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5

THE CHOLERA,

CONSIDERED

PSYCHOLOGICALLY.

BY

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" 'Tis the great art of life to manage well
The restless mind."

ARMSTRONG.

LONDON:
JOHN CHURCHILL, PRINCES STREET, SOHO.
MDCCCXLIX.

THE substance of this Pamphlet was published in the "*Morning Chronicle,*" of Sept. 13. In consequence of numerous letters which the author has received, and in compliance with the request of several friends and strangers, he has been induced to reprint his remarks, and, with some alterations and additions, to publish them in the present form.

Sussex House, Hammersmith.

THE CHOLERA,

CONSIDERED PSYCHOLOGICALLY.

In defiance of the most stringent measures of the Board of Health, coupled with the devoted, untiring zeal and unquestioned skill of the most celebrated physiologists, pathologists, and practical physicians of the day, the cholera marches onward in its sure but fatal progress, and the melancholy toll of the funeral bell, and the solemn tramp of mourners along our public streets, are almost momentarily reminding us of the fearful uncertainty of human life! The cry is, "What is to be done?" The guardians of the public health have, with praiseworthy energy, been devoting their earnest attention to the condition of the sewers and drains of the metropolis, and this, combined with their constant appeals to the public to seek medical advice in the early and curable stage of the malady, has undoubtedly been productive of great benefit.

Amidst much wailing and distress, the question asked almost simultaneously by a thousand voices is, "Can nothing else be done to stay the progress of the epidemic? Are we to sit with our arms folded, crying, 'Peace, peace, where there is no peace?'"

Without desiring for a moment to depreciate the necessity and importance of carefully examining those *physical* causes which obviously engender the malady and accelerate its advance, I may be allowed to observe that there is a higher, and perhaps more philosophical altitude, from which the subject may be viewed. The question of disease generally is to be considered in a double aspect—1, *physically;* 2, *psychologically*, or *morally*. At present, the subject of cholera has been investigated principally in relation to its PHYSICAL ASPECT. I propose to view it through another medium, and to consider whether the MORAL or PSYCHOLOGICAL bearings of the question are not entitled to grave and serious consideration.

Accustomed as I am almost daily, in the exercise of my professional avocations, to witness the fearful inroad made upon the material organization through the agency of mind, I am perhaps disposed to overrate the importance of examining, in all its relations, the influence of mental emotion, either in causing the disease or in readily predisposing the body to the action of these occult agents, which are believed, under given circumstances, to develop the epidemic

malady. The knowledge we possess of the history and peculiar character of the cholera is quite sufficient to convince us of the fact, that if the depressing passions cannot of themselves engender the disease, they certainly render the system most peculiarly and remarkably susceptible to the smallest conceivable quantity of that poison (be it what it may), which, acting upon the body, paralyses all the vital energies, and in the majority of cases sets at nought the best directed efforts of medical science and skill.

It is a well established fact that persons may be exposed for a length of time to the influence of the most virulent contagion with impunity so long as the mind remains in a fearless, tranquil, and unanxious condition; but if mental depression ensues, the contagion seizes hold of the constitution, and disease manifests itself. Mr. Madden, in his account of the plague, contained in a record of his Travels to Egypt and Turkey, when speaking of the effect of mental despondency in predisposing the body to the malady, observes, "In no other complaint is the influence so marked. The man who is apprehensive of contagion is always the person to take the disease; FEAR is the predisposing cause of plague." The same remark holds good with reference to typhus fever, small-pox, and diseases which have a malarious origin. If the mind is exposed to any depressing cause, a liability or predisposition to disease is immediately engen-

dered. In illustration of this fact, the fatality which attended our troops in the lamentable expedition to Walcheren has been referred to. It has been remarked, that whilst our troops and seamen were actively engaged in the siege and bombardment of Flushing, exposed to intense heat, heavy rains, and poisonous exhalations from the malarious soil inundated by the turbid waters of the Scheldt, scarcely a man was on the sick list—the excitement of warfare, the prospect of victory, and the expectation of booty, completely fortifying the body against all the potent causes of disease that environed the camp and the fleet. But as soon as the troops became inactive and dispirited, by the failure of the expedition, the poisonous exhalations seized hold of them, and disease, in all its frightful malignity, broke out, and created desolation in the camp. The memorable retreat of the "ten thousand Greeks" under Xenophon affords us another striking example of the influence of MENTAL ACTIVITY and HOPE in protecting the body from disease. In the terrible night that preceded the murder of Clearchus and other leaders of the phalanx, Xenophon, in his address to the troops, says, "You have at present nothing before your eyes but misfortune: if any CAN TURN THEIR THOUGHTS INTO ACTION, it would greatly encourage them." Acting on this principle, their celebrated leader converted "the torpor of despair into the energy of desperation," urging the men

to prefer death in the sanguinary, but brief and almost painless conflict with the enemy personally and collectively, to the protracted tortures that would be the inevitable consequence of captivity. "Then it was," says a modern historian, "that the tents were burnt, the carriages destroyed, the sumpter-horses slaughtered, and every unnecessary incumbrance, besides 'the soldier and his sword,' abandoned. During 215 days of almost uninterrupted and toilsome march —often in the face of the enemy—often between two enemies, and engaged in front and rear at the same moment, the army lost an uncertain, but not a great number of men—partly by the darts and arrows of the barbarians — partly by desertion — partly by drowning in the rivers, or sinking in the morasses—partly by perishing in the snows of the Armenian mountains, but not ONE BY SICKNESS! Xenophon is often very minute in his statements of losses, even describing the individual cases, the names of these individuals, and the parts of the body wounded. Only two instances of SICKNESS are put on record: one a sort of *Bulimia*, or canine appetite, produced by the cold of the snow, which was observed in a considerable number of men, but did not prove fatal. The other was an illness of twenty-four hours, which was general throughout the army, in consequence of indulgence in a kind of honeycomb, which they found at one place in Armenia in great abundance. It

produced vomiting and purging among those who ate freely, but a kind of drunken delirium in those who ate little. He also describes very minutely the almost unconquerable disposition to sleep, produced by the frigidity of the snows on the mountains near the sources of the Tigris. The army was in great jeopardy from this cause for some days, and the soldiers could hardly be induced to continue their march. Many of the rear-guard lay down, and preferred dying, or being captured by the enemy, to perseverance against the lethargic sleep that overpowered them. Xenophon was obliged to halt and repulse the enemy, to prevent these men from falling victims to the cold or to the barbarians. The number of the Greeks, at the commencement of this memorable retreat, is not stated; but, estimating it at the full complement of TEN THOUSAND, it is clear that they could not have lost above 500 men at the utmost, since they mustered, in the very last battle which they had (and in which they experienced hardly any loss) *nine thousand five hundred troops*, not including women and slaves! they never abandoned a single individual; and they had no means of carrying sick men along with them, if any considerable number existed. The fact is therefore clearly established, that no sickness, in the common acceptation of the word, occurred in this series of sufferings and privations."

Instances have occurred during the prevalence of

the present epidemic, which clearly prove that intense fear, independently of all physical causes, has produced most malignant attacks of cholera. Reasoning *à priori*, we should imagine that such might be the result.

Fear has a most certain and remarkable influence upon the mucous membrane of the bowels, and often, if long in operation, produces violent, protracted, and incurable diarrhœa. The pernicious influence of this emotion is well marked during the prevalence of all great epidemic diseases. It is specially referred to by THUCYDIDES, in his account of the Plague of Athens; and by SYDENHAM, in his "History of Epidemic Diseases." The former historian observes, that the fiercest battle had to be fought with the *dejection of mind*, which so constantly prevailed. He observes—"The mind sinking at once into despair, the sick gave themselves up without a struggle." The same fact was noticed during the existence of the plague in this country; and cases are referred to in which fear alone appeared to give rise to the disease.

Considering, then, the subject of cholera psychologically, I have no hesitation in asserting that the disease has been much aggravated, and extensively diffused by moral or mental agents. That the panic which existed both before and subsequent to the invasion of the disease has acted as a most powerful predisposing cause very few will doubt. That in some

instances the disease itself has been induced by great depression, fear, and anxiety of mind, is also capable of demonstration; but I would rather confine myself to the consideration of the depressing passions, as they are often the most certain predisposing causes of cholera. Taking this view of the matter, how necessary it is that we should adopt every legitimate mode of allaying public apprehension, and of exciting its antagonistic emotions—hope and confidence.

In proportion as the means adopted produce such results, *cæteris paribus* will the epidemic disease, which is now carrying desolation into every habitation, lessen its hold upon the population. I am much disposed to question the utility and necessity of making this matter the subject of such prominent discussion in the ordinary channels of communication. I also do not hesitate to affirm that the daily publication of the reports of cholera inquests and the numerical returns of daily deaths from the disease, coupled with the copious details extracted from the official reports of the registrars, have had, and continue to have, a most depressing, injurious, and fatal influence, increasing to an extraordinary degree the public apprehension, and engendering a fearful predisposition to the disease. There may be advantages resulting from such publicity, counterbalancing the certain evil consequences produced; but I must confess that I cannot perceive them.

In addition to the attention now paid to the physical treatment of cholera, it may be a matter worthy of consideration whether there are not some powerful MORAL REMEDIES, by means of which the epidemic may be shorn of much of its virulence? In this point I have no hesitation in observing that it is the duty, the solemn obligation of those capable of influencing opinion, to devise every means of allaying the present panic, and of diverting the public mind from the consideration of the epidemic to other and more pleasing topics. It is a question entitled to serious discussion, what are the best means within our reach to effect so desirable an object. Many may smile at the idea of attempting, by any mental measures, to create a revulsion in the public mind, and thus to destroy, if possible, all fear and apprehension. When Rome was threatened with pestilence, the public authorities marched in solemn procession to the National Temple, and means were adopted for appeasing the anger of the gods. The psychological effect of this, to our minds, superstitious proceeding, was to allay public apprehension, and to excite hope and confidence. May not we, as members of the Christian community, adopt somewhat analogous means to arrive at similar results? I would not for a moment have it supposed that I differ from those who see in the present fearful scourge the finger of an angry God chastising his children for their many transgressions against his Divine laws. Neither would

I say anything to discountenance the suggestion of setting apart a day for national prayer and humiliation. The psychological view of the question now taken tends rather to establish the importance and necessity of our prostrating ourselves before God in humble prayer that "this cup may pass away." At present, a large portion of the community are strongly impressed with the idea, that we, as a nation, are sinning greatly against Providence, and hurling defiance at His laws, by the non-adoption of a day of public fast, prayer, and humiliation. The natural, inevitable, and necessary effect of this is, to create and keep alive a considerable amount of depressing, predisposing influences arising from the consciousness of our not, as a nation, following the strict path of conscience and of duty. Were those in authority to act in conformity to the known feelings of the Christian portion of the population, much good would result.

There are other points in relation to this important matter which are entitled to serious reflection. It is a question with many whether we have not within our power effectual means of acting upon the public mind *en masse* for the purpose of creating a new turn to the current of thought, and of dispelling unnecessary fears and morbid apprehensions. God has so intimately associated the spiritual with the material portion of our organization, that He will not consider that we are slighting His dispensations, or

making light of His awful providence, if, in obedience to His will, and in conformity to the recognised laws influencing the mysterious union of mind and matter, we adopt moral or mental means for curing or preventing disease by acting upon the physical organization. Such being admitted to be a view of the question sanctioned by religion and science, it behoves us to consider whether some means might not be adopted for the purpose of abstracting the public mind from its own depressing apprehensions, thus rendering the system less liable to be acted upon by those physical agents alleged to give rise to the disease. Of course this is only suggestive. It may be entirely impracticable; but whether it be so or no, I have not the slightest doubt of the soundness of the *principle* I am advocating, and of the importance of doing our utmost to allay the present panic, and of looking somewhat beyond the mere physical means at our disposal for the prevention and cure of cholera.

We must make a strong effort to dismiss from the mind the contemplation of subjects calculated to awaken gloomy apprehensions, to depress the feelings and exhaust the nervous energy. Every legitimate mode of inducing cheerfulness and serenity of mind should be as much as possible encouraged. Constant and agreeable occupation will do much good. An effort should be made to excite a pleasurable train of thought, either by reading, conversation, or agreeable

society. The exercise of the charitable feelings, the determination to keep in abeyance all the corroding emotions of the mind, such as anger, jealousy, revenge, covetousness, and the effort to cultivate " love, peace, and good-will towards men," will be found of positive advantage in invigorating the *physique*, and thus warding off disease. It should be the duty of those, whose special position in life does not render it necessary that they should acquaint themselves with the progress of the epidemic, or inform their minds of the various remedies suggested for its cure, to abstain carefully from perusing the accounts published daily of the progress of the disease. The less the mind is permitted to dwell upon the subject, the less probability will there be of the poison having any effect upon the body. This is quite compatible with the exercise of proper prudence and precaution, and a Christian recognition of the inscrutable, but wise decrees of Providence.

We should never forget these facts : that those whose vital powers are debilitated are the most susceptible to the epidemic malady—that the depressing emotions induce this bodily condition more certainly than any other cause. A humble reliance on the will of God—a well-sustained piety and cheerfulness of mind, combined with a careful avoidance of those physical agents known to have a deleterious influence on the health, are the safest and most legitimate

means of protecting us from this terrible malady. It is our duty individually, as well as nationally, to fortify and strengthen the system, by resolutely determining not to yield to useless fears and childish apprehensions, and, as far as it is in our power, to inspire ourselves and neighbours with energy and courage, and as a powerful prophylactic agent, to cultivate

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EDITED BY

FORBES WINSLOW, M.D.

The Lancet.

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The Medical Gazette.

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LONDON: JOHN CHURCHILL, PRINCES STREET, SOHO.