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LECTURES

ON SOME

DISEASES OF THE SKIN,

DELIVERED AT THE HÔPITAL ST. LOUIS,

By BARON ALIBERT.

THE family of diseases, the history of which I proceed to sketch, has become very prevalent in the present age. I shall trace the nature of a great number of morbid phenomena which show themselves in all periods of time, in every rank, and under all the conditions of civilization. I have made strenuous and manifold efforts to apply the method of the naturalists to the classification of these phenomena. In this attempt I have endeavoured to describe the Hôpital St. Louis, as the botanist describes a country or a garden.

The emblematical tree of the family of "fevers" was planted by Torti. I have attempted to rear that of "Dermatose diseases." I would fain realize the wish of Sydenham and of the most illustrious observers, being fully convinced that all the forms of morbid alteration which show themselves in the succession of living beings, may be re-united, or separated into distinct groups, according to their analogies or dissimilar attributes. By the term "group," we here mean, a collection more or less considerable of phenomena, which we appreciate by comparison, in order to place their attributes or characters in a more prominent and evident position. From each of these groups several "genera" proceed, which we arrange methodically in our minds as if they were organized bodies. By "genus,"

again, we mean a principal fact, a primary and fertile truth, whence the "species" necessarily emanate. Perhaps we shall even be enabled to point out the connexion between these ramifying branches, and divide from their relations facts which will not be devoid of advantage in the arrest or diminution of the destructive influences of the maladies in question.

Every investigation is facilitated and accelerated by method. It imparts attraction to every doctrine. It is a pleasure to distribute facts according to their greatest affinities. But in order to apprehend their concatenation well, and to understand correctly their natural sequence, it is important to distribute the materials of our knowledge and to study them in analogous divisions. It is important, too, to proceed in the first place to the exposition of the phenomena, the re-union of which interests us by analogy in physiognomy. In fine, in a study wherein order is our only guide, we must arrest our steps awhile before the peristyle of the science, so that we may enter its recesses and mysteries with the greater advantage.

FIRST GROUP.

ECZEMATOUS DERMATOSES.

Nothing seems to be of greater importance than the grouping apart the alterations which constitute the primitive result of the inflammatory condition of the dermis, and nothing more useful than to separate these from the "exanthemata," properly so called. In fact, they ordinarily seem but little connected with the morbid disposition of the interior instruments of life. All the disorders they excite occur with different intensity in the different tissues which concur in the physical composition of the skin.

The development of the eczematous "dermatoses" has been justly compared to

the effects produced by the alterative action of fire; for in the first degree of these affections there is intense heat and pain in every respect analogous to that resulting from the material application of that element; subsequently we see the epidermis lifted up, vesications which give issue to a serous humour, suppurating pustules, &c. &c. Later still, if the morbid causes become more intense, there is erosion, loss of substance, and ulceration. Its mechanical influence then shows itself as violently as that of fire, it acts with the same subtlety, with the like effervescence. The coagulation of the albuminous fluids, the flaming redness, and the tumefaction of the parts attacked, are so many phenomena corroborating this analogy, of which the ancients also have spoken. The majority of patients attacked with inflammation say themselves, that they are a prey to a burning pain as if they were in a furnace. Look at what is suffered by means of the development of pemphix, zoster, &c. Nay more, we observe in these diseases the same progression as in objects in process of consumption by superabundance of caloric. I have seen in the Hôpital St. Louis cases of erythema which gave the skin the dryness and reddish colour of scorched parchment. I have seen patients whose hands seemed as if they had been roasted and blackened by the heat of a furnace; in certain cases of erysipelas one would think the flesh had been boiled. Many additional illustrations might be given of this occasional *igneous* state of the animal economy. The majority of the eczematous dermatoses are, moreover, accompanied by a fever, in consequence of which incalescence is experienced, and, as has been very well observed, a sort of despumation of the fluids apparently directed from the centre to the circumference.

Thus the human body is essentially the producer of the excessive caloric which consumes it; but there is nothing in this fact which need astonish the physiologist or the physician. The synochæ which are kindled beneath the fiery sky of the tropics, the spontaneous combustions of the general organization itself, and the partial "burnings" which take place in certain viscera, are phenomena at the present day susceptible of easy explanation. Every being which respire is rigorously impregnated with the matter of fire, and the fable of Prometheus stealing the celestial flame is but the faithful emblem of this primary condition of life.

The skin is a mixed organ, and most complicated in its wonderful structure. Eminently endowed with nervous sensi-

bility, it is singularly subject to hyperemic infiltration. It is frequently seen injected with the blood in different points of its surface. But what is most remarkable is the frequent isolation of this phlogistic disposition, when by a species of elective action it exerts itself alone on some circumscribed part or constituent of the tegumentary apparatus.

The first phenomenon of eczematization is, then, the hyperemic state of the skin. This state, dependent on the extreme vascularity of the dermis, is very variable in its degrees; it is the exaltation of sensibility which induces the afflux of the blood to the diseased parts. The presence of this liquid, which has the vermilion tint of the arterial blood, is particularly manifested in the cutaneous region where only serous or capillary vessels exist. Hunter has, moreover, proved that the calibre of these vessels is augmented by inflammation, and permit themselves to be penetrated in all directions. Indeed the microscope is not necessary for the perception of this secret of nature.

This hyperemic orgasm may be produced by friction of the skin, performed with variable violence. It suffices even to compress it gently in order to cause the blood to flow into other vessels; but as soon as the mechanical action ceases the redness re-appears. This accidental coloration is more or less decided. We may even say that its intensity is in direct proportion to that of the inflammation. Different stimulants, and even moral affections, may cause its occurrence.

There is no doubt but that the skin is susceptible of undergoing the same morbid phenomena with the other parts of our organization when subjected to the inflammatory influence. It is thus that increase of temperature is in this organ felt in a manner more or less remarkable. It is thus that pain occurs with greater or less energy, and excites disorders prejudicial to the normal exercise of its functions.

It is apparently the hyperemic state of the irritated skin which gives rise to an extraordinary increase of temperature at its periphery. This excess of temperature is very appreciable to the sense of touch. It dilates the parts, and affects them with an unusual tumefaction, considerable in proportion to the extensibility of the dermis in the place affected.

Pain, which is also a phenomenon of the cutaneous eczematata, occurs in all its shades in those persons attacked by these diseases. Sometimes burning, sometimes itching, now as if stretching the part, now

pungent, now biting or throbbing. It modifies itself in degrees which words cannot express. It varies in general according to the character of the tissues which render the integument more or less complex. And, in fact, in this astonishing fabric everything seems united; nerves, vessels, adipose substance, cellular fibrous matter, secretory and excretory crypts, &c. The pain, too, may put on additional characters, which depend on the depth of its situation. The torture experienced from a furuncle, an anthrax, or an erysipelas, unfortunately needs no description.

Amongst all the varied symptoms which accompany the dermatic eczematization, the fever must not be overlooked, which shows itself as a consecutive, or often even as a precursory phenomenon. The skin, which by its destination is essentially defensive, possesses, moreover, all the conditions which can favour this salutary movement. Under a thousand circumstances, indeed, it presents itself to our consideration as a focus of reaction, or as the extensive theatre of vital resistance.

The careful study of the elementary phenomena of cutaneous eczematization is due to Willan, and still more so to Lorry. Amid these phenomena, the pustular form must be placed in the first rank. This form is especially remarkable, since it is the result of an organic labour which is effected in the very tissue of the skin, a labour generally slow, and subject to periodical phases. Of all the forms of inflammation, the pustular is, beyond contradiction, the most familiar to the dermis, and that which is most naturally varied. There are pustules of no importance; others accompanied by the utmost peril. There are some which appear and suppurate with extreme rapidity; some which suppurate without phlogosis or hyperæmia, and which only require for their excitement the arrest of a secretion. How troublesome is sometimes the development of the nocturnal epinyctis, to which Europeans are so subject in hot climates! The ancients were singularly struck by these differences, and, consequently, divided pustules into the benign, malignant, sanguine, pituitous, arbitrary, &c., distinctions far from being destitute of value.

The vesicular eczematization seems to interest only the superficies of the skin. It is often developed in a night, in a day, in some hours; but we may at the same time say that it is the most representative sign of the inflammatory state of the skin. The phlyctenæ resemble the mechanical results of the application of fire. They

are in certain diseases regarded as symptoms of most unfavourable import.

It is known that the cellular tissue shoots its prolongations into the areolæ of the dermis. These prolongations are susceptible of inflammation, and thence the dermis participates with them in all the accidents this inflammation produces. These accidents are sometimes acute, sometimes chronic. Moreover, according to the greater or less uniformity of the skin, to its superior or inferior degree of nervous and vascular texture, to its abundance of dilatable capillaries, nervous papillæ, mucous substance, sebaceous crypts, &c., the dermatose eczematata must present a peculiar physiognomy. The parts which are out of the bounds of the circulation, such as the hair, nails, &c., have also their mode of inflammation. I do not except even the epidermis, that tutelary membrane, which becomes thickened in some cases so as to acquire the hardness of horn or the consistency of parchment.

According to these preliminary details, it is not difficult to perceive what are the genera which should figure in the interesting group which forms the object of our first study. We shall first speak of *erythema*, which generally resides in the cutaneous superficies, and most frequently terminates in a simple furcation; *erysipelas*, which penetrates the dermis to different depths, and sometimes continues its ravages to the subjacent cerebral layer; *pemphix* and *zoster*, which elevate the epidermis by a phenomenon of burning vesication; *urticaria*, which produces the same effects as urtication; the *epinyctides*, *holophlyctides*, *pyrophlyctides*, &c. Observed under the same point of view, the skin also becomes the prey of different furuncles, and the deep-seated and malignant destruction of anthrax.

An illustrious physiologist, Galvani, who always captivated the attention of his pupils by the importance and beauty of his experiments, thought that he might attribute these igneous explosions, these phlogistic and carbonaceous destructions of the living tissues, to the irregular play of the animal electricity, the laws of which he was then investigating. Not to dwell on these speculations, I shall only add here that eczematization is, hence, perhaps the most frequent malady of the human race. If, however, the skin be the organ in which nature has most diversified her sad results, it is also the organ gifted with the most abundant means of self-reparation.