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RABIES,

ITS TREATMENT AND BLISTERING INSECTS BY THE ARABS,

BY H. CAMUSSI.

II BLISTERING INSECTS.

The Arab doctors, who had borrowed most of their observations on the characters of the cantharide and his properties from Greek and Latin medical authors, did not limit its employment exclusively to the treatment of rabies. Quite to the contrary, they had given this coleopter an important place in their therapies, and the various extracts which follow will show us that they had recourse to it to fight a certain number of affections, internal as well as external.

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3 SFAX AND MEHDIA.

The Arab doctors of the area of Sfax employ, to treat the effects of the communicated rabic virus in man, coleopters from the tribe of Mylabres. They call them in the plural *djerarih* ذراريج, and dzernoah ذرنوح in the singular. There are several varieties in the country: the most abundant, that the natives prefer, is identified by a size a little larger than the others. The body is black, hairy; the wings a beautiful orange yellow, with their former part are decorated with four large black spots, two on each wing; in the middle and at the extremities of the same cases, can be seen two broad transversal bands, black and toothed. Among the other varieties, the most numerous after that which we have just described has the black, glabrous body and, for the color, resembles in any point the first of the two species employed at Gabès¹.

Besides the latter which were brought to us by natives of the suburbs of Sfax, we found all these coleopters living side by side. They -292- made their appearance in the last days of the month of April and, from the beginning of May, they flew in very great number to the flowers of various aromatic plants, while appearing to seek preferably the white wild flowers in the street, very common in environs of Sfax. It is in the anthills dug at the foot of the tufts of this plant that we saw the females going to deposit their eggs.

The Arabs collect these insects at daybreak, during which they are still dull in the freshness of the morning, and kill them precisely with help of the process described, eighteen centuries ago, by Dioscorides and which Avicenne adopted. In a rag of coarse fabric, they bring together approximately thirty of them and form a kind of sachet which they place above an earthenware container half filled with water: the liquid is then subjected to boiling for twenty-four hours. The vapor which is released penetrates the small bag, and, falling down in droplets after its condensation, strongly colours the liquid yellow. This is the subtle and essentially toxic principle which is drawn from the flies which impregnate it with this color; this spirit is contained in all the parts of the insect, but more particularly, one should not be

¹ Since the weak range of our entomologic knowledge does not allow us to determine these insects exactly, we address some specimens of them to the Commission of the *Journal Asiatique*, requesting it to hold them for the provision of the scientists who would wish to examine them.

unaware of, in a yellow liquor, stinking and blistering which it secretes at will and which constitutes its single means of defense.

One very often replaces water with vinegar ¹, for the preceding operation of which -293- conscientious doctors repeat the boiling twice, by employing first of all water and then vinegar. It is then that after having dried the coleopters in the shade, one places them in flasks of glass or reed tubes which are hermetically closed. One can preserve it almost indefinitely without them losing their anti-rabic properties.

When a doctor is called to attend an individual bitten by a mad dog, far from hastening to resort to the vesicant, he restricts himself first of all to cauterizing the wound, if he considers it suitable, and to bandage it in absolutely same manner that he would for an ordinary wound. He prescribes also various internal remedies, febrifuge, purgative, sudorific or otherwise.

Only on the twenty-second day after the accident, he administers to the subject, in a half-cup of mutton gravy, or preferably a very young lamb, prepared without any condiment, one of the coleopters, reduced to powder and mixed with three *nouaya* or carats fennel and the same quantity of sulphate of ammonia ², carefully pulverized. To calm the inflammatory effect that this beverage will inevitably produce on the génito-urinary bodies of the patient, he is made to take -294 – take large amounts of fresh butter or, in its absence, melted butter.

Even though one restricts oneself to make take only one of the coleopters, the quantity of the remedy varies according to the age and the constitution of the subject: it is the size of the fly which constitutes the difference in dosage. One gives one of the largest to a well-built adult man; an average, to the young man or woman, and to the children, the smallest.

The educated men of Sfax affirm that a case of rabis never resisted this treatment when the casualty made use of it at the correct time. They will still quote *chendegoura* (*ajuga iva* or other related Labiate plants), as producing good effects, but hold it well inferior to the *dzernouh*.

The inhabitants of Mehdiia cited us three substances endowed, according to them, with curative properties for rabies:

The first is *chendegoura*;

The second is a coleopter called, also, *dzernoah*: with the description which we were given of it, it appeared to us to be the same one as that of Sfax;

The third is another coleopter called *ghe-bret es-sma* غبرة السماء “the dust of heaven” (?), which is said to equal *dzernouh* in effectiveness. It does not seem to be the ladybird which in certain parts of of Algeria also has the same name of *ghebret es-sma* ¹; the insect of Mehdiia is large like a pea -295 - scanty, round, of a russet colour, or yellowish-brown, sometimes with clearer shades, perhaps hairy; it carries a nauseous odor. During periods of intense heat one sees these small insects flying in swarms, at sunset, on the flowers of a plant called *koukhera* كوخرة, which apparently grows commonly in sandy places in the vicinity of Mehdiia. In Sfax, one would find the same coleopter or a variety of the same kind on the flowers of rose trees, jasmines and especially water melon. We were able to procure neither insect nor plant: also we have our reserves about the details which relate to them.

¹ Today still, in Europe, the cantharides officinales are submitted to the vapor of vinegar or ammonia to preserve them.

² Called in Sfax *nenajer* صناجر

¹ In the area of Sfax, the ladybird is called bou keder بوقدر “the animal which reveals fate”. This name is common for a great number of insects, especially beetles, because, according to the coarse beliefs of the countrymen and nomads, these small animals are useful, by means of childish practices, to reveal certain things which appear to be secrets of the future, such as the sex of a child or animal for which one awaits the birth, the quantity and the quality of the harvest, to the dryness of the rainfall one year, the mildness or the rigour of a winter, etc

Mr. Lumbroso (*Revue Scientifique* of February 6, 1886) publicized the case of a man who, having been bitten by a mad dog, was sent to Ksour Es-Saf, a small town of the caïdat of Mehdia.

It is indeed to this locality that the inhabitants of the region of Mehdia will send the people for whom the fear the appearance -296- of the dreadful disease. There, they entrust them to a doctor whom they consider very wise, of the name of El-Hadj Hassen Eth-Thelik, who provides them shelter from any danger in feeding them, either a preparation seemingly made up of flour, or a ragout made with meat of a sucking lamb taken from the thigh or the leg, a ragout in which he incorporates a powder of cantharides mixed with various additional substances. This mixture does not fail to produce the usual effect, an index of the cure: terrible pains in the bladder, cystitis and secretion, with urination of blood, of fleshy and mucous matters, in which the credulity of the patient allows him to see embryos of dogs.

El-Hadj Hassen manages the beneficial drug, fifteen days after the bite during heat waves, or twenty-one to twenty-five days during the moderate season and winter. Taken after thirty-five days, it would be ineffective, and the subject would be fatally condemned if the dog that bit him was really infected with rabies.

In Djemmal, a village located to the south of Monastir, we saw another doctor called El-Mellouly, who shares with his colleague of Ksour Es-Saf the reputation of curing hydrophobic subjects.

People of the country have an unlimited confidence in the remedy of these two experts, a remedy which, they say, does not differ one from the other except by the additional vehicle and substances in which one -297 – administers it, but the precise composition of which they are unaware. They claim never to have had, in living memory, to deplore his failure except in only one case, that of a man from the small town of Moknine, who, bitten seriously in various places of the body, mainly on uncovered parts, like the head, face, hands ¹, succumbed, in spite of the application of the treatment and the intensive care that he received.

Some little time ago, the doctors of Sfax neglected completely the use of blistering insects in the treatment of the disease which occupies us. That was because, they claim, they had not been able to discover in the country any insect answering exactly the description that the founders of Arab medicine gave of *dzernouh*. As for the coleopters which exist in the region, they had, after having attempted to find a treatment there, to give up their efforts, these insects being of a dangerous application and having caused many very serious accidents, either because the remedy was too strong a dose, or because it was imperfectly combined with the additional substances intended -398 - to mitigate its toxic action. About the middle of this century, a Sfaxien, bitten by a mad dog, went to find a doctor from Ksour Es-Saf named Ali Ben El-Hadj Ramdhan, whose reputation had arrived along with him, and who was enough happy to penetrate the secrecy of the drug, a secret that on his return, he revealed to his fellow-citizens. Consequently, its use spread in Sfax.

During his life this Ali Ben El-Hadj Ramdhan surrounded in deepest mystery the preparation of this invaluable drug; on his death, he bequeathed the formula of it to his two daughters who supplied it for a long time and ended up making it public.

¹ “ Doctor Jagell remarks that it is necessary to make a difference between the bites of a mad wolf or dog produced directly on the human body and those which took place through wool fabrics (clothes, etc). It is recognized that the last were always inoffensive, and all the patients of Mr. Pasteur that died of hydrophobia are precisely those whose wounds had not been made through wool fabrics.....” (*Revue scientifique*, no. 8, 21 August 1886, p. 252, col. 1).

4° TUNIS.

The natives of Tunis and the surroundings employ the black *dzernouh* with orange wings that we saw the doctors in Sfax seeking preferably. One takes an insect, only one, which one crushes, and then kneads into a small amount of honey and swallows. One must begin this treatment seven days after the accident, and to repeat it daily reiterate for a whole week. Let us note a rather singular remark here: the Arab general storekeeper from whom we receive this information told us that he had sold these coleopters many times to Europeans, Italians or Maltese, who had made good use of it.

There exists, in Zaghouan, a doctor who enjoys a great reputation as healer of rabies bites in the region; -299 - he also administers, it appears, a blistering coléoptère.

Lastly, a countryman of the area of Nabeul, recently identified a plant called *douda* دودة, as endowed with remarkable anti-rabic properties. This plant, which is unknown to us, grows commonly in the mountains of the nearby island [sic] of Cap Bon, and the people of these cantons make a great use of it.

In the caïdat of Bizerte, in that of Mateur, and as far as the mountains of Mogod, we found the use of a caustic drug whose composition is held secret, but of which the invariable and immediate effect is, as the natives say, "to cause the expulsion of puppies by the urinary tracts", with accompaniment of cystitis and strong colics.

Such are the details that were given to us to collect on a question already sufficiently interesting by itself and which borrows from the work of Mr. Pasteur an addition topicality. Is it not curious, indeed, to see the medical idea of Razes, after having crossed so many centuries, rediscovered intact, not only amongst the Arabs nowadays, but still in certain European regions?

In addition to this use of the *dzerarih* as anti-rabic, we saw, though rarely, the cantharide employed in Tunisia in the form of [vesicatory flying], -300 - as revulsive and to fight certain pains, neuralgic or otherwise, of the face, eyes, head, ears, body, toothache, ears, etc. We believe that this mode of treatment does not come from the Arabs, but that it was introduced to their territory by Europeans.

We will not finish this account without saying some words about the practices of worship or sorcery used in Algeria and Tunisia to treat rabies, including marabouts to which the Arabs, in their coarse superstition, have for centuries attributed the virtue of ensuring immunity for people bitten by mad animals.

Mr. I. Lapaine teaches us (*Revue Scientifique, op. cit.*) that the descendants of Sidi Mohammed Bel Kassem, the marabout of the Hassassna, a tribe of the Oranian south, write a verse of the Koran on a sheet of green paper, grind this sheet in the milk of a black cow and make the patient swallow the mixture.

The marabouts of the zaouïa of Sidi Mohammed Ben Âmmar, in the vicinity of Nedroma, do not treat the rabies itself: they cure it by proxy, by making one of his close relations drink water which, poured into a container at the bottom of which a verse of the Koran was written, mixed with the ink of the writing.

In Tunisia, the effectiveness of the water in the well located in the koubba of Sidi Daoud, close to Marsa was praised to us. Water from this well is poured on the

hydrophobic pilgrim, and he is made to drink it repeatedly, and this sufficed to guard against the consequences of the bite.

The well called *Bir El-Afou* "the well of forgiveness", in the zaouïa of Sidi Âbd El-Kader El-Djilani, at the village of Menzel Bou Zelfa, not far from Soliman, and the well of the koubba of Sidi Bou Atsman, that is found to the north of Djemmal, the locality of the Sahel about which we have already spoken, were quoted to us as enjoying the same properties.

In the area of Sfax, we will mention several saintly figures, such as:

Sidi Mansour El-Ghoulam, a negro monk buried beside the sea, three or four leagues to the North-East of Sfax. The Moslem who fears hydrophobia goes in great pomp to the tomb of the saint, and is plunged several times in the salt water, at the foot of the koubba; after each immersion, he comes to kiss devotedly the ring fixed to the door of the room in which the remains of Sidi Mansour rest. This simple practice protects the casualty from any danger. The bitten animals and the mad dogs themselves are cured by immersing them in the sea at this place.

Sidi Meserra. The koubba of this wise dervish is raised further north, also beside the sea also -302 - at 35 kilometers approximately from Sfax. To save their threatened days, the bitten people make, without stopping and at a rapid pace, seven circuits of the small square building which shelters the remainders of the saint; that done, they plunge themselves into the sea, opposite the koubba and in a particular place.

Sidi Abd Allah Bou Gerboua. Very close to the tomb of this saint, buried on the road from Sfax to Kairouan, his grand-nephews are camped, grouped around the tent where he used to live; To prevent the appearance of rabies, it is enough to embrace the large central pole of this tent several times, while reciting prayers or invocations;; one must also eat a handful of earth - taken from the foot of the pole - that one has held on one's head for a few moments.

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