

THE
NATURAL HISTORY

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BY THE LATE
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NATURAL HISTORY OF PLINY.

BOOK XXIV.

THE REMEDIES DERIVED FROM THE FOREST TREES.

CHAP. I.(1.)—THE ANTIPATHIES AND SYMPATHIES WHICH EXIST AMONG TREES AND PLANTS.

Not even are the forests and the spots in which the aspect of Nature is most rugged, destitute of their peculiar remedies; for so universally has that divine parent of all things distributed her succours for the benefit of man, as to implant for him medicinal virtues in the trees of the desert even, while at every step she presents us with most wonderful illustrations of those antipathies and sympathies which exist in the vegetable world.

Between the quercus¹ and the olive² there exists a hatred so inveterate, that transplanted, either of them, to a site previously occupied by the other, they will die.³ The quercus too, if planted near the walnut, will perish. There is a mortal feud⁴ existing also between the cabbage and the vine; and the cabbage itself, so shunned as it is by the vine, will wither immediately if planted in the vicinity of cyclamen⁵ or of origanum. We find it asserted even, that aged trees fit to be felled, are cut with all the greater difficulty, and dry all the more rapidly,

¹ See B. xvi. cc. 6, 8, 33, 50.

² See B. xvii. c. 3.

³ As Fée justly remarks, the greater part of these so-called sympathies and antipathies must be looked upon as so many fables. In the majority of instances, it is the habitual requirements of the tree or plant that constitute the difference; thus, for instance, the oak or quercus requires a different site and temperature from that needed by the olive, and the stony soil adopted by the vine is but ill-suited for the cultivation of the cabbage.

⁴ See B. xx. c. 36.

⁵ See B. xxi. cc. 27, 38, and B. xxv. c. 67.

if touched by the hand of man before the axe is applied: it is a common belief, too, that when their load consists of fruit, beasts of burden are immediately sensible⁶ of it, and will instantly begin to sweat, however trifling it may be, unless the fruit is duly shown to them before starting. Fennel-giant, as a fodder, is extremely grateful to the ass, and yet to other beasts of burden it is a deadly poison: hence it is that the ass is consecrated to Father Liber,⁷ to which deity the fennel is also sacred.

Inanimate objects again, even of the most insignificant character, have their own peculiar antipathies. Cooks disengage meat of the brine, when it has been too highly salted, by the agency of fine meal and the inner bark⁸ of the linden-tree. Salt again, tends to neutralize the sickly flavour of food when over-sweet. The taste of water, when nitrous or bitter, is modified by the addition of polenta,⁹ so much so indeed, as to be rendered potable¹⁰ in a couple of hours: it is for a similar reason, too, that a layer of polenta is put¹¹ in our linen wine-strainers. A similar property is possessed also by the chalk¹² of Rhodes, and the argilla of our own country.

Equal affinities exist as well; pitch, for instance, is extracted by the agency of oil, both of them being of an unctuous nature: oil again, will incorporate only with lime, both of them having a natural antipathy¹³ to water. Gum is most¹⁴ easily removed with vinegar, and ink¹⁵ with water; in addition to which, there

⁶ See the same statement made in B. xxiii. c. 62.

⁷ Or Bacchus.

⁸ "Philyra." Fée does not think that it can be of any use for such a purpose. Hardouin says, however, that in his time meat when too highly salted was wrapped in leaves of the lime or linden, for the purpose of extracting the salt.

⁹ See B. xviii. c. 14.

¹⁰ Instead of having this effect, Fée says, it would render it much worse.

¹¹ The intention being to clear the wine, though in reality, as Fée observes, it would have a tendency to turn the wine into vinegar.

¹² Chalk, or in other words, sub-carbonate of lime, and argilla, or aluminous earth combining several earthy salts, would probably neutralize the acetic acid in the wine, but would greatly deteriorate its flavour.

¹³ On the contrary, lime would appear to have a great affinity for water, absorbing it with avidity, if we may use the term.

¹⁴ More easily with water; though vinegar will do for the purpose.

¹⁵ "Atramentum." By this passage, Fée says, it is clearly proved that the ink of the ancients was soluble in water, and that it contained neither galls nor salts of iron. What it really was made of is still a matter of

are numberless other instances of sympathy and antipathy which we shall be careful to mention in their appropriate places.

It is in tendencies of this description that the medical art first took its rise; though it was originally intended, no doubt, by Nature, that our only medicaments should be those which universally exist, are everywhere to be found, and are to be procured at no great outlay, the various substances, in fact, from which we derive our sustenance. But at a later period the fraudulent disposition of mankind, combined with an ingenuity prompted by lucre, invented those various laboratories,¹⁶ in which each one of us is promised an extension of his life—that is, if he will pay for it. Compositions and mixtures of an inexplicable nature forthwith have their praises sung, and the productions of Arabia and India are held in unbounded admiration in the very midst¹⁷ of us. For some trifling sore or other, a medicament is prescribed from the shores of the Red Sea; while not a day passes but what the real remedies are to be found upon the tables of the very poorest man among us.¹⁸ But if the remedies for diseases were derived from our own gardens, if the plants or shrubs were employed which grow there, there would be no art, forsooth, that would rank lower than that of medicine.

Yes, avow it we must—the Roman people, in extending its empire, has lost sight of its ancient manners, and in that we have conquered we are the conquered:¹⁹ for now we obey the natives of foreign²⁰ lands, who by the agency of a single art have even out-generalled our generals.²¹ More, however, on this topic hereafter.

CHAP. 2. (2.)—THE LOTUS OF ITALY: SIX REMEDIES.

We have already²² spoken in their appropriate places of the doubt; but it is not improbable that the basis of it was spodium, or ashes of ivory.

¹⁶ "Officinas."

¹⁷ "In medio." The reading is very doubtful here.

¹⁸ This, of course, is mere exaggeration.

¹⁹ He would seem to imply that the medical men of his age had conspired to gain an adventitious importance by imposing upon the credulity of the public, on the principle "Omne ignotum pro magnifico;" much as the "medicine-men" of the North American Indians do at the present day.

²⁰ He alludes to the physicians of Greece more particularly.

²¹ "Imperatoribus quoque imperaverunt."

²² In B. xiii. c. 32, and B. xvi. c. 53. Pliny ascribes here to the Lotus of Italy, the *Celtis Australis* of Linnaeus, the same medicinal properties that

herb called lotus, and of the plant of Egypt known by the same name and as the "tree of the Syrtes." The berries of the lotus, which is known among us as the "Grecian bean,"²³ act astringently upon the bowels; and the shavings of the wood, boiled in wine, are useful in cases of dysentery, excessive menstruation, vertigo, and epilepsy: they also prevent the hair from falling off. It is a marvellous thing—but there is no substance known that is more bitter than the shavings of this wood, or sweeter than the fruit. The sawdust also of the wood is boiled in myrtle-water, and then kneaded and divided into lozenges, which form a medicament for dysentery of remarkable utility, being taken in doses of one victoriatum,²⁴ in three cyathi of water.

CHAP. 3. (3.)—ACORNS: THIRTEEN REMEDIES.

Acorns,²⁵ pounded with salted axle-grease,^{25*} are curative of those indurations known as "cacoethe."²⁶ The acorn of the holm-oak, however, is the most powerful in its effects; and in all these trees the bark is still more efficacious, as well as the inner membrane which lies beneath it. A decoction of this last is good for cœliac affections; and it is applied topically in cases of dysentery, as well as the acorns, which are employed also for the treatment of stings inflicted by serpents, fluxes, and suppurations. The leaves, acorns, and bark, as well as a decoction prepared from them, are good as counterpoisons. A decoction of the bark, boiled in cows' milk, is used topically for stings inflicted by serpents, and is administered in wine for dysentery. The holm-oak is possessed of similar properties.

CHAP. 4. (4.)—THE KERMES-BERRY OF THE HOLM-OAK: THREE REMEDIES.

The scarlet berry²⁷ of the holm-oak is applied to fresh are given by Dioscorides, B. i. c. 171, to the Egyptian bean or *Nymphaea Nelumbo* of Linnæus. Galen gives the same account as Dioscorides; it is not improbable, therefore, that Pliny is in error.

²³ See B. xvi. c. 53, Note 55.

²⁴ Half a denarius. See Introduction to Vol. III.

²⁵ Acorns, as well as the bark of the various kinds of oak, are of an astringent nature.

^{25*} Or, hogs' lard.

²⁶ In the singular number, "cacoethes," "a bad habit;" signifying a malignant or cancerous tumour.

²⁷ See B. xvi. c. 12. All the properties here ascribed to it, Fée says,

wounds with vinegar; and in combination with water it is dropt into the eyes in cases of defluxion of those organs or of ecchymosis. There grows also in most parts of Attica, and in Asia, a berry of this description, which becomes transformed with great rapidity into a diminutive worm, owing to which circumstance the Greeks have given it the name of "scolcion:"²⁸ it is held, however, in disesteem. The principal varieties of this berry have been previously²⁹ described.

CHAP. 5.—GALL-NUTS: TWENTY-THREE REMEDIES.

And no fewer are the varieties of the gall-nut which we have described:³⁰ we have, for instance, the full-bodied gall-nut, the perforated one, the white, the black, the large, the small, all of them possessed of similar properties; that, however, of Commagene is generally preferred. These substances remove fleshy excrescences on the body, and are serviceable for affections of the gums and uvula,³¹ and for ulcerations of the mouth. Burnt, and then quenched in wine, they are applied topically in cases of cœliac affections and dysentery, and with honey, to whitlows, hang-nails, malformed nails, running ulcers, condylomatous swellings, and ulcerations of the nature known as phagedænic.³² A decoction of them in wine is used as an injection for the ears, and as a liniment for the eyes, and in combination with vinegar they are employed for eruptions and tumours.

The inner part of the gall, chewed, allays tooth-ache, and is good for excoriations between the thighs, and for burns. Taken unripe in vinegar, they reduce the volume of the spleen; and, burnt and then quenched in salt and vinegar, they are used as a fomentation for excessive menstruation and procidence of the uterus. All varieties of the gall-nut stain the hair black.

CHAP. 6.—MISTLETOE: ELEVEN REMEDIES.

We have already³³ stated that the best mistletoe is that which grows on the robur,³⁴ and have described the manner in are hypothetical. It is no longer used in medicine, at least to any recognized extent.

²⁸ Hence the Latin word "vermiculum," from which our word "vermilion" is derived.

²⁹ In B. xvi. c. 12.

³⁰ In B. xvi. c. 9.

³¹ They might be used advantageously, Fée thinks, in the shape of a decoction, for procidence of the uvula and uterus.

³² "Eating," or "corrosive."

³³ See B. xvi. cc. 11, 93, 94.

³⁴ See B. xvi. cc. 10, 11.

which it is prepared. Some persons, after bruising the berries, boil them in water, till nothing appears on the surface, while others, again, bite the berries with the teeth, and reject the skins.³⁵ The best kind of viscus is that which has none of the outer skin in it, is extremely light, yellow without, and of a leek-green colour within. There is no substance more glutinous than this: it is of an emollient nature, disperses tumours, and acts as a desiccative upon scrofulous sores; combined with resin and wax, it heals inflamed swellings of every description. Some persons add galbanum as well, using equal proportions of each ingredient, and this preparation they employ also for the treatment of wounds.

The viscus of the mistletoe has the additional property also of rectifying malformed nails; but to effect this it must be taken off at the end of seven days, and the nails must be washed with a solution of nitre.^{35*} Some persons have a sort of superstitious notion that the viscus will be all the more efficacious if the berries are gathered from the robur at new moon, and without the aid of iron. They have an impression too, that if it has not touched the ground, it will cure epilepsy,³⁶ that it will promote conception in females if they make a practice of carrying it about them: the berries, chewed and applied to ulcers, are remarkably efficacious for their cure, it is said.

CHAP. 7.—THE EXCRESCENCES WHICH GROW ON THE ROBUR:
ONE REMEDY. THE CERRUS: EIGHT REMEDIES.

The round excrescences³⁷ which grow on the robur * * * and mixed with bear's grease, are remedial in cases of loss of the hair by alopecia.

The leaves, bark, and acorns of the cerrus³⁸ act as a desiccative upon gatherings and suppurations, and arrest fluxes. A decoction³⁹ of them, used as a fomentation, strengthens such parts of the body as are paralyzed; and it is a very good plan

³⁵ This passage, as Fée remarks, is somewhat obscure.

^{35*} As to the identity of the "nitrum" of Pliny, see B. xxxi. cc. 22, 46.

³⁶ Fée says, that till very recently it was a common belief that the oak mistletoe is curative of epilepsy. It was also employed as an ingredient in certain antispasmodic powders.

³⁷ See B. xvi. c. 10.

³⁸ See B. xvi. c. 8.

³⁹ This decoction would be of a tonic and astringent nature, owing to the tannin and gallic acid which the leaves and bark contain.

to employ it as a sitting-bath, for its desiccative or astringent effects upon the lower extremities. The root of this tree neutralizes the venom of the scorpion.

CHAP. 8.—THE-CORK TREE: TWO REMEDIES.

The bark of the cork-tree,⁴⁰ pulverized and taken in warm water, arrests hæmorrhage at the mouth and nostrils;⁴¹ and the ashes of it, taken in warm wine, are highly extolled as a cure for spitting of blood.

CHAP. 9. (5.)—THE BEECH: FOUR REMEDIES.

The leaves⁴² of the beech are chewed for affections of the lips and gums. A liniment is made of the ashes of beech-mast for urinary calculus, and, in combination with honey, for alopecia.

CHAP. 10.—THE CYPRESS: TWENTY-THREE REMEDIES.

The leaves of the cypress⁴³ are pounded and applied to wounds inflicted by serpents, and with polenta, to the head, in cases of sunstroke. They are used also for hernia, and an infusion of them is taken in drink.⁴⁴ They are applied with wax to swellings of the testes, and mixed with vinegar they stain the hair black.⁴⁵ Beaten up with twice the quantity of light bread, and then kneaded with Aminean⁴⁶ wine, they are found very soothing for pains in the feet and sinews.

The excrescences of this tree are taken in drink for the stings of serpents and for discharges of blood from the mouth; they are used also as a topical application for gatherings. Fresh-gathered and beaten up with axle-grease and bean-meal, they are good for hernia; and an infusion of them is

⁴⁰ See B. xvi. c. 13.

⁴¹ "Ex utralibet parte."

⁴² There is no foundation, Fée says, for any of these statements.

⁴³ See B. xvi. c. 60. The leaves of the cypress, Fée says, contain tannin and an essential oil; all the medicinal properties therefore, here attributed to them, which are not based upon these principles, must be looked upon as hypothetical.

⁴⁴ Down to the present century the leaves and fruit of the cypress were recommended in some medical works for the cure of hernia. The juice, however, of the leaves, taken internally, would be, as Fée says, highly dangerous.

⁴⁵ Owing probably to the gallic acid they contain.

⁴⁶ See B. xiv. c. 4.

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