

Selected Articles.

MEDICAL MYTHS.

Among the many wise sayings accredited to Abraham Lincoln is the following: "You can fool all the people part of the time; you can fool part of the people all the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time."

A man who has been in the practice of medicine for a number of years might feel inclined to take exceptions to the truth of this statement. Nowhere does the credulity of the people seem so obvious as in the readiness with which a new and startling discovery in medicine finds acceptance among the, apparently, most enlightened. It is true that among a certain class, who view with a degree of skepticism, born of apathy or indifference, all that pertains to medicine, we may find exceptions to the rule. Yet, even among these, when the matter is brought directly home to them in the form of a personal affliction, skepticism gives way to eager credulity, whenever hope, from whatever source, is offered them. People are quick to believe what they *want* to believe, and reason and argument are alike useless in such cases. It is not among the ignorant and uncultivated alone that we may expect to find the credulous. All down the ages of history, charlatanry and medical buffonery have found their most ardent supporters and adherents among the cultivated classes. In support of this statement, I will adduce the example of the great Berkley, the most profound metaphysician and elegant writer of his age, who claimed for his tar-water: "A preparation made by stirring a gallon of water with a quart of tar—all the virtues of a panacea." According to him, "It would prevent small-pox, and was a cure for impurities of the blood, coughs, pleurisy, peripneumony, erysipelas, asthma, indigestion, cachexia, hysterics, dropsy, mortification, scurvy, and hypochondria." You will notice the last word of this wonderful list, hypochondria, which might, with a little more truth, have been made to begin and end it. Certainly a striking and sad instance of how foolish even a great and learned man may become, when he ventures to speak with authority on subjects of which he is entirely ignorant. Berkley was a great and good man, but in his effort to be humane, and to give the world the benefit of what he considered a great discovery, he made himself ridiculous. There is something quite *naïve* in the following statement of the virtues of this water: "It is now to be lamented that our Insulars, who act and think so much for themselves, should yet, from grossness of air and diet, grow stupid, or dote sooner than other people, who by virtue of elastic air, water-drinking, and light food, preserve their faculties to extreme old age, an advantage which

may perhaps be approached, if not equalled, even in these regions, by tar-water, temperance, and early hours." Bishop Berkley might well have learned and laid to heart that first and greatest of the aphorisms of Hippocrates, that "Life is short, art is long, the occasion fleeting, experience fallacious, and judgment difficult." There are many Berkleys in the world, men, and women, too, whose cultivation and intelligence none would care to dispute, who imagine that the positions of prominence which they occupy entitle them to an expression of their views on matters outside their field of observation. It would be well for many to remember the fable of the two asses, one of which was laden with bags of salt, and the other with a cord of wood. They came to a stream, and the ass with the burden of salt bags entering the stream, the salt was quickly dissolved, and the ass came out relieved of his load. He then counselled the other ass to do likewise, but the wood absorbed the moisture, and, the load becoming too heavy, the poor ass sank beneath it and was drowned. The moral of this fable is obvious, and shows the danger of making too wide an application of a single experience. It is this tendency of the human mind, to argue from insufficient data, to deduce erroneous conclusions from false hypotheses—in other words, to be illogical; that is the greatest stumbling-block in the way of the progressive thinker in medical or any other field of science.

How many hundreds of years ago medicine might have evolved from the uncertainties of purely speculative philosophy to the dignity of an experimental science, but for the trammels to which it was subjected from the ignorance and superstition of mankind, it is hard to say. Certain it is, that over two thousand years ago there lived a man of such profound insight into the laws of nature, and knowledge of mankind and his diseases, that such of his works as have been preserved to us, may be, and *are*, still read with profit. This was the divine Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and even his great name must come down to us with the smirch of charlatanry upon it, for it is reported that, among his other great works, he cured King Perdiccas of Macedonia of love-sickness. The immortal Galen, the greatest anatomist until Versalius, unless it be Aristotle, that ever lived, owed his fame as a practitioner in Rome to the success of a certain remedy, a sort of cure-all, of which he was the discoverer.

It is this great eagerness on the part of most people to be humbugged, a trait not confined to the American people alone, but to all the descendants of mother Eve, that has made charlatanry the vice of otherwise exalted characters. Man can not live on the revelations of science alone, and unless there be some practical application of such knowledge, "*quid bonum*" cries the *vox populi*, and will have none of it. Even the great