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FOR THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCER.

"Sce'ſt thou not, what a deformed thief, this "faſhion is."

SHAKESPEARE.

MR. SMITH,

ALTHOUGH in your capacity of Editor, the public or the body corporate is the object of your attention, or (to ſpeak in the medical ſtyle) is the patient upon which you exerciſe your ſkill, yet it may be preſumed, that the natural body is not beneath your care; and that an eſſay tending to the benefit of the latter, may find a corner in your paper among the numerous attempts which are made to explain and promote the former, or the public intereſt.

If I am right in this conjecture, I ſhall proceed to claim the attention of your readers to a ſubject, which, tho' not entertaining, may be inſtructive, and the diſcuſſion of which (like the materials which belong to it) may be ſalutary in the operation, though unpleaſant to the taſte.

The diſcuſſion which I propoſe to make, is reſpecting the preſent mode of treating diſeaſes, which (however it might be extended) will be confined almoſt to a ſingle queſtion, to which the ſimplicity of the modern practice ſeems to have reduced the healing art.

I am not inſenſible of the raſhneſs of this undertaking—I know well the *powers* of the faculty whom I am to encounter, even when exerted with the moſt friendly motives; and my dread of falling into their hands when in health, is only inferior to that of their attacking me, when under the preſſure of ſickneſs.

I muſt not however be underſtood as levelling an indiſcriminate cenſure at the reſpectable body of phyſicians. On the contrary, I hold the profeſſion in the higheſt eſtimation. In an accompliſhed phyſician, I contemplate a man of enlarged ſcience, of liberal mind, of humane diſpoſition, of poliſhed manners, of active and indefatigable exertions, and of incorruptible integrity.—The book of nature is open to him. The courſe of his ſtudies leads him to a knowledge of the "fearful and wonderful make of man." The purſuit of remedies carries him to the mineral and vegetable kingdoms, and he diſcovers the various combinations of which their productions are ſuſceptible. And tho' the voice of miſery and anguiſh often reach his ear, to him it is given to diſpel that miſery—to ſooth that anguiſh and to reſtore the happineſs, which health alone can give.

Such might a phyſician be—but it is a height which is not eaſily attained. Years of ſtudy, application and experience ſeem to be neceſſary for the purpoſe, and it may reaſonably be doubted, whether the ſhort time which our young and adventurous doctors allot to this part of their education, is ſufficient to qualify them for ſo important a truſt.

When we conſider the degree of perfection to which the ſcience of medicine might be brought, it is lamentable to view the ſtate in which it is.

Like other ſciences it is liable to be perverted by ignorance or to be abuſed by diſhoneſty.—This might be borne. But it is dreadful to reflect that a profeſſion which embraces the whole human race, and which (as far as finite means can extend) deals out our life or our death, ſhould alſo be *the ſlave and victim of faſhion.*—That it ſhould be ſo, I deplore. That it is ſo, I ſeriouſly believe; and it is to this evil that my obſervations are intended to apply.

It may indeed be alledged that there is a *faſhion* in every thing—Learned judges have accuſed their predeceſſors of deciding according to *faſhion.*—*Faſhion* has modelled the diſcourſes, which are meant to inſtruct us in the purſuit of happineſs in the next world, and thoſe who watch over our exiſtence in this, may perhaps claim the ſame privilege. I might produce the authority of many writers, to ſhew that this fault has been heretofore attributed to the medical faculty. I ſhall not however, fatigue your readers by the trite ſtory of Doctor Sangrado, or many others that might be adduced. I ſhall appeal only to thoſe facts which have ariſen in our own times, and under our own obſervation.

To counterpoiſe the weight of this charge I ſhall be ready to admit, that many valuable improvements have taken place, both in medicine and ſurgery.—The "woundings of a Father's curſe," would not now, as in the time of Shakeſpeare, be the worſe for being *untented.* The ſuggeſtions of common ſenſe have taught us that, to heal a wound, it is not neceſſary to inflict one of greater extent and more difficult of cure; and we have diſcarded thoſe wonderful compounds, the ingredients of which were expected to detach themſelves to the different parts of the body, and to perform *En Militaire* the duties which were ſeverally allotted to them. We want only a ſteady adherence to the ſame principles, to make us reject ſyſtems which rely only on *a name*, and rules of practice which *faſhion* alone has contributed to eſtabliſh.

At one time our diſorders were all *Billious.* At another, the *Nervous* ſyſtem was in fault—In the former caſe, the apothecary followed cloſe on the heels of the preſcribing phyſician, and poured in his drugs in abundance. It was reſerved to the Doctors of the preſent day, to reduce all diſeaſes to a level—to diſregard the cauſes prediſpoſing, proximate and immediate; and by the univerſal uſe of bleeding and mercury to cure (*or kill*) all who fall into their hands. They ſeem to have realiſed the picture drawn by Moliere in his examination of a candidate for the profeſſion, *Bleedare, Purgare, et——donare*, and if he did not ſucceed—Re-Bleedare, Re-Purgare, et Re——donare.

Shall we ſubmit to be thus *patiently* drained of our blood and ſubſtance? Shall we look into theſe things, and enquire on what grounds the practice is founded?

In purſuing this enquiry it may be neceſſary to uſe terms which may not be of the moſt delicate nature; but they will be uſed as ſparingly as the ſubject will admit.

Without attempting a learned enumeration of the maladies incident to the human frame, it may be ſafely aſſerted, that in their treatment, evacuents are generally required: It is within my recollection, that, for this purpoſe antimonial preparations have been deemed the moſt efficacious, acting, either as emetics, or ſecondarily as cathartics; and alſo by promoting a greater degree of perſpiration.

They are now disused—the *fashion* of them has passed away and *calomel* has usurped their place. I shall endeavor to prove that they are the best, if not the only medicines that can be used in the disorders which arise in our climate, and that *mercurial* preparations are generally unsafe and often in the highest degree penicious.

It is however but a comparative praise which I mean to bestow—the best medicines are (like the best governments) but necessary evils and it is only adviseable to choose the least of them.

The diseases which most frequently occur amongst us, are, the intermittent, the remittent, and the continued fever; the latter of which is generally of a malignant nature, and approaches nearly to the yellow-fever, with which our large towns have been afflicted—they are frequently denominated bilious fevers, and are all attended with some deviation from the usual course and quantity of the bile. The stomach appears to be principally affected; and not only ceases to require but is unable to retain the accustomed food—the remedy for this was formerly an obvious and a natural one—by throwing out at once by an emetic the cause of the disorder—by removing the *paralysis* or *torpor* of the stomach, and by restoring to it its former tone and vigor. The *emetic tartar* is nearly certain in this operation, and frequently spends its remaining force on the intestinal canal—that, and other preparations of antimony act powerfully as sudorifics, and even by the shock of their operation carry off those obstructions which are often the causes of diseases.

In favor of *emetics* I contend, that the stomach is affected by bilious fevers to a much greater degree than the intestines, and that it is an organ of much greater strength, and less liable to be destroyed by the powers of medicine.

It is frequently said that all medicines are poisons, and the observation is a true one when we contrast them with those productions which are used for our good and can be assimilated to our substance—and if it is necessary to excite a preternatural action in any of our vessels, the attempt should be made on those which are the least liable to injury by it.—Those who are acquainted with physiology must know, how much depends on the digestion which is principally carried on by the *peristallic* motion of the intestines; and, must be satisfied that any derangement of that action is attended with the most fatal effects. But, supposing, the several *viscera* to be equal in their strength and liability to injury, it would seem that the readiest and simplest method of ejecting the cause of our complaints would naturaly be preferred. If an enemy or a troublesome inmate should be in our houses we should act more wisely in expelling him by the way that he got in, than by taking him a circuitous route through all the rooms, to effect at last the same purpose.

But, to apply to the test of experience.

I could safely appeal to every man's observation, whether, by the use of emetics, the stomach is not more immediately relieved, and the appetite more fully restored, than by the use of purgative medicines.

Those who have felt the effects of a debauch and have found their stomachs oppressed by excessive diet, or immoderate drinking, must have experienced the most immediate relief from an ejection of this kind of the cause of their disorders—an effect which is sometimes produced by those very causes without the assistance of art:—and it will scarcely be deemed proper to follow the course dictated by *nature* unless *fashion* should be sufficiently powerful to usurp her sway.

The operation of cathartic medicines, even of the most harmless kind, is not calculated to attain this useful purpose. They weaken the system without lessening the disorder, and they never produce that discharge by perspiration which is so essential in the cure of fevers. It seems indeed that by an obstinate adherence to such prescriptions, and the tree use of the lancet the unfortunate patients are quickly hurried to that *end* which they are so likely to produce.

The stomach, for want of being relieved, is unable to take in any further sustenance.

There is nothing left in the intestines from which the chyle and the blood can be formed.

The blood, (for which no renovation is provided) is sluiced from their veins, and their death is a consequence as natural as it is certain.

When I see one of those dreadful arbiters of fate armed with his lancet and his mercury it reminds me of the unfortunate Rosamond to whom queen Eleanor proffered her choice of the dagger, or the poisoned bowl. The difference is, that, to us, no choice is left, and we are obliged to encounter both.

Every fever is accompanied by an increased action of the blood vessels: this, which they denominate the arterial *action*, is the signal for repeated bleedings—and they bleed till the vessels can *act* no more. I have been informed, (though I will not say how truly) that a young physician, in reporting to his lecturers at Philadelphia the progress of a disease which had been under his management, boasted that he had by bleeding and mercury completely destroyed the fever. A regard for truth, induced him to mention (as a collateral incident) that the day after the fever was removed the patient departed also.

I have as yet formed my comparisons on those cathartics which are of the most innoxious nature. I shall proceed to shew that mercury is not attended with the same good effects, which they may in some cases produce, but that it is a medicine of the most dangerous, virulent and destructive kind. A weapon which the hand of a master only is formed to weild, and which in the hands of boys and emperics, is deadly indeed.

It is well known that mercury is peculiarly destructive to insects of all kinds; and the same powers that occasion their destruction, are believed to operate on the fluids of the human body; to destroy their consistence, and to alter their nature, and the effect which it has been found to possess as an antidote to the *virus* of certain disorders and poisons, may be traced to this cause.

It will be recollected by many, that in the preparatory steps to inoculation, mercury was formerly used with this view, and that whatever the remote consequences might have been, it seemed to deaden the malignancy of the disorder and to prevent its active effects on the system.

Mercury has also been used, and perhaps to advantage in other diseases, and particularly in those by which the circulation through the different *viscera* had been obstructed, and in which a dissolution of the obstructing matter became necessary.

It has been used (though perhaps too freely) in those disorders, which originating in vice, seemed to merit the punishment of such a cure. The patients there might have no just cause of complaint. In the pursuit of pleasure, they had braved all danger, and "from the powdering tub of infamy," they rose to reflect at leisure on the natural consequences of their folly.

To them no right might be left, to repine at the loss of teeth, the loss of hair, the discoloring of their skin and nails, and a debilitated and shattered constitution. But their betters are now brought to a level with them. The grave and circumspect citizen, and the blooming and innocent virgin, now share the same fate, & are alike the victims of this destructive poison, which in the hands of our modern physicians, stalks abroad like the Russian Swarrow, and spares neither age, sex, or condition.

It will be observed that there are two distinct modes in which it has been proposed to operate with this medicine. In the commencement of the *fashion* it was recommended as an active and strong cathartic, proper to carry off at once the redundant bile and other causes of complaint, and care was taken to prevent the use of cold water, or such exposure as might tend to impede its immediate operation, and throw it on the salival glands.

But, (as the perpetration of vice became hardened by impunity) so, our medical gentry have advanced, step by step, on the credulity of their patients, and in addition to the use of bleeding, have boldly ventured on *salivation* for the cure of the most trifling diseases,

"*Lancet in this, and pill in t'other hand,*

"*They bleed and salivate throughout the land.*"

I trangress not the bounds of truth, when I say that a physician has recommended *ptyalism* (the discharge attendant on salivation) as the best method of evacuating the bile in a remittent or bilious fever. I transgress not the bounds of truth, when I say, that another has, in a distension of the *abdomen* which a dose of salts would have removed, recommended and procured that mode of discharge, to be used (according to the military phrase) as a *diversion*, or drawing to another point the cause of complaint.

We can say with the frogs in the fable—that it may be *diversion* to them, but it is *death* to us.

There is an old observation which is frequently a true one,—that the remedy is worse than the disease; and it cannot be more fully exemplified than in those cases in which slight bilious fevers are cured by *salivation*: When I say that by this remedy, the complexion is destroyed, the hair lost, the nails discolored and the teeth loosened and decayed, I say no more than can be attested by hundreds, who bear on them the melancholy and lasting proofs of my assertion; but the frequency of the event seems to have made it familiar and to have rescued it from particular observation.

In one of the papers of the *Spectator* it is stated that in a large company in England during the time of war, an officer was giving an account of an engagement in which many lives had been lost, and was describing those scenes of horror which usually occur on such occasions; and the author remarks, that the audience seemed but little affected with so general a picture of distress: But, that, happening to mention an instance in which the parties were known, and the particular circumstances of distress enumerated, the most lively sensations were produced: We find also that *Sterne* despairing to excite sufficient commiseration for the *millions* who were born to no inheritance but slavery, took a *single captive* in order to illustrate the horrors of confinement.

Perhaps, if I can do justice to the subject, the case which I am about to describe, will interest the feelings of your readers more than any general observations.

A lady in a neighboring state had been married in early life, and had become early a widow.

Without incurring the reproach of levity, she had recovered from the first emotions of grief,—she was in the possession of youth, and beauty; and was in the enjoyment of that kind of cheerful society which might naturally lead to a second connection. The bloom of health was on her cheek, and the smile of innocence and pleasure on her lips—But, alas "the smiles no more." Going to visit a relation in the country, she was taken with an intermittent fever, and unfortunately met with a disciple of the new school, fresh from his studies at Philadelphia. His mercurial pills were ready, and in a short time a *salivation* was produced, the effects of which will never be removed. The fever indeed was gone—but, with it went also her complexion, the appearance of her youth, the strength of her constitution, and every charm which had contributed to make her the ornament of society, and the delight of her friends—and she is condemned to drag out a lingering existence, a hopeless prey to remorse and a victim to the medical *fashion* of the day.

It is certain, that we ought not to murmur at the dispensations of Providence, by which we are subject to the various maladies which precede our dissolution, and that in endeavoring at a cure, we must submit to the effects which the necessary medicines are calculated to produce: But there is in this respect a choice of evils, and I cannot conceive a situation, in which "man, so noble in reason—so infinite in faculties—so express and admirable in form and moving," becomes so loathsome an object, as when operated on by *salivation.*

I shall not be satisfied with stating, that *mercury* is unnecessary and injurious in slight complaints, but shall contend, that it is equally so in fevers of the malignant kind; and I shall hazard the opinion, that, so far from being a cure for the yellow fever, it has occasioned nearly as many deaths as the disorder itself.

I might perhaps rest for proof of the correctness of this opinion on the Bills of Mortality which have been published where this dreadful fever has prevailed, but I shall bring forward a particular instance in corroboration.

In the summer of the year 1798, in one of our large cities, a letter was published in the newspapers, as coming from two of the most eminent physicians addressed to another of the faculty.

It was stated by them, that in their practice in the city and in the hospitals, upwards of four thousand persons had died; and that they had tried every prescription which their knowledge and experience could suggest, and they conclude with this memorable question, "*Perhaps an emetic might be of service?*"—Gracious heaven! Thousands had died, under the prevailing practice, and yet a medicine which had heretofore been so generally used in fevers of the most infectious kind, had never been tried.

It appeared by the same paper, that the physician to whom the letter was addressed, admitted in his reply that he had found *emetics* useful, though without giving up the efficacy of his favorite remedies, bleeding and mercury.

I shall not here enter into a detail of those symptoms of the yellow fever, which are so generally known, and which seem so strongly to point out that course of treatment which I have endeavored to recommend; but shall leave them for the reflection of those whose duty it is to consider the subject, and of those whose situation may expose them to the danger of contracting the disease.

I am not so uncharitable as to believe that any physician would knowingly or wantonly adopt a practice destructive to the lives of his fellow creatures, or would be wilfully negligent in his profession; but I must believe that many of them are prevented from the exercise of their own judgments, according to the dictates of science and of common reason; and are led away by *fashion* to sanction opinions and hypotheses which on proper reflection they would be ready to condemn.

I have only further to observe, that whatever appearance of levity there may be in some of the foregoing remarks, the opinions which I have stated are founded on the fullest conviction of their propriety, and are suggested with a view of calling the attention of the public to a subject in which the preservation of their health and of their lives is so deeply involved.

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