

LECTURE VI.

Our Materia Medica contains a very large number of drugs of much less importance than many others the importance of which can scarcely be sufficiently appreciated. We possess some twenty-five medicines which are so frequently and so universally used, that Hahnemann has given to them the name of *polychrests*, or many-healing remedies; remedies possessing the power of healing many diseases.

Next to these we possess a number of drugs the therapeutic range of which is well defined, but limited, extending only to a small number of pathological lesions. A third class comprises drugs imperfectly proved, which, if used at all, are used empirically. We may adopt a fourth class consisting of drugs which are merely known to us by name and are as yet of little if any practical value.

I shall devote the first half of our course to giving you a thorough knowledge of our polychrests. This knowledge will serve you as a rallying-point, a central column, as it were, round which the other drugs of less importance and of a much smaller therapeutic range will afterwards cluster with ease and without producing any confusion.

Among the polychrests, the first and most important medicine which claims our attention, is

ACONITUM NAPELLUS.

This medicine constitutes the back-bone, as it were, of our Materia Medica. In analyzing the effect of this heroic agent upon the living organism, I shall be enabled to show you that there is hardly an acute disease where this medicine is not required more or less. Even in many chronic diseases Aconite may prove an useful, yea an indispensable agent. The English name of this plant is wolf's-bane and also monk's-hood; wolf's-bane because it proves exceedingly poisonous to wolves; and monk's-hood because the beautiful blue flower of this plant resembles the hood which monks used to wear, and which our ladies now wear when going to parties or to the opera.

This plant was known to the ancients, for we find its name mentioned by Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Plinius. These ancient authors inform us that the extraordinary poisonous properties of this plant were attributable to its origin; they supposed that this plant had been created by Hecate, the goddess of the infernal regions; according to another myth it arose from the froth of Cerberus,

the monster-dog that watched at the gate of Hell. All that the ancients knew of this plant was, that it was very poisonous. It was not until the year 1521 that Matthiolus, physician to Pope Clement VII., instituted the first experiment with this plant with a view of investigating its poisonous qualities.

On account of the beauty of its flowers and leaves, we cultivate this plant in our gardens as an ornamental shrub. We prepare a tincture and an extract from this cultivated plant. It is possible that, in the course of time, these cultivated medicinal plants may have to be used exclusively, the natural plants failing us or becoming too expensive for importation. If these embarrassments should arise, we may suppose that, with a more cultivated state of our medicines, the diseases for which they seem designed, will likewise manifest themselves in a more tractable, a more civilized form.

This plant belongs to the family *Ranunculaceae*, a family of plants characterized by acrid properties. It attains a height of from two to three feet, has a glabrous or smooth stem which is moreover ramose or full of branches, and cylindrical; the leaves are green and shining, petiolate, (endowed with leaf-stalks,) incised, having five or six lobes, linear, (by which we mean narrow and flat lobes, having parallel margins,) expanding at the upper extremity and marked with a line. The plant has beautiful blue flowers in long terminal spikes, forming racemes with sessile flowers. The root constitutes a rhizoma or root-stock resembling a small turnip. Hence the surname *napellus*, from *napus* which is the Latin for turnip. The generic name *Aconitum* is supposed to be derived from the Greek word *akonae* which signifies "rock." The plant is a native of the mountainous regions of the north and middle of Europe, Jura, Germany, Switzerland, the mountains of Tyrol and Bohemia, etc.

Linne states that horses eat the dry leaves of *napellus* without injury. Dogs, wolves, cats and rats are killed by this plant.

We have several species of Aconite the principal of which are *Aconitum napellus*, *neomontanum*, *cammaruin*, *ferox*, *variegatum*, etc. Opinions, as to what species Hahnemann used in his provings, have differed. It seems generally conceded, however, that it was the species *napellus*, though this is not very material; for, according to the late experiments of Professor Schroff of Prague, which were conducted with the most exemplary devotion by himself and his disciples, the different species of Aconite are all poisonous, though not equally so. There seems to be no difference whatever between the poisonous properties of *neomontanum* and *napellus*, and it is almost certain that it is these two species that were used by Hahnemann, and by his predecessor, Baron Stocck.

I have found that an excellent way of becoming acquainted with the therapeutic properties of a drug, is to obtain a thorough knowledge of its toxicological effects from cases of poisoning. Many of these cases exhibit the characteristic virtues of a drug in striking, well-marked, unmistakable and impressive characters, and, of course, delineate the pathological lesions to which such a drug applies as a homoeopathic remedial agent, with corresponding distinctness and accuracy. Let us then review some of the most important cases of poisoning by Aconite which we find recorded in our treatises on *Materia Medica* and *Toxicology*, and apply them as instructive lessons to the study of therapeutic science. In reviewing these cases, it is immaterial whether we observe a strictly chronological order. This would oblige us to first describe the experiments of Richard and Matthiolus. But the object we have in view of investigating the therapeutic properties of Aconite, permits us to commence our examination of this agent with a few interesting cases of recent date, the first of which is related in the July number of the *Medico-Chirurgical Review*, 1844.

FIRST CASE.

"A boy ate some of the leaves instead of parsley. Two hours after, he complained of a burning sensation in the mouth, throat and stomach, followed by swooning and death. A post-mortem inspection showed that the cerebral vessels were enormously distended with a dark-colored fluid; a deep inflammatory blush extended over the whole mucous surface of the stomach, with dark-colored patches."

From this case we may learn a useful lesson regarding the therapeutic use of Aconite. The symptoms show that a most violent congestion of the brain had taken place and that death may have resulted from this cause. The acute congestions caused by Aconite, are the result of the paralyzing action which this poison exercises upon the capillary nerves. We find moreover all the symptoms of acute gastritis, such as might result from exposure to a cold, to draughts of air, retrocession of the perspiration, or even from indigestion. Hence for *Acute congestion of the brain* not resulting from typhus or from some other primary disease of the cerebrum, but from a depressed condition or an inability of the capillary nerves to apply the necessary amount of harmonious, contractile and expansive energy to the tissue of the capillary vessels: I repeat, in all such congestions of the brain, even when assuming this most violent form termed apoplexy, Aconite may be a most important and efficient remedy. The same may be said of *Acute gastritis*, when of a purely inflammatory or rheumatic character, where the disease is characterized by burning heat in the stomach, vomiting of bile, mucus or blood, and high fever. In such attacks, Aconite will be found a powerful means to strike down this dangerous invader.

Regarding the dose, I would remark that in acute congestions of the brain, and in rheumatic gastritis or gastritis from indigestion, I do not hesitate to give half-

tablespoonful doses of a mixture of one drop of the tincture of the root in ten tablespoonfuls of water, repeating the dose every hour or even half-hour as the case may require.

SECOND CASE.

Another interesting case of poisoning by Aconite, is reported in the Dublin Medical Journal, 1842.

"A young man ate the leaves of Aconite by mistake. Two minutes after eating the leaves, the patient experienced burning heat in the mouth, throat, gullet, and stomach, with sensation of swelling of the face, general feeling of numbness and creeping of the skin, restlessness, dimness of sight, stupor and partial insensibility and death."

This case again shows that Aconite has a powerful effect upon the cerebral and ganglionic system of nerves, and through it upon the capillary vessels.

One of the most constant and most characteristic effects of Aconite is to cause a burning sensation or even a burning pain in the mouth, throat, esophagus and stomach. In

Angina faucium and in *quinsy sore-throat*, where this burning is a very common pathognomonic symptom, Aconite will prove an invaluable remedy. In severe forms of

Heart-burn this burning sensation along the esophagus, accompanied with acrid risings, is a very common symptom. The first or second attenuation prepared from the tincture of the root, is a capital remedy for it. In

Dyspepsia, burning in the pyloric region very often torments patients. I know from abundant experience that in very many cases of this kind, Aconite, first or second attenuation, is preferable to Arsenic or Carbo. In severe forms of dyspepsia, this burning is not only felt in the pyloric region, but it likewise invades the region of the heart. From the depressing action which Aconite exercises upon the bilious secretions, as we shall see in our subsequent lectures, I infer that this burning is occasioned by bile, which, carried along by the capillary current, is enabled to act upon, and irritate in certain localities, the terminal filaments of the ganglionic system ramified over the mucous surfaces. In

Neuralgia, this burning sensation often calls for the exhibition of Aconite. In a case of neuralgia of the stomach, where this burning was most agonizing, as if a red-hot iron had been bored through the stomach, the patient was completely relieved in the space of half an hour by taking a spoonful of one drop of the tincture of the root in a tumblerful of water every five and ten minutes.

In the case before us, the presence of cerebral congestion is fully revealed by the sensation as if the face were swollen, by the dimness of sight, the stupor and partial insensibility.

The accompanying sensation of numbness and formication is generally experienced by patients previous to an apoplectic or paralytic stroke. Hence we infer that Aconite is a great remedy in true

Apoplectic Conditions of the brain, and we have an abundance of clinical proof confirmatory of this fact. If a patient complains of pricking, creeping and burning in the extremities, accompanied by a sense of heaviness, numbness, sluggish or irritated pulse, and by the above-mentioned symptoms of cerebral derangement, do not hesitate to give a drop of the tincture or a few drops of the first attenuation in eight tablespoonfuls of water, a dose every five or ten minutes, until decided symptoms of reaction have set in. By this treatment you may avert paralysis, and perhaps apoplexy.

THIRD CASE.

Pereira relates the following cases of poisoning by Aconite, in his "Elements of Materia Medica:" "A man, his wife and child, ate some roots at dinner by mistake for horse-radish. The greater portion was eaten by the man, at about two o'clock in the afternoon. Three quarters of an hour after eating the roots, the man complained of burning and numbness of the lips, mouth and throat, which soon extended to the stomach, and was accompanied by vomiting of his dinner and afterwards of a frothy mucus. His extremities were cold, but his chest was warm; his head was bathed in a cold sweat; his eyes were glaring; there was excessive trembling and violent pain in the head; the lips were blue; there were no spasms, cramps or convulsions; his breathing was not affected; he died apparently in a fainting state about four hours after dinner.

"The woman was similarly affected: the same burning and numbness of the lips, month, throat, stomach; violent vomiting; curious sensation of numbness in the hands, arms and legs; she lost the power of articulating; her attempts to speak were attended with unintelligible sounds only; she experienced great muscular debility, was unable to stand; some of the external senses were disordered; though her eyes were wide open, her sight was very dim, and surrounding objects were seen indistinctly; sensibility greatly impaired; face and throat almost insensible to the touch; she was very dizzy, but neither delirious nor sleepy; body and extremities cold: she frequently pulled her throat, but knew not why; five or six hours afterwards she began to recover.

"The child was similarly, but slightly affected: like the others, she was constantly putting her hands to her throat."

This case of poisoning likewise yields a good deal of valuable instruction to a homoeopathic physician. Let us analyze the physiological character of these symptoms, and range them in parallel lines with the pathological conditions to which they point.

In the case of the man we have several interesting symptoms: first, the burning which large doses of Aconite always cause in the mouth and fauces; next we

have vomiting of frothy mucus and symptoms of violent cerebral congestion, which seems induced by capillary torpor; the symptoms indicating this congestion are: blue lips, profuse secretion of cold sweat about the head; violent pain in the head. Another important symptom is the trembling of the head, which shows that the nervous equilibrium of the supporting muscles of the head must have been considerably disturbed. This trembling of the head is worthy of notice, for we shall afterwards find that Aconite is one of our great agents for the cure of chorea, spasms and tetanic convulsions. This case likewise affords evidence of the depressing or paralyzing action of Aconite upon the heart; the fainting and coldness of the extremities bear witness to this relation of Aconite to the central organ of the circulatory apparatus.

In the case of the woman we have striking evidences of the paralyzing action of Aconite upon the capillary system of nerves. This case shows, for instance, that Aconite is capable of paralyzing the organs of speech; we find likewise incipient paralysis of the lower extremities, incipient paralysis of the sense of vision; this paralyzing action had even invaded the sphere of sensations, for we are told that sensibility was greatly impaired, and that her face and throat were almost insensible to the touch. We are told that she was dizzy, but neither delirious nor sleepy, from which we may infer that, inasmuch as her consciousness seemed to have remained unimpaired, the Aconite had simply induced a state of purely nervous irritation in the brain, without any of those violent congestive conditions which terminated fatally in her husband's case; an irritation giving rise to a condition described as nervous vertigo.

Aconite induces a sense of constriction or strangulation in the throat; these symptoms, accompanied by a want of sensibility in the part, account for the fact that both mother and child were continually pulling at and feeling about the throat. These symptoms lead us to infer that Aconite is a curative agent in *Paralytic conditions*, in *Pure and simple irritations of the cerebral nerves*, and in *spasmodic affections of the throat*, among which we may class that peculiar spasm of the glottis to which children are liable and which is described by pathologists under the name of *asthma millari*.

So far we have seen that Aconite may be resorted to as a powerful remedial agent in the treatment of acute congestions of the brain; apoplectic conditions of the brain; rheumatic gastritis or gastritis from acute indigestion; heartburn; dyspepsia; neuralgia characterized by burning pain; paralytic conditions of the heart characterized by collapse or extreme sluggishness of the pulse; loss of sensation from paralysis of the sentient nerves, nervous vertigo. We shall now turn our attention to another case of poisoning which will enable us to increase this list of morbid affections quite considerably.

FOURTH CASE.

In the year 1524, on the 10th of November, Claudius Richard gave one-eighth of an ounce of Aconite-root to a criminal condemned to death. It was the fashion in those times to experiment upon criminals with unknown poisons whose virtues some prominent physician wished to investigate. If the criminal outlived the experiment, he recovered life and liberty as a reward for his boldness. In the present case, the experiment was made in order to test the antidotal virtues of *bezoar*, a calculous concretion found in the fourth stomach of the gazelle of India; it was supposed to be an irresistible antidote to poisons, and was so named from, *pa* (against,) and *zahar*, (poison.)

"Immediately after taking the poison, the man complained of the following symptoms: oppression on the chest; pain in the stomach; obscuration of sight, with dizziness: no alteration in the pulse; he became very feeble and called for help. Five grains of bezoar were given him, after which he felt relieved, vomited, experienced anxiety, complained of some strange stuff accumulating in the region of his stomach; he felt a pain at the occiput and nape of the neck, was delirious, whistled on a leaf. The delirium soon ceased; he complained of pains in the stomach, head, jaws, chest and now in one joint, then in another; after the lapse of seven hours, all his joints pained him; the abdomen began to swell as in dropsy; the sides were distended, painful, hard; he experienced stitches in the kidneys, retention of urine; one upper and one lower extremity were paralyzed; the pulse frequently intermitted and became feverish, on the same day he vomited several times, had several stools, complained of pressure and coldness in the stomach, as from a stone. Finally he was attacked with frightful ophthalmia and lippitudo (bleareyedness,) so painful that he preferred death to so much suffering. This continued for eight hours. At the end of this period all the symptoms ceased, he had a good appetite for supper and felt quite well on the morning following."

The effects of Aconite as depicted in this case, point to a variety of important affections in which this great agent may prove curative. Let us analyze the symptoms in their order, and see with what pathological lesions they correspond.

The patient became delirious and whistled on a leaf. This symptom points unequivocally to acute *mania*. The delirium was accompanied by pain in the occiput and nape of the neck, which would seem to show that the cerebellum was irritated and most probably congested.

After the delirium ceased, he complained of pains in the stomach, head, jaws, chest and joints. The universality of these pains shows that the ganglionic system of nerves, or the great sympathetic as it is called, must have been deeply invaded by the action of the poison. In some forms of rheumatism, pains of the same nature occur. Common *arthritic* and *articular rheumatism* is characterized by pains of this kind. The fever is not always very high; nor are the external signs of

inflammation, such as swelling and redness, always strikingly developed. Hence it is in rheumatic affections of this order that Aconite shows specifically curative virtues. In the articular form of rheumatism the tincture has often to be used; in the arthritic form, the attenuations are generally, though not always, preferable. The pains here indicated may likewise occur in certain forms of *bilious remittent fever*. Considering that Aconite seems to derange the bilious functions to their very foundation, as may be inferred in the present as well as in other cases from the repeated vomiting and the praecordial anxiety, we may justly recommend Aconite as one of our important agents in bilious remittent fever. We shall afterwards see that Aconite answers to all the characteristic symptoms of fever. We are told that the abdomen began to swell as if dropsical, and that the sides became distended, painful and hard. Hence we infer that Aconite may prove useful in *acute dropsy*. In a case of anasarca induced by fright, Aconite effected a cure. In a case of *hydrothorax* superinduced by a cold, Aconite likewise effected a thorough and permanent cure. Aconite exerts a disorganizing influence upon the blood, the arterialization of which it has a tendency to retard. The continued use of Aconite makes the blood watery, and causes a diminution of fibrin. Aconite is evidently in therapeutic rapport with *congestion of the kidneys*; the stitches in the kidneys, the swelling and the retention of urine point to this affection.

Paralysis of the muscular fibres of the bladder may be inferred from the retention of urine.

Paralysis of the extremities, both upper and lower, may be successfully treated with Aconite.

The pressure and coldness in the pit of the stomach as from a stone, is a symptom which occurs in many severe forms of *dyspepsia* and *chronic congestion* of the stomach. It may result in *haematemesis* or vomiting of blood. Aconite will relieve this symptom. The German tincture had better be used, one or two drops in twelve tablespoonfuls of water.

The last symptom which this case developed, is ophthalmia, accompanied by a profuse discharge of acrid and burning tears. This very painful symptom is frequently present in *scrofulous ophthalmia*, and we may therefore recommend Aconite for this exceedingly distressing disease.

FIFTH CASE.

In 1561, Matthiolus made the following experiment in Prague: "A criminal took one drachm of Aconite (stems, leaves, blossoms and seeds of the plant); three hours after, ulcerative sensation in the whole body; prostration of strength; weight about the heart; cold sweat on the forehead; pulse almost imperceptible; after taking bezoar, his eyes became distorted, the mouth was drawn to one side, the nape of the neck was stiff, he fainted and would have fallen unless held; he passed several stools; after consciousness had returned, he was put in bed,

complained of chilliness, threw up foul, black bile, then turned to the left side, became speechless, and died after his face had become blue as if he had been choked. Death seems to have occurred from apoplexy and paralysis of the heart." Regarding this ulcerative sensation all over the body, we may observe that it seems to arise from a general bilious congestion of the capillary vessels. This symptom sometimes occurs in certain forms of remittent fever, either purely rheumatic or bilious rheumatic; among a group of Aconite-symptoms, this one constitutes a characteristic indication.

The symptoms of *cerebral apoplexy* and *paralysis of the heart* are so characteristically developed that it seems hardly necessary to dwell upon them more especially.

SIXTH CASE.

"To another criminal Matthiolus gave a mixture of Aconite; the patient fancied it contained pepper. One hour after taking the poison, he experienced the following symptoms: vomiting of green bile; sensation as if a ball were ascending from the pit of the stomach, spreading a cool current across the vertex and occiput. After a longer interval he was attacked with complete paralysis of the left arm and leg, except the hand which was still a little moveable. As soon as the left side was restored, the right side was affected in the same way; finally he was again able to lift up both hands. He then complained of every vessel in the body becoming congealed; he was attacked with vertigo, burning in the head as if the head were full of boiling-hot water, convulsions of the eyes and mouth, violent pain in the jaws as if they would drop off" protrusion of the eyes, blueness of the face, black lips; the abdomen became distended as if full of water, pulse and spirits changed according as the symptoms were more or less violent; at times he despaired of his life, at others he thought he might be saved; at times he was rational, at others delirious; at times singing, at others weeping; he lost his sight completely three times during this time, and thought himself dying; always had the full use of his voice; all these symptoms disappeared in seven hours; the pulse became normal and he recovered."

This case presents an interesting group of symptoms. The first symptom to which our attention is directed is the vomiting of green bile; we will note this symptom, for it appears as a constituent element in more than one group of 'pathological phenomena denoting a deep-seated derangement of the bilious secretions.

Secondly, we have: sensations as if a ball were ascending from the pit of the stomach spreading a cool current across the vertex and occiput; this symptom is characteristic of *hysteria*, the *globus hystericus*, hysteric ball, a spasmodic and congestive sensation which causes a good deal of distress to some females.

Thirdly: alternate *paralysis* of the extremity of the left and right side.

Fourth: bilious congestive headache, as indicated by the burning and seething sensation in the head; these bilious congestive headaches are generally accompanied by vomiting of green bile, a sense of stupor or excessive sensitiveness to noise and light; for such headaches Aconite is a specific remedy.

Fifth: neuralgic pain in the jaws, with sensation as if they would drop off; this kind of neuralgia may be induced by a cold, and it may be of great advantage to you to know that Aconite is a remedy for it. The tincture prepared from the whole plant, or a few drops of the first or second attenuation of the tincture of the root in eight or ten tablespoonfuls of water, is the proper dose for this affection. We have cured the most horrid aching, burning and stinging pains affecting the whole of the lower jaw, with the sixth attenuation.

Sixth: apoplectic congestion of the brain, as indicated by the intense distress in the head, as if the head were full of boiling water, protrusion of the eyes, blueness of the face and blackness of the lips.

Seventh: dropsical distention of the abdomen; we have seen in a former case that acute dropsy may be cured by Aconite.

Eighth: fitful mania characterized by opposite states, such as: despondency even unto dread of dying, and hopefulness; singing and weeping mood. These alternate states are likewise characteristic of *hysteria*, in which affection Aconite may be depended on as a most admirable agent.

Ninth: we have complete amaurosis; in amaurosis caused by exposure to the sun's rays, accompanied with sudden rush of blood, distress in the head and more particularly in the frontal region, buzzing in the ears, irregularity and depression, or heaviness and sluggish hardness of the pulse, you will find the tincture of Aconite the first and foremost remedy.