Medical Matters.

THE ROMANCE OF MEDICINE.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in an address delivered at St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington, at the opening of the new session, as reported by the *Lancet*, said in part:—

With a knowledge of medicine you will find that you bear with you a little private lantern which throws a light of its own.

In every transaction of the world, you are likely to find medical facts down at the root of it, influencing its origin and growth. To take an obvious example of what I mean, for centuries mankind beautified themselves by means of wigs. Whence came such a custom, unknown to antiquity and absurd in its nature? Medical, of course. A skin disease on the top of the head of Francis the First of France, which induced alopecia, or bald patches, compelled him to cover himself with artificial hair; his courtiers all followed suit, exactly as they all whispered when the same monarch got laryngitis; and so, the custom enduring after the true cause of it was passed, you find the explanation for all your tow-headed ancestors. The association of certain diseases with certain characters is an extraordinary problem. Julius Cæsar was, I believe, at all times of his life subject to fits. Then as to Mahomet, we know that he also had sudden trance-like fits, quite apart from his religious visions, so that even the most pious Mahomedan must admit them to have been symptoms of disease. Such conjunction of the highest human qualities with a humiliating disease has surely both its pathological and its moral interest. Pathologically, one might suppose that there is a limit to the point to which the keenness of the spirit can drive the body; that at last the strain tells, and they tear away from each other, like a racing engine which has got out of control. Morally, if the human race needed anything else to keep it humble, surely it could find it in the contemplation of the limitations of its own greatest men. I would further adduce Napoleon as an example of the sidelights and fresh interests which a medical man can read into history. One can trace for many years, certainly from 1802, the inception of that disease which killed him at St. Helena in 1821. In 1802 Bourrienne said: "I have often seen him at Malmaison lean against the right arm of his chair, and unbuttoning his coat and waistcoat exclaim, 'What pain I feel!'" That was perhaps the first allusion to his stomachic and hepatic trouble; but from then onwards it continually appeared, like Banquo at the banquet. He could scatter the hosts of Europe and alter its kingdoms, but he was powerless against the mutinous cells of his own mucous membrane. Again and again he had attacks of lethargy, amounting almost to collapse, at moments when all his energy was most required. At the crisis of Waterloo he had such an attack, and sat his horse like a man dazed for hours of the action. Finally, the six years at St. Helena furnish a clinical study of gastric disease which was all explained in the post-mortem examination which disclosed cancer covering the whole wall of the stomach, and actually perforating it at the hepatic border. Napoleon's whole career was profoundly modified by his complaint. There have been many criticisms—not unnatural ones—of his petty, querulous, and undignified attitude during his captivity; but if his critics knew what it was to digest their food with an organ which had hardly a square inch of healthy tissue upon it they would take a more generous view of the conduct of Napoleon. For my own part, I think that his fortitude was never more shown than during those years—the best proof of which was, that his guardians had no notion how ill he was until within a few days of his actual death.

History abounds with examples of what I have called the romance of medicine—a grim romance, it is true, but a realistic and an absorbing one. Medicine takes you down to the deep springs of those actions which appear upon the surface. Look at the men, for example, who were the prime movers in the French Revolution. How far were their inhuman actions dependent upon their own complaints? They were a diseased company—a pathological museum. Was Marat's view of life tainted by his loathsome skin disease, for which he was taking hot baths when Charlotte Corday cut him off? Was the incorruptible but bilious Robespierre the victim of his own liver? A man whose veins are green in colour is likely to take a harsh view of life. Was Couthon's heart embittered by his disfigured limbs? How many times do the most important historical developments appear to depend upon small physical causes? There is, for example, the case of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Now, how came Louis XIV., who had always held out upon this point, to give way at last to the pressure of Madame de Maintenon and his clerical advisers? The answer lay in one of his molar teeth. It is historical that he had for some months bad toothache, caries, abscess of the jaw, and finally a sinus which required operation; and it was at this time, when he was pathologically abnormal and irritable, that he took the step which has modified history.

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