

Open Mail

Primitive Science.

Sir:—Dr. Sambon, in his article last month in *The Public Health Journal*, suggests that the agency of rats and insects in spreading disease was known in remote antiquity. One is always prepared to hear that some late discovery of science was familiar to the Greeks, and those most competent to judge are least inclined to dismiss the assertion with a laugh. In this case, however, the evidence adduced seems rather interesting, perhaps, than convincing, for the most part. The divine animals of Egypt formed such a large and miscellaneous collection of zoology that to suppose the cat, hawk and snake were included because they prey on rats may be thought a hazardous assumption. Egyptologists attribute the veneration of the scarabæus to a motive less practical, but far more dignified, than the grub-eating habit of its larvæ. The use of mosquito nets may well have been due to a mere human longing for comfort and peaceful rest. Miss Jane Harrison's learned and ingenious *Prolegomena* suggests other reasons for the adoption of a serpent as the symbol of health. And house-holders in the Far East to this day cherish harmless snakes in the dwelling to keep down rats without any thought of combating disease — terrifying are the noises those useful reptiles make in the small hours to a newcomer unwarned!

It does not follow, however, that Egyptians and Greeks had not remarked a mysterious connection betwixt rats and fleas and plague. Mediæval regulations dealing with the epidemic, lately published, show that the civic authorities who framed them recognized this danger; and they knew little on such matters beyond the hints handed down from classic time. Indeed, there is reason to think that some savage peoples nowadays have more than a suspicion of facts which modern science has proved. In the earliest of his books, Richard Burton mentions that the Somalis told him the dreaded fever of those parts is caused by mosquito bites. The statement was positive. Burton naturally supposed that, if there was any truth in it, they mistook

a coincidence for a cause—the fever is worst when mosquitoes are most troublesome. So he explained the case. "First Footsteps in Africa" was published in the forties. At the present time we know that the Somalis were right, whether consciously or no. Sir Henry Blake, when Governor of Ceylon, a few years ago, read a paper before the Asiatic Society, in which he alleged that Cingalese books of the sixth century name various classes of mosquito and distinguish those which produce the different forms of fever. In a recent work on Haussaland, the missionary author, whose name I am sorry to forget for the moment, declares that the native treatment of hydrophobia there is the same "in principle" as Pasteur's. We do not know how far the gentleman was qualified to judge, but the process must be remarkable, at any rate.

The beginning of every science is a marvel which grows more surprising the more one reads and thinks. But that of medicine is most wonderful of all. How did men learn to choose the particular herb or substance which would best relieve a particular malady? All races intelligent enough to see the difficulty have solved it by assuming a revelation—some God-instructed mortals. Even the negro supposes that his medicine man is inspired, to put it roughly. We cannot accept that explanation, and so we are left to credit that each discovery was made by experience. But how many generations of patient thoughtful men — rather women, perhaps — must have gathered the fragments of knowledge! And how hazardous the experiments must have been! Some 25 years ago an Englishman found great relief from a drug, new to the profession then, salicine. He learned that it was extracted from willow bark. The information interested his old housekeeper, for an infusion of willow bark had been the village remedy for rheumatism time out of mind. So it is in other places. I understand that, while various barks are useful, that of willow is best. Did the primeval practitioner try them all? But his reason for trying any is