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What is Opium?

BY DR. F. A. FLUCKIGER, OF BERN.

This question, in our days, will certainly be looked at as perfectly idle, both by practical pharmacutists and chemists. The drug, indeed, is well known, and has been universally used since the earliest time, in fact for twenty centuries at least; while to no other product of the vegetable kingdom has so astonishing an amount of excellent chemical research been devoted since the days of that glorious discovery of a modest Hanoverian Apothecar, who the first evolved the idea that there are bodies existing which are thoroughly analogous to ammonia or potash, yet composed of organic elements. Every one looking over the rich chemical literature of opium published from the time of Sertürner (1816) to the recent delicate investigations of Smith of Edinburgh, or Hesse of Stuttgart, may well be satisfied with a mass of analytical facts so interesting, useful and complete. The present text-books, indeed, display a very satisfactory knowledge of this important drug, albeit they leave a little doubt regarding some of its numerous constituents.

Yet, I venture to say, that science is far from having an exact idea of the nature of opium. The endeavors of so many eminent chemists having failed to supply a thorough acquaintance with the drug, I cannot hope to fill up at once this defect, but merely wish to make it evident, and contribute some facts concerning the composition of opium, which have escaped the attention of former investigators.

Opium contains a dozen of more or less decidedly alkaline bodies, among which morphine and narcotine occur in the largest proportion. The former constitutes very rarely more than 20 per cent. of the dried drug and usually not more than 12 to 15 per cent.; the narcotine on an average about 5 to 6 per cent.* The whole of the other alkaloids, namely, pseudomorphine, codeina, thebaine, papaverine, rhœadine, narceine, kryptopine, and opianine, may be estimated at not more than 1 per cent. Thus the alkaloids amount at best to only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the weight of the dried juice; and meconic and thebotatic acid, and meconine to nearly $5\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. We may say, in fact, that allowing for the considerable discrepancies existing in the composition of opium, all the peculiar bodies found in it do not exceed one-third of its weight.

Now, what is the bulk of the remaining 66 per cent.?—However interesting, however important, both practically and scientifically, the first one-third may be, yet to have a satisfactory idea of opium, we require also to know exactly the nature of the other two-

* I had the opportunity of examining a German opium from Blitz, Erfurt, which yielded 11 per cent. of narcotine.

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Toronto, May, 1868.

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