

MEDICAL INSTRUCTOR.

OF THE COMPARATIVE POWERS OF MINERAL, AND VEGETABLE MEDICINES.

There seems to be an universal disposition, among all descriptions of medical quacks, to abuse, decry, and most foully slander, all medicines obtained from the mineral, while they at the same time extol the properties of those belonging to the vegetable kingdom. To accomplish an unworthy, or unlawful, purpose with the community, it often, if not always, becomes necessary to inflame existing prejudices, and where they are wanting, to excite, and foster such as may best subserve the desired end. That there has been a general prejudice against a few of the mineral medicines—some remains of which are yet too frequently met with—past experience bears ample testimony. Calomel is the great bug-bear—the raw head and bloody bones—that has been used by designing knaves, and others who deserve compassion for their weakness, to frighten those who have been selected as fit subjects for imposition. With Calomel, all minerals have been dragged in, and receive the same sentence of condemnation, for no reason but belonging to the same family—for being found in bad company; or, perhaps, for another reason, deemed sufficient by the ignorant; viz. that they are medicines of great power; and, therefore, are capable of doing injury. That medicines of the mineral kingdom have done mischief by not having been judiciously administered, may be true; and that a prejudice should arise in consequence, is very natural. Such misfortunes have been turned, by quacks, to their own account; they have raised a hue and cry against all minerals, and in the hope of throwing ridicule upon the profession they term us, "Mineral Doctors." They cry *mal dog*, and set out upon the chase; and happy are they if they can succeed in deluding a few weak sisters to join with them in the pursuit, and chime in with their cry. The reason of this uncompromising hostility on the part of quacks, and some of their disciples, to mineral medicines, is, that they are efficacious when employed—and that when misused, they do injury. The same argument, if such a notion can be dignified with the appellation of argument, can be applied to any thing that we eat or drink; or to any power that we employ in the ordinary concerns of life. Fire destroys our dwellings—water drowns us—steam boilers explode, and destroy life—horses take fright and run away—excess in eating the simplest viands, produces disease and death; and, therefore, according to the logic of quackery, all these things are to be condemned. If medicines have been misapplied, it would be the dictate of true wisdom to learn a lesson from error, and profit from misfortune, rather than condemn the thing for a fault which justly belongs to the hand that administered, or the head that prescribed it.

And if medicines obtained from the mineral kingdom possess such tremendous potency, pray what are vegetable medicines? If minerals are poisonous are vegetables any the less so?

With the word vegetable, are associated many delicious articles of food; and when we are told of a vegetable pill, the idea, perhaps insensibly occurs, that it is something eatable. "Vegetables are nutritious, they are wholesome articles of food; every body eats them, we eat them every day—these are vegetable pills—no minerals here, no poison—they can't hurt you, because they are vegetable." This is the language and logic of empiricism; and with those who are not at the trouble of thinking for themselves—who close their eyes, and swallow whatever is thrust into their mouths—it is believed with the greatest sincerity. Let the pill be what it may—whether it be the most active, acrid, irritating poison, so it only be called "vegetable," no further questions are asked, and nothing more is desired. Before we proceed further on this subject, we will just state here, that nothing of the mineral kingdom possesses any thing of the activity, or power, that vegetables do—that while minerals require hours, or perhaps, days, to produce fatal effects, vegetables will cause the same result in a far less space of time, or even in a few moments.

We shall now mention a few of the most active of the mineral medicines, and some of those of the vegetable class, and the reader can judge for himself which possesses the greatest activity—in other words which are the most poisonous.

Arsenic. This is, occasionally, prescribed in various diseases, and is one of the most violent of the mineral poisons. In Beck's Medical Jurisprudence, the earliest time of which he speaks of death from taking arsenic is "five, six, or ten hours;" and this is probably the shortest period at which it can take place. It kills by exciting an intense inflammation of the mucous membrane lining the throat and the whole alimentary canal, which terminates in mortification. Death may ensue without this inflammation; but this is its general operation.

Mercury. The most active and poisonous of the preparations of this metal is *corrosive sublimate*; but many others may, if too freely administered, induce diseases that may in a short time, or after weeks or months of suffering, terminate in death. *Corrosive sublimate* destroys life, according to Dr. Christison, in "ordinary cases, in from twenty-four to thirty-six hours;" but it may produce death much sooner.

Antimony. Against this remedy there was once so strong a

prejudice that the faculty of Paris procured an edict of the French Parliament prohibiting the use of all its compounds; and they were not restored to favor till one of the kings was cured by its means. Its use was again permitted in 1666.

Tartar emetic may produce death, but not as speedily as corrosive sublimate, or arsenic; it acts by exciting irritation and inflammation. Other preparations of antimony produce the same effect as tartar emetic, though in a much less degree.

Copper. This mineral is but little used, in any of its forms, as an internal remedy. It may produce death within twenty-four hours. It acts as an irritant and causes inflammation.

Zinc. The sulphate of zinc, or white vitriol, is occasionally used as an internal remedy, and is capable of destroying life in the same manner as the one last named.

Nitrate of Silver, Chloride of Gold, and Subnitrate of Bismuth, are irritating poisons, and cause death. They are seldom used internally.

Iron. The Sulphate and Muriate, are irritating poisons, and may destroy animal life in twenty-six hours.

Lead. Only one preparation of this mineral, the acetate, or sugar of lead, is used in medical practice; and those who have used it most deny its ever producing, or being capable of producing unpleasant results.

To this catalogue may be added *Sulphuric, Nitric, and Murialic acids*; and these constitute the most active mineral remedies in the practice of the healing art. Let us look now at the VEGETABLE REMEDIES, which are said to be so very harmless, and which, at the same time, are capable of destroying life.

Oxalic Acid. This acid exists in the common sorrel. In its medicinal preparation it has destroyed life in ten minutes. It operates like the other irritating poisons; and, if not taken in sufficient quantities to produce death, it may leave a diseased state of the alimentary canal similar to that induced by the mineral poisons.

Prussic Acid. This is the most deadly poison known. One or two drops has killed a strong dog in a few seconds. Hufeland relates that a man, about to be taken up as a thief, took prussic acid, staggered a few steps and fell. The pulse could not be felt, and there was no trace of breathing. In a few minutes there was a single violent expiration.

Orfila states that a servant girl swallowed a small glass-full of alcohol saturated with prussic acid. In two minutes she fell dead.

A chemist in Paris applied a bottle of the acid to his nose. Alarming symptoms immediately commenced, which continued throughout the day.—(Beck.)

Bryony. "Pyl mentions a fatal case from taking two glasses of an infusion of the root to cure an ague."

Elatarium. (Wild cucumber.) This is so violent a cathartic that medical men seldom use it.

A case is related in the Boston Medical Magazine, and quoted by Dr. Beck, of a female in that city who took six pills of elatarium and rhubarb by the advice of a quack, making in all, 2½ grains of the extract of elatarium, and 16 of rhubarb. She died in thirty-six hours after taking the last pill.

Colocynth. (Bitter Apple.) This produces violent and incessant vomiting and purging, and death in twenty-four hours.

Castor Oil. The seeds from which this oil is extracted are capable of producing inflammation, ulceration, and death.

Croton Oil. A half a drop of this operates as a violent cathartic. Two or three drops rubbed over the skin of the abdomen will also cause purging.

Jalap in large doses is an acrid poison.

Savin. This excites inflammation and causes death.

Poison Oak. (Ivy.) When applied to the skin this excites a violent inflammation accompanied with an eruption of pustules. We have seen its effects remain in the system for years.

Poison Sumach is still more deleterious than the last named vegetable. It almost equals in virulence the Upas-Tree; for it causes inflammation of the face and eyes, terminating in blindness by only handling it, or being in a room where it is burning on the fire.

Lobelia. (Indian tobacco.) An acrid poison. Horses and cattle are killed by it; and it often destroys life in the hands of botanic quacks.

Opium. This drug and its various preparations belong to the class of narcotic poisons. They cause death in a few hours. Every one knows that the habit of taking opium acts upon the system like a slow poison, destroying the health, undermining the strength, annihilating the mental faculties, and rendering the individual a mere vegetative animal—incapable of thinking, and scarcely of moving. It is incredible to what extent this drug may be taken by those who have been long accustomed to its use. A single grain is an ordinary dose when taken medicinally; and the effects of this remain for twenty-four hours or upwards. But, after a time, the quantity may be increased to drams, or to an ounce, and even to a large amount still—and this is persevered in for years, perhaps, before the system finally succumbs to its poisonous influence. It is related of the celebrated Coleridge, that, for a long time, he took daily a pint of laudanum; this is

equivalent to one ounce of solid opium, and a pint of ardent spirits. It is stated by Madden in his travels in the East that a regular opium eater, seldom lives to be more than thirty years of age.

Hyoasciaum. (Henbane.) A narcotic poison; and like opium kills in a few hours.

Solanum. (Nightshade.) A narcotic poison.

Strong Scented Lettuce. The same as the last named.

Cherry Laurel, Peach Blossoms and Leaves, and bitter almonds are poisons. Their deleterious property being the prussic acid which they contain.

Wild Cherry, and Black Cherry, both contain the prussic acid and occasionally kill animals.

Wild Orange is poisonous, and cattle that feed on its leaves are killed.

Bitter Almonds. The essential oil destroyed a cat in five minutes.

Peach Kernels. These are distilled for the purpose of impregnating the *noyau cordial*. Beck says the late Duke of Lorraine nearly lost his life by swallowing a small quantity of the liquor.

Belladonna. (Deadly nightshade.) Very properly named *deadly*. A detachment of one hundred and eighty French soldiers ate of the berries of this plant, many of whom died.

The following articles are ranked by Dr. Beck, in his Medical Jurisprudence, among the poisons; and he gives instances of fatal results from the use of each one.

Datura Stramonium. (Thorn Apple.)

Nicotiana Tabacum. (Tobacco.)

Conium Maculatum. (Hemlock.)

Cicuta Virosa. (Water Hemlock.)

Cicuta Maculata. (Snake Weed.—American Hemlock.)

Enanthe Crocata. (Hemlock dropwort. Dead tongue.)

Ethusa Cynapium. (Common fool's parsley.)

Chaerophyllum Sylvestre. (Wild Chervil.)

Sium Latifolium. (Procumbent water-parsnip.)

Aconitum Napellus, (Monkshood, Wolfsbane, Aconite.)

Helleborus Niger. (Black hellebore.)

Veratrum Album. (White hellebore.—Indian poke.)

Colchicum Autumnale. (Meadow Saffron.)

Digitalis Purpurea. (Purple Foxglove.)

Scilla Maritima. (Squill.)

Ipecacuanha.

Ruta Graveolens. (Rue.)

Anagallis Arvensis. (Meadow pimpernel.)

Aristolochia Clematitis. (Common Birthwort.)

Nerium Oleander. (Common Oleander.—Rose Bay.)

Asclepias Gigantea. (Milkweed.)

Mercurialis Perennis. (Mountain Mercury.—Dog's Mercury.)

Strychnos Nux-Vomica. (Vomica Nut.—Quaker Buttons.) Sometimes called "hop up." It is used to poison dogs, and kills in a very short time.

Strychnos Ignatii. (Bean of St. Ignatius.) Its operation is similar to *nux-vomica*.

Laurus Camphora. (Camphor.)

Cocculus Indicus. (Indian Cockle.)

Coriaria Myrtifolia. (Myrtle leaved Sumach.)

(Mushrooms.)

Secal Cornutum. (Ergot.—Spurred Rye.)

(Spurred Maize.—Indian Corn.)

(Disensed Wheat.)

(Darnel.)

(Alcohol.)

The essential oils of tansy, winter-green, cedar, and others of this class.

There is also obtained from the common potato vine, by evaporating the expressed juice, a most powerful narcotic, which is used as a substitute for opium, and which, doubtless, is capable of producing death in no very large dose. There is a narcotic principle in the *hop* also, deleterious, and fatal to life.

A very active cathartic is obtained from the common butternut. The catalogue of poisons, and active remedial agents, belonging to the vegetable kingdom, might be increased to infinity; and the one here given, though somewhat extensive, is extremely limited.

It has not been our intention, by presenting this, to frighten the reader by showing him that *medicine* is but another name for *poison*. But we did intend to teach him that the cry in favour of "vegetable" medicine was the song of the syren; and we hope he has learned that "vegetables" are not the innocent, harmless things that some persons would fain make the people believe. They are as useful and as valuable as any medicinal agents; and to prescribe them requires great skill and more science than usually falls to the lot of an ignorant empiric.

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