well, the Moone increasing, beyinge in Tauro, Virgine, or Libra. Cuttinge, shaving, clipping, in the wane, causeth baldness; what is then cut groweth litel. The best time of gelding is in Cancer, Scorpio, or Piscis in the wane.’

Such was the standard, and consequently the people died.

Although medical knowledge made great strides in the course of the two following centuries, although the sixteenth century itself could boast of the remarkable cures of Nostradamus and the discovery of laudanum by Paracelsus, the scourge of plague continued to sweep Europe. Physicians continued to try and cure its effects, while making no effort to eradicate its causes. Even in the great plague of London the most

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popular remedy was still the application of a live fowl to the tumour, in the hopes that it would suck out the poison. It is perhaps instructive to quote from the works of one of the last doctors of the old regime, by which we can see the development of knowledge since the time of Digges. Sir Richard Blackmore's book, *The Plague*, is interesting not only for its subject-matter, but also for its style, a style which contrasts strangely with the unintelligible jargon and exciting abbreviations of our modern specialists. 'First,' he says, 'the Fever call'd Miliary from the small red Eruptions that resemble Millet Seed. This is the most frequent in this Country of all the Malignant Kind, and therefore I shall discourse a little more largely upon this Subject. The Patient often seems to himself at first only somewhat faint and indisposed, his Strength and Appetite diminished, and his Sleep interrupted and his Dreams disorderly and tumultuous, whilst he goes abroad and applies to his usual Business, not suspecting that he nourishes a Malignant Fever in his Bosom. Then after about Seven or Eight Days, when he has taken to his Bed, by means of copious and profuse Sweats, the Miliary Eruptions appear in the Temples, the Neck, and Breast. If the Quantity be not great they generally presage a Happy Event; but if they are very numerous, they are often fatal, and always dangerous.'

At this point, he breaks into a magnificent peroration, which I cannot resist quoting in full :

'This is the terrible Enemy of Mankind, that sends its Arrows abroad by Day, and walks all stained with Slaughter by Night; that turns the Vital into Noxious Air, poisons the blood, and kills us by our own Breath; that goes forth thro' a Land collected in its Strength, and armed with Vengeance scatters Destruction in its Dreadfull March. Before it are beautiful gardens, crowded Habitations, and populous Cities, behind it

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are unfruitful Emptiness and Howling Desolation. It is strengthened and fed by the Famine which it makes, gathers Force in its Progress, and makes the dead destroy the Living. It advances in Triumph from Place to Place, despises the Fences, and leaps over the lines raised to restrain it. Before it the Guards and Armies of mighty Princes are as Dead Men, and Physicians are no protection either to the Sick or to themselves. When the Almighty to punish a guilty Nation empties His Vials of Wrath and pours forth these Lees of Vengeance upon the Air, He gluts His Sword with Death, and makes His Arrows drunk with Blood.'

Next he passes to the causes of the plague at *Marseilles*. This he attributes impartially to the south wind and the Reformation. In a sober and reasoned argument, he explodes the time-honoured theory that the ringing of bells agitates the air so violently that the plague is instantaneously driven away. Of the first of his arguments he states: 'High Winds and Tempests, however, are so far from purging the Air from such destructive Vapours, that they carry them abroad from one Country to another, as has been observed before of the Terrible Plague of Athens, conveyed thither by the Winds blowing from Africa. This is so plain a Case that it needs no further Confirmation.'

Note the sublime self-confidence of the modern psycho-analytical school. His second cause is a glorious vindication of Protestantism. During the religious disturbances of the times, numbers of Protestants, who refused to give up their heresies, were arrested and condemned to the galleys off *Marseilles*. Here they suffered for years, in the most disgusting state of dirt and degradation, with no hope of respite.

'*Marseilles*,' he says, 'is yet more disposed to the Breeding and Receiving of it by the Impurities and Filth that accompany the Gallies and the Slaves that labour in them, which fill the Air with Stench and

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offensive Smells, easily perceived by those that pass along the Shore adjoining. These noxious Exhalations approaching near to Putrefaction may well be supposed to be capable at some Seasons, when extraordinary Accidents intervene, of generating the Plague of themselves, and of contributing much to the Propagation of Imported Contagion. Wherefore,' he declaims proudly, 'it is very remarkable that this terrible Calamity began in the same Town where Multitudes of Illustrious Confessours, who from a generous and truly Christian Fortitude refused to renounce the Protestant Religion, being condemned to the Gallies, toil'd in Fetters at the Slavish Oar; and where many of them ended their Days, and bore a glorious Testimony to the Orthodox Faith.'

It is perhaps permissible to quote one of his prescriptions, as a further example of the improvement in the science of medicine. Even this, however, leaves a lot to be desired. 'Take away ten or twelve Ounces of Blood at the first Seizure,' he prescribes, 'if the Pulse be not too low and depressed. A Vomit should be administered the Next Day, if Nauseousness and Inclination to vomit require it; for tho' this cannot be supposed to separate and carry off the matter of the Fever, yet this Evacuation may discharge those Humours in the Stomach from which the Distemper might receive greater Strength. Besides, a Vomit will prove friendly to Nature by the Shake or Concussion of the whole Frame or Systeme of the Nerves. The Form follows:—Take of Milk-Water or Spring-Water three Ounces; of the Indian Root half a Dram; of Emetic Tartar three grains; make it into a Draught. Let it be given in the Morning or the Evening, and let the Sick Person after half an Hour drink plentifully of the Infusion of Carduus-Leaves. If this hath not its Effect, take of Milk-Water ten Ounces, of Plague-Water four Ounces, sweeten the Mixture with

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Sugar or with ten Drams of Syrup of Clove Gillyflowers. Sometimes I have made it a little stronger by adding five Drops of Laudanum: for where Inquietude is the Symptom, Quiet is the Cure. The Reason some Physicians give for being dissatisfied with this Medicine is this, that it “locks up the Humours of the Body.” This is an obscure and vulgar Expression, and one would be glad to have a Key to unlock it. When the Gentlemen that make this Observation will unmask their meaning by using Words Intelligible, I shall consider it as it deserves.

It is unnecessary to give any details of the methods by which the scourge has been finally stamped out. As I pointed out in my opening paragraph, it was the higher standard of living and the improvement in housing and sanitation which ultimately defeated it; and the doctors did their part nobly in bringing this to pass. There is little more to add but this. Every good story should provide its own moral, and the moral of this is that the good workman should stick to his own tools. The doctor's duty is care of the Body, not the Soul. But, paradoxically, now that Medicine has conquered Mumbo Jumbo, Mumbo Jumbo is at the height of its power. The doctors, sighing for new worlds to conquer, have invented Complexes, while millions perish annually from cancer. Doctor Ernest Jones proves that plagues are inseparably connected with outbreaks of Vampirism. Bring out your poppies and mandragora, good sir, bring out your pentacles and your magician's robe, for Venus is in the ascendant, and the hosts of darkness prowl abroad. See, the cycle is complete.

Quaerite a pythonibus, et a divinis qui strident in incantationibus suis.

SPENCER UNDERWOOD.