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Priest's Theory of Leprosy

Brother Serapion Van Hooft, the young man who, following in the footsteps of Father Damien, went to the leper settlement of Molokai in 1885, to join the little band of men and women who have consecrated their lives on the altar of God and humanity, has become a leper. The story has already gone around the world, attracting the attention of bacteriologists and leper experts everywhere and calling forth many inquiries as to the circumstances under which he contracted the disease. Brother Serapion, according to Father Joseph, of Kalawao, Molokai, contracted leprosy by absorbing into his system the bacilli of the disease during his nightly visits to the patients of the Baldwin Home Hospital. This conclusion of the Father—himself a leper student of many years' experience—will, if correct, upset many accepted theories and, at all events, is sure to bring up again one of these important questions with which science has been struggling unsuccessfully for a long time: What is leprosy? What are the primary causes that are responsible for it? Is it really incurable? Leprosy is a disease which seems to defy all ordinary rules both in the manner of its appearance and development. It shows at first by discoloration—white spots on the lower limbs usually. In the case of Brother Serapion this discoloration appeared upon his right arm, rendering it very weak, and paralyzing two of three fingers of the right hand. Then comes a depression of the muscles, a wasting that continues until all the fingers bend backward, shrivel, and drop off. The face takes on a bluish pallor. Blotches appear above the eyes. The ears become elongated, the diseased portion sometimes being four or five inches in length. One of the most curious phases of leprosy is that, although contagious, it does not seem to transmit itself through the blood of the persons so afflicted. For instance, there are at the Bishop Home, Kalawao, and the Baldwin Home, Kalawao, a number of children of both sexes, born at the settlement of leprosy parents—some afflicted with the worst form of the disease—but who themselves are free from it. The writer knows personally three women whose fathers and mothers were lepers. These women were born at the leper settlement, where they remained until their eighteenth year. Then, the doctors declaring them to be non-lepers, they were sent to the Kapiolani Home, in Honolulu, in which institution such girls may remain, in charge of the good Franciscan Sisters, until they have made plans for their future life. They may marry, go to work or remain at the home, at their pleasure. Here again is another peculiar case, showing the erratic pranks of leprosy. There is—or was until a short time ago—living in the city of Honolulu a woman who had been married three times. Each of her husbands eventually became a leper and died at the settlement. The woman never had so much as the slightest suspicion of the disease.

In order to get the best information obtainable upon the subject, the writer secured a permit from the Health Committee of the Hawaiian Legislature to accompany its members on their periodical visit to Molokai, which occurs once every two years. During the stay of the party upon that island of misery, desolation and death I secured a horse and went to interview Father Joseph Juliotte, the parish priest of Kalawao. Father Joseph has been at the leper settlement many years and is in charge of the church hallowed by the heroic labors of Father Damien. In his humble rectory he has fitted up a complete bacteriological laboratory. With the help of the territorial government—which does more for its unfortunate wards than any other government upon the face of the earth—and the assistance of kind friends the world over the good priest has become the happy possessor of a set of instruments with which he is able to prosecute his researches and studies. Microscopes, microtomes, photomicrographs and photographic implements of the most delicate make and precision may be found on the table of this remarkable laboratory. Neatly arranged upon the shelves are numerous bottles, labelled and classified, containing all sorts of preparations, drops of blood, whole human fingers and toes, flies, mosquitoes, bits of flesh—all preserved in diverse kinds of alcohol and in a normal solution of physiological salt. With the aid of a good mi-

crotope it is possible to study the most minute details of these exhibits, and it is worth going miles by land and sea for the privilege of witnessing this scientific priest conduct his experiments and listen to his interesting if technical views upon that disease which, so far, has succeeded in baffling the learned members of the medical fraternity. Father Joseph laughs to scorn the theory that the fish-eating propensities of the Hawaiian people is one of the greatest means of the spreading of leprosy. With a twinkle in his wonderfully blue and intelligent eyes he meets the theory with the question, "Why, then, is it, since the Hawaiians have been eaters of fish for centuries, that the disease did not make its appearance in the islands until 1863, when it was introduced therein by Chinese coolies?" And when one comes to think of it, the allegation does seem a little curious.

"But I will tell you," continued the priest, "what my opinion on the subject is. There are several things that contribute to the prevalence of leprosy. First, you will never see a person of clean habits and living in clean surroundings contract leprosy unless he should live among lepers. Fifth, then, is one of the agents of contamination. 'Awa' is another. You know how awa is made by the natives. They take awa roots, pound them to pulp and place them in a large bowl, around which a number of them sit and into which they cast their saliva. This, when it ferments, produces the liquor so favorite among Hawaiians and Chinese, but which is their most relentless enemy. Then, again, certain diseases which have followed the advent of civilization in the islands have also contributed their part. An acute form of one of these diseases has played havoc in a race virgin to the disease. But all these agents to-day have done their worst. Mosquitoes, in my opinion, are to be held responsible for a number of the new cases. You know that the microscope and microtome are the great agents used to determine the nature of ailments; with their aid it is possible to go to the cause itself of the disorder—the bacillus found in the interior parts of an individual who may be sure that that individual is a leper; this is logic; but so long as the bacilli has not penetrated into the interior the individual is not a leper. And after many years of experiments, study and observation I give it as my deliberate opinion that leprosy is inoculated by mosquitoes and by the organs of respiration as easily and as often as by any other means.

"The other day I was painting the foot of a leper—or, rather, I was just finishing a wax model of the foot of a leper. And while I was busily engaged in my work there came a mosquito, which chose a large red spot on the foot of the patient upon which to alight, and from which it promptly proceeded to absorb material for a good meal. Quickly I seized the intruder between two fingers and made it disgorge upon a piece of sterilized glass a good part of its ill-gotten gain. With my instruments I made a careful examination, and there, true enough, on that piece of glass could be seen very distinctly the bacilli of leprosy. Of course this was nothing new to me, but I like to repeat my experiments whenever possible, so that the results achieved may be beyond the possibility of a doubt. I have examined thus quantities of mosquitoes, swollen with the blood of lepers, and in every case have reached the same results, which have led me to the opinion that the bacilli of leprosy is inoculated by mosquitoes. Before this conclusion is accepted by experts and writers of scientific books it will be necessary, no doubt, to prosecute experiments more numerous and convincing, but nevertheless I hold to the conclusion just formulated, based upon personal researches and experiments, and shall continue to do so.

"To assure myself that the bacilli is also absorbed by the breathing organs I prepared a sterilized glass containing a small quantity of not-

mal solution. In this solution I placed a rubber tube, also sterilized. Then, having covered the glass, I requested a leper to breathe repeatedly upon the tube. When I analyzed the contents of the glass I found there, beyond any doubt, the bacilli of leprosy. Following the same experiment and as a complement thereof, I scraped my tongue with a needle of platinum, sterilized. Studying carefully the little cells which adhered to the needle, I found there also the telltale bacilli. I repeated it in my nose with the same result. Undoubtedly these experiments must be often repeated, at different days and different hours. What I have done, so far, is not sufficient, perhaps, for a conclusive scientific demonstration; but I believe that my theory that the bacilli of leprosy is inoculated by mosquitoes, by the breathing organs, and transmitted by the atmosphere, will prove to be a correct one. "Here at the settlement no one doubts but that we are surrounded by bacteria. It is in the air, in the clothing, in the pores of the body. It is easy, certainly, for the bacilli to pass from the exterior to the interior of the human organism. A little scratch will suffice for the transmitter, and in my opinion it is thus that Brother Serapion contracted the disease. When he was making his nightly visits to the hospital to see if his services were needed by any of the inmates the foul smell that pervaded the atmosphere provoked frequent vomiting of blood, which goes a long way to prove that there must have been some internal abrasion. It is through this abrasion that in all probability the bacilli entered into his internal organs."

It may be said here, what Father Joseph failed to mention, that whenever he or Father Maxim, of Kalawao, officiate at Mass in the church they are compelled to make short but frequent visits to the outside of the building in order to breathe a little pure air, the atmosphere in the church being so foul as to result in suffocation for a non-leper. The theory advanced by Father Joseph, and now made public for the first time, is a novel one, but well worthy of the serious consideration of the members of the medical fraternity.

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"But, Bud, you must, I am mother and I am the oldest."

The little chap straightened himself up, and stamped his little foot, and said, "Well, Ethel, if I must, I won't."

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