

Medical Matters.

THE HORRORS OF SLEEPING SICKNESS.



Mr. H. Hesketh Bell, C.M.G., H.M. Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief in Uganda, British Central Africa, in a most interesting letter to the *Times*, gives a detailed account of the condition of the sufferers in that region from sleeping sickness.

A short time ago the Commissioner visited the refuge for sufferers from sleeping sickness, maintained at Kissubi, not far from Kampala, by the White Fathers of the Algerian Mission. He states that—

“Even at the time when the disease had been considered to be of such an infectious nature that its victims were shunned like the plague-stricken, these exemplary missionaries had fearlessly collected large numbers of the sufferers, and, in spite of the apparent futility of all curative measures, had devoted themselves to alleviating the pains and miseries of the doomed. The sick who, in many cases, had been thrown out by their terrified relatives to starve in the jungle, or to be devoured by wild beasts, were rescued, fed, and nursed without reference to creed or character.”

After describing the enclosure in which a number of infants in whom the first outward signs of the disease were just appearing were happily at play, unconscious of their approaching doom, the Commissioner goes on to describe the conditions of the adults. He writes:

“In a row of sheds, surrounded by the banana groves which supply the food for the patients, we saw numbers of those who had reached the second stage of the disease. Most of them appeared to be suffering acutely. They seemed to shun the cool shade of the broad thatched roofs, and to prefer to sit or lie in the full blaze of the noon-day sun. Even there many of them shivered almost constantly, and drew about their emaciated limbs the brown rags of bark-cloth which partly covered them. The drawn features and haggard eyes testified to the gnawing pains that almost constantly afflict them, and the unhappy creatures appeared to have special dread of being touched. Many of them were in the peculiar state of lethargy which has, doubtless, been responsible for the misleading name by which the disease has become commonly known. Unfortunately, sound sleep rarely comes to the relief of the doomed ones, and the torpor in which they lie comes from the con-

stant strain of never-ceasing pain. Many of them, in an unguarded moment, put an end to their miserable lives, and it is a wonder that more of them do not do likewise.

“Further on, we came to those who were in the last stages of the disease. Lying about, on beds of withered leaves, they had reached a degree of emaciation that was horrible to see. The unhappy creatures looked like skeletons, and only their doleful moaning indicated the presence of life in the wretched remains. A few, in whom nature was struggling hard, had gone raving mad, and in spite of the fact that the poor creatures had perforce to be chained to heavy logs to prevent their doing harm, one almost envied them their insensibility to the tortures that afflicted their fellow-victims. The frenzied laughter of these unfortunates seemed particularly dreadful in that abode of suffering and death.

“An intense desire for meat or for any fatty substance is one of the characteristic symptoms of the disease, and it is not unusual for a native, who has contracted sleeping sickness, to recklessly kill and eat all his sheep and goats in a very short space of time.”

On the Commissioner's visit to Kissubi, he asked the Bishop what he could do to give pleasure in any way to the unhappy inmates, and it was decided that a gift of meat would be most acceptable. He writes:—

“The Bishop had hardly finished announcing to the unfortunate people that a bullock would be killed and cooked for them that night than they were moved by extraordinary excitement. Their faces were lighted up with intense joy. Those who were still capable of vigorous movement jumped about with delight; others threw themselves at our feet in gratitude; and even on the features of the most apathetic could be seen gleams of unwonted interest. Their sufferings seemed for the moment to be forgotten, and one could only regret that the alleviation was to be of such a fleeting nature.”

As is generally known, a variety of the tsetse fly, the *Glossina Palpalis* is now believed to be the principal, if not the only, agent in the dissemination of the disease. This fly exists in enormous numbers on the shores of the Victoria Nyanza and of some other lakes and rivers of Uganda. Scientists believe that the fly can only transmit infection for a short period, probably under 48 hours, after feeding on a diseased person, and it is believed that the disease which has swept out of existence 200,000 of the 300,000 natives inhabiting the shores of Lake Victoria Nyanza has raged uninterruptedly because the means of infection

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