

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM FETICH TO HYGIENE.

I. THE THEOLOGICAL VIEW OF EPIDEMICS AND SANITATION.

A VERY striking feature in recorded history has been the recurrence of great pestilences. Various indications in ancient times show their frequency, while the famous description of the plague of Athens given by Thucydides, and the discussion of it by Lucretius, exemplify their severity. In the Middle Ages they raged from time to time throughout Europe: such plagues as the Black Death and the sweating sickness swept off vast multitudes, the best authorities estimating that of the former, at the middle of the fourteenth century, more than half the population of England died, and that twenty-five millions of people perished in various parts of Europe. In 1552 sixty-seven thousand patients died of the plague at Paris alone, and in 1580 more than twenty thousand. The great plague in England and other parts of Europe in the seventeenth century was also fearful, and that which swept the south of Europe in the early part of the eighteenth century, as well as the invasions by the cholera at various times during the nineteenth, while less terrible than those of former years, have left a deep impress upon the imaginations of men.

From the earliest records we find such pestilences attributed to the wrath or malice of unseen powers. This had been the prevailing view even in the most cultured ages before the establishment of Christianity: in Greece and Rome especially, plagues of various sorts were attributed to the wrath of the gods; in Judea, the scriptural records of various plagues sent upon the earth by the Divine fiat as a punishment for sin show the continuance of this mode of

thought. Among many examples and intimations of this in our sacred literature, we have the epidemic which carried off fourteen thousand seven hundred of the children of Israel, and which was only stayed by the prayers and offerings of Aaron, the high priest; the destruction of seventy thousand men in the pestilence by which King David was punished for the numbering of Israel, and which was only stopped when the wrath of Jahveh was averted by burnt-offerings; the plague threatened by the prophet Zechariah, and that delineated in the Apocalypse. From these sources this current of ideas was poured into the early Christian Church, and hence it has been that during nearly twenty centuries since the rise of Christianity, and down to a period within living memory, at the appearance of any pestilence the Church authorities, instead of devising sanitary measures, have very generally preached the necessity of immediate atonement for offences against the Almighty.

This view of the early Church was enriched greatly by a new development of theological thought regarding the powers of Satan and evil angels, the declaration of St. Paul that the gods of antiquity were devils being cited as its sufficient warrant.*

Moreover, comets, falling stars, and earthquakes were thought, upon scriptural authority, to be "signs and wonders"—evidences of the Divine wrath, heralds of fearful visitations; and this belief, acting powerfully upon the minds of millions, did much to create a panic-terror sure to increase epidemic disease wherever it broke forth.

* For plague during the Peloponnesian war, see Thucydides, vol. ii, pp. 47-55, and vol. iii, p. 87. For a general statement regarding this and other plagues in ancient times, see Lucretius, vol. vi, pp. 1090 *et seq.*; and for a translation, see vol. i, p. 179, in Munro's edition of 1886. For early views of sanitary science in Greece and Rome, see Forster's *Inquiry*, in *The Pamphleteer*, vol. xxiv, p. 404. For the Greek view of the interference of the gods in [disease, especially in pestilence, see Grote's *History of Greece*, vol. i, pp. 251, 485, and vol. vi, p. 213; see also Herodotus, lib. iii, c. xxxiii, and elsewhere. For the Hebrew view of the same interference by the Almighty, see especially Numbers xi, 4-34; also xvi, 49; 1 Samuel xxiv; also Psalm cvi, 29; also the well-known texts in Zechariah and Revelation. For St. Paul's declaration that the gods of the heathen are devils, see 1 Cor. x, 20. As to the earlier origin of the plague in Egypt, see Haeser, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Medicin und der epidemischen Krankheiten*, Jena, 1875-'82, vol. iii, pp. 15 *et seq.*

The main cause of this immense sacrifice of life is now known to have been the want of hygienic precaution, both in the Eastern centres, where various plagues were developed, and in the European towns through which they spread. And here certain theological reasonings came in to resist the evolution of a proper sanitary theory. Out of the Orient had been poured into the thinking of western Europe the theological idea that the abasement of man adds to the glory of God; that indignity to the body may secure salvation to the soul; hence, that cleanliness betokens pride and filthiness humility. Living in filth was regarded by great numbers of holy men, who set an example to the Church and to society, as an evidence of sanctity. St. Jerome and the Breviary of the Roman Church dwell with unction on the fact that St. Hilarion lived his whole life long in utter physical uncleanness; St. Athanasius glorifies St. Anthony because he had never washed his feet; St. Abraham's most striking evidence of holiness was that for fifty years he washed neither his hands nor his feet; St. Sylvia never washed any part of her body save her fingers; St. Euphraxia belonged to a convent in which the nuns religiously abstained from bathing; St. Mary of Egypt was eminent for filthiness; St. Simon Stylites was in this respect unspeakable—the least that can be said is, that he lived in ordure and stench intolerable to his visitors. The *Lives of the Saints* dwell with complacency on the statement that, when sundry Eastern monks showed a disposition to wash themselves, the Almighty manifested his displeasure by drying up a neighbouring stream until the bath which it had supplied was destroyed.

The religious world was far indeed from the inspired utterance attributed to John Wesley, that "cleanliness is near akin to godliness." For century after century the idea prevailed that filthiness was akin to holiness; and, while we may well believe that the devotion of the clergy to the sick was one cause why, during the greater plagues, they lost so large a proportion of their numbers, we can not escape the conclusion that their want of cleanliness had much to do with it. In France, during the fourteenth century, Guy de Chauliac, the great physician of his time, noted particularly that cer-

tain Carmelite monks suffered especially from pestilence, and that they were especially filthy. During the Black Death no less than nine hundred Carthusian monks fell victims in one group of buildings.

Naturally, such an example set by the venerated leaders of thought exercised great influence throughout society, and all the more because it justified the carelessness and sloth to which ordinary humanity is prone. In the principal towns of Europe, as well as in the country at large, down to a recent period, the most ordinary sanitary precautions were neglected, and pestilences continued to be attributed to the wrath of God or the malice of Satan. As to the wrath of God, a new and powerful impulse was given to this belief in the Church toward the end of the sixth century by St. Gregory the Great. In 590, when he was elected Pope, the city of Rome was suffering from a dreadful pestilence: the people were dying by thousands; out of one procession imploring the mercy of Heaven no less than eighty persons died within an hour: what the heathen in an earlier epoch had attributed to Apollo was now attributed to Jehovah, and chroniclers tell us that fiery darts were seen flung from heaven into the devoted city. But finally, in the midst of all this horror, Gregory, at the head of a penitential procession, saw hovering over the mausoleum of Hadrian the figure of the archangel Michael, who was just sheathing a flaming sword, while three angels were heard chanting the *Regina Cœli*. The legend continues that the Pope immediately broke forth into hallelujahs for this sign that the plague was stayed, and, as it shortly afterward became less severe, a chapel was built at the summit of the mausoleum and dedicated to St. Michael; still later, above the whole was erected the colossal statue of the archangel sheathing his sword, which still stands to perpetuate the legend. Thus the greatest of Rome's ancient funeral monuments was made to bear testimony to this mediæval belief; the mausoleum of Hadrian became the castle of St. Angelo. A legend like this, claiming to date from the greatest of the early popes, and vouched for by such an imposing monument, had undoubtedly a marked effect upon the dominant theology throughout Europe, which was constantly developing a great body of

thought regarding the agencies by which the Divine wrath might be averted.

First among these agencies, naturally, were evidences of devotion, especially gifts of land, money, or privileges to churches, monasteries, and shrines—the seats of fetiches which it was supposed had wrought cures or might work them. The whole evolution of modern history, not only ecclesiastical but civil, has been largely affected by the wealth transferred to the clergy at such periods. It was noted that in the fourteenth century, after the great plague, the Black Death, had passed, an immensely increased proportion of the landed and personal property of every European country was in the hands of the Church. Well did a great ecclesiastic remark that “pestilences are the harvests of the ministers of God.” *

Other modes of propitiating the higher powers were penitential processions, the parading of images of the Virgin or of saints through plague-stricken towns, and fetiches innumerable. Very noted in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the processions of the flagellants, trooping through various parts of Europe, scourging their naked bodies, shrieking the penitential psalms, and often running from wild excesses of devotion to the maddest orgies.

Sometimes, too, plagues were attributed to the wrath of lesser heavenly powers. Just as, in former times, the fury of “far-darting Apollo” was felt when his name was not re-

* For triumphant mention of St. Hilarion's filth, see the *Roman Breviary* for October 21st; and for details, see S. Hieronymus, *Vita S. Hilarionis Eremitæ*, in Migne, *Patrologia*, vol. xxiii. For Athanasius's reference to St. Anthony's filth, see works of St. Athanasius in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. iv, p. 209. For the filthiness of the other saints named, see citations from the *Lives of the Saints*, in Lecky's *History of European Morals*, vol. ii, pp. 117, 118. For Guy de Chauliac's observation on the filthiness of Carmelite monks and their great losses by pestilence, see Meryon, *History of Medicine*, vol. i, p. 257. For the mortality among the Carthusian monks in time of plague, see Mrs. Lecky's very interesting *Visit to the Grand Chartreuse*, in *The Nineteenth Century* for March, 1891. For the plague at Rome in 590, the legend regarding the fiery darts, mentioned by Pope Gregory himself, and that of the castle of St. Angelo, see Gregorovius, *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter*, vol. ii, pp. 26-35; also Story, *Castle of St. Angelo*, etc., chap. ii. For the remark that “pestilences are the harvest of the ministers of God,” see reference to Charlevoix, in Southey, *History of Brazil*, vol. ii, p. 254, cited in Buckle, vol. i, p. 130, note.

spectfully treated by mortals, so, in 1680, the Church authorities at Rome discovered that the plague then raging resulted from the anger of St. Sebastian because no monument had been erected to him. Such a monument was therefore placed in the Church of St. Peter ad Vincula, and the plague ceased.

So much for the endeavour to avert the wrath of the heavenly powers. On the other hand, theological reasoning no less subtle was used in thwarting the malice of Satan. This idea, too, came from far. In the sacred books of India and Persia, as well as in our own, we find the same theory of disease, leading to similar means of cure. Perhaps the most astounding among Christian survivals of this theory and its resultant practices was seen during the plague at Rome in 1522. In that year, at that centre of divine illumination, certain people, having reasoned upon the matter, came to the conclusion that this great scourge was the result of Satanic malice; and, in view of St. Paul's declaration that the ancient gods were devils, and of the theory that the ancient gods of Rome were the devils who had the most reason to punish that city for their dethronement, and that the great amphitheatre was the chosen haunt of these demon gods, an ox decorated with garlands, after the ancient heathen manner, was taken in procession to the Colosseum and solemnly sacrificed. Even this proved vain, and the Church authorities then ordered expiatory processions and ceremonies to propitiate the Almighty, the Virgin, and the saints, who had been offended by this temporary effort to bribe their enemies.

But this sort of theological reasoning developed an idea far more disastrous, and this was that Satan, in causing pestilences, used as his emissaries especially Jews and witches. The proof of this belief in the case of the Jews was seen in the fact that they escaped with a less percentage of disease than did the Christians in the great plague periods. This was doubtless due in some measure to their remarkable sanitary system, which had probably originated thousands of years before in Egypt, and had been handed down through Jewish lawgivers and statesmen. Certainly they observed more careful sanitary rules and more constant abstinence from dangerous foods than was usual among Christians; but

the public at large could not understand so simple a cause, and jumped to the conclusion that their immunity resulted from protection by Satan, and that this protection was repaid and the pestilence caused by their wholesale poisoning of Christians. As a result of this mode of thought, attempts were made in all parts of Europe to propitiate the Almighty, to thwart Satan, and to stop the plague by torturing and murdering the Jews. Throughout Europe during great pestilences we hear of extensive burnings of this devoted people. In Bavaria, at the time of the Black Death, it is computed that twelve thousand Jews thus perished; in the small town of Erfurt the number is said to have been three thousand; in Strasburg, the Rue Brulée remains as a monument to the two thousand Jews burned there for poisoning the wells and causing the plague of 1348; at the royal castle of Chinon, near Tours, an immense trench was dug, filled with blazing wood, and in a single day one hundred and sixty Jews were burned. Everywhere in continental Europe this mad persecution went on; but it is a pleasure to say that one great churchman, Pope Clement VI, stood against this popular unreason, and, so far as he could bring his influence to bear on the maddened populace, exercised it in favour of mercy to these supposed enemies of the Almighty.*

* For an early conception in India of the Divinity acting through medicine, see *The Bhagavadgītā*, translated by Telang, p. 82, in Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*. For the necessity of religious means of securing knowledge of medicine, see the *Anugīta*, translated by Telang, in Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*, p. 388. For ancient Persian ideas of sickness as sent by the spirit of evil and to be cured by spells, but not excluding medicine and surgery, and for sickness generally as caused by the evil principle in demons, see the *Zend-Avesta*, Darmesteter's translation, introduction *passim*, but especially p. xciii. For diseases wrought by witchcraft, see the same, pp. 230, 293. On the preference of spells in healing over medicine and surgery, see *Zend-Avesta*, vol. i, pp. 85, 86. For healing by magic in ancient Greece, see, e. g., the cure of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, "They stopped the black blood by a spell" (*Odyssey*, xix, 457). For medicine in Egypt as partly priestly and partly in the hands of physicians, see Rawlinson's *Herodotus*, vol. ii, p. 136, note. For ideas of curing of diseases by expulsion of demons still surviving among various tribes and nations of Asia, see J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a Study of Comparative Religion*, London, 1890, pp. 184-192. For the Flagellants and their processions at the time of the Black Death, see Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, New York, 1888, vol. ii, pp. 381 *et seq.* For the persecution of the Jews in time of pestilence, see *ibid.*, p. 379 and following, with authorities in the notes. For the expulsion of the Jews from Padua, see the *Acta Sanctorum*, September, tom. vii, p. 893.

