

To the Editors of the Medical and Physical Journal.

“ *Cicuta Homini venenum est.*” PLINY.

GENTLEMEN,

NOTWITHSTANDING a concise statement of the following interesting particulars has recently appeared in the Nottingham Journal, I presume to think with many of my judicious friends, that the cause of philanthropy will be essentially promoted, by giving it, in an enlarged and more correct form, that degree of publicity, which your widely circulating Miscellany is calculated to afford.

Poisonous ingredients are sometimes incautiously conveyed into the constitution, through the medium of substances otherwise the most innocent and salubrious. That grateful beverage *cider* becomes highly pernicious by being impregnated with a preparation of lead. Even common water, according to some late and very ingenious experiments, is found to contract a similar contamination from passing through a *leaden* pump, and becomes consequently more or less detrimental to the health. But do many imagine that *common parsley* can be the vehicle of that dangerous narcotic herb, lesser hemlock? Yet, of the possibility of this, two ladies of Castle-Donnington, Leicestershire, were lately unfortunate examples. The hemlock was eaten with some sallad, wherein it had been put by mistake with common parsley, for which it had grown and been gathered. Symptoms of an alarming kind soon followed, indicative of the full operation of that pernicious vegetable. Had the mistake remained undiscovered, there is a just ground for a strong presumption, that the error would have produced the most tragical event. I will here briefly enumerate the symptoms which supervened, in order that any person casually labouring under them, may be enabled; by comparison, to ascertain their real origin.

A troublesome nausea with occasional vomiting occurred, accompanied with oppressive head-ach and giddiness; also a strong propensity to slumber, at the same time that *calm* repose was wholly prevented by frequent startings, and excessive agitations. The mouth, throat, and stomach, were impressed with the sensation of a pungent heat, attended with great difficulty in swallowing. Increased thirst prevailed, with total loss of appetite of every kind of solid aliment. The extremities felt benumbed, and

and were affected with tremors; and all the vital and animal functions were performed with unusual inactivity.

It may not be deemed uninteresting, by way of illustration, to state in this place, the different and opposite sentiments entertained by several eminent botanical writers, relative to the effects resulting from the incautious use of this plant. It is curious enough, that some authors altogether overlook it, as Turner, and the Editors of the Encyclopædia Britannica, &c. Gerard, Ray, Parkinson, and Hill, after describing the *cicuta minor*, take no notice of its poisonous quality, although they all speak of it as being *liable* to be mistaken for parsley, yet without adducing any instances of the kind. Others again speak of it *cursorily*, as an herb capable of exciting slight and transient inconveniences; and there are not wanting characters of the first respectability, who allege that it is a *violent narcotic poison*. Thus, e. g. "We are not sure," says Sowerby, "of the poisonous qualities attributed by some to this plant, but it is at *least unwholesome* as well as unpleasant, and by no means eligible for food." Withering observes, "that this plant, from its resemblance to parsley, has sometimes been mistaken for it; and when eaten, it occasions *sickness*."

To conclude with authorities of its unquestionably deleterious properties, I select the subsequent extract upon this plant from 2 tom. p. 256, of *Elementaires de Botanique*. "Toute la plante de la *petite cigue* a une saveur *d'ail*; elle est nausieuse, resolute, calmante interieurement; c'est une caustique tres dangereux à l'exterieur. Elle ne se mele que trop souvent avec *l'herbage*. On n'emploie que *l'herbe*. On pourroit dans le besoin la substituer a la *precedente*: i. e. The *conium maculatum*, the effects of which are well known to be dangerously narcotic. Dr. Willich has the following passage in his *Domestic Encyclopædia*, under the article fool's-parsley. This noxious weed greatly resembles common parsley, for which it is sometimes mistaken, and when eaten with other plants, it occasions *vomiting, violent cholic, and other painful symptoms*."

Lightfoot, in his *Flora Scotica*, vol. 1. p. 165, furnishes the following very apposite quotation. "This plant (the lesser hemlock) is of a poisonous nature, producing *stupors, vomitings, and convulsions*. Cooks therefore cannot be too careful that they mistake it not for *parsley*, which it a good deal resembles." Chambers, in fifth Edition *Cyclopædia*, declares, "that the *lesser hemlock* is not less *dangerous*

gerous than the greater; it is even supposed more violent as well as more hasty in its operation. Some persons have been rendered delirious by eating porridge, wherein it had been used instead of parsley." Again, Bauhin, in 3 tom. p. 180, Historia Plantarum, Venenosam et perniciosam esse plantam cicutariam (cicutam minorem) testatur Dalechampius dicens; Esû cicutæ quæ apii hortensis specie incautum fefellerat, ego quendam novi ad extremum usque vitæ dementem factum." Lastly, Mr. P. Miller, in his Dictionary, expressly remarks, "that it is so like parsley, that some unskilful persons have gathered and used it as such, by which several persons have suffered in their health, and some have been destroyed thereby."

To what cause must we attribute, and how reconcile these discordant opinions? I think there is good ground for believing, that the lesser hemlock is a plant with which every writer is not acquainted, owing perhaps to the insignificant rank it has held hitherto in the catalogue of poisons. And of the number of those who have given its character from the different effects ascribed to it, we may fairly doubt, whether many of those have actually had an opportunity of observing its genuine operation upon the human system. These, of course, would transcribe only the sentiments of other authors upon this subject, with which they might casually meet. I must add too, that the reports of those who might witness its deleterious power would necessary vary according to the phenomena; and it is well known, that poisons, taken in the same proportions, exert (in consequence of peculiar idiosyncracies) very various degrees of violence upon different individuals, comprehending a gradation from the slightest symptoms that would scarcely arrest attention to those which are most alarmingly dangerous and even fatal; and it may be further observed, that the poisonous qualities of a plant are materially modified by the season, and especially by the peculiar soil in which it grows; for a moist shady situation probably will render the lesser hemlock both more luxuriant as well as more virulent. Thus we find the *cicuta aquatica* (another species of this plant) grows only in wet places, which is amongst the most poisonous plants that this country affords; the fatal juice of which, indeed, is supposed by some to have been exhibited to the great Athenian philosopher. Nor is it irrelevant to add, that the lesser hemlock with which the two ladies above stated were so seriously affected, grew in a garden almost secluded

ed from the penetrating solar rays, by spreading trees, and surrounding buildings.

Another source also of this diversity of sentiment may partly have arisen from the *variety* of appellations which have been affixed to the subject of these remarks. Linnaeus, Withering, Sowerby, &c. denominate it *aethusa*, *aquarium*; Parkinson, *cicuta minor seu fatua*; Miller, *cicuta minor*, &c. Ray and Gerard, *cicuta tenuifolia*; Lobel, *cicutaria fatua*; Thalius, *apium cicutarium*, *tabermontanus petroselinum caninum*; Gesner, *apii comes vitium*, &c. Hence, perhaps, some, not intimately acquainted with the distinctive characteristics of the *lesser hemlock*, have confounded it with the *cicutaria vulgaris*, *bastard hemlock*, which Mr. Parkinson says, grows only in gardens in these parts, and is indeed not unlike it in appearance, though not so poisonous. It is not impossible also, that the *Charophyllum sylvestre*, named *small hemlock* by Ray, may, by those who are not conversant in botanical criteria, have been mistaken for the plant in question. In this case, as the leaves, in times of scarcity, are sometimes made use of with impunity as pot herbs in some parts of this kingdom, the effects produced, would be described as the most remote from those of a narcotic origin.

It is truly singular, that though all writers upon this weed mention its very close analogy to common parsley, yet no description, sufficiently characteristic of their *respective particularities*, is annexed, to enable a person not a professed botanist, to recognize each individually; e. g. Sowerby says, it may be distinguished by its dark dull green leaves, and *garlic* smell. Withering, on the contrary, is *silent* respecting the *colour* of the leaves, but intimates that they are glossy; and though several authors speak of the *garlic* odour of this plant, yet I agree with Ray and Bauhin on this point, who decidedly deny its possessing *any such smell*, by the words "*odore nullo*." In short, without enumerating the contradictory descriptions to be found in different writers upon this plant, I shall only observe, that some glaring misrepresentation, or faulty omission, is visible in all the histories which I have had an opportunity of examining. As, however, it must be deemed a circumstance of the last importance to be furnished with infallible marks of distinction which exist at all times in these respective vegetables, I will endeavour, by contrasting the two, to point out such as will enable any one invariably to detect the *lesser hemlock* when found mixed with common parsley. I must here observe, that

It is during their *early* growth, that the striking resemblance obtains. Then indeed the similarity is so close as easily to deceive any one not intimately acquainted with their peculiar differences. Hence it is, that the *lesser hemlock* has acquired the significant epithet of fool's parsley. Even at this period they may be distinguished with a degree of certainty, by the *round, branched, and hollow* stem of the *lesser hemlock*, rising *singly* from its root, having a violet tinge on the side exposed to the sun, (but without *maculæ*, or *spots*, as in the common hemlock, *conium maculatum* Linnæi); whereas *parsley* grows from the bottom of the plant, the first year in *several long leaved-stalks*. The leaves also of this hemlock are finer, more acute, decurrent, and of a darker hue. But the difference of their *smell*, and especially of their *taste*, at once establish their characters. It is an *annual* plant, the parsley on the contrary flowers only the *second* year. Should this hemlock have grown into flower *unobserved* with the parsley, still invariable characteristics would present themselves, which should studiously be regarded, in order that the *lesser hemlock* may be eradicated, to prevent its propagating itself by means of its seeds. I allude to three *long fencelets*, consisting of pendant leaves going *half round each rundle*, which in parsley are *wanting*, and in lieu thereof, there is a fence of short rising leaflets *surrounding* the umbels. The *flowers* too of the *lesser hemlock* are *white*, those of parsley *yellow*. Each flower of the former, terminates in roundish scored seeds, of the latter in two semi-convex ones, adhering by a *flat* surface to each other. If to these criteria be added the *smell* and *taste*, it is scarcely possible to commit a mistake.

From what has been already advanced, we may, I apprehend, without fear of contradiction, infer, that the *lesser hemlock*, though hitherto very confusedly treated of, is *really* an *actively poisonous herb*; and as it is by *no means* an unfrequent intruder amongst parsley, for which it is unquestionably liable to be mistaken, it doubtless deserves to have its character, and its noxious qualities, universally known and exposed. The slight effects consequent upon a small quantity *only* being consumed, have perhaps occasioned it to be overlooked so very commonly. Hence a dangerous poison is unconsciously used, which insiduously undermines the health. For it is not at all improbable, that indigestion, or other latent causes of indisposition, derive their origin from this source much more frequently than is supposed. And as it is in common with parsley,

not seldom applied to culinary purposes, its pernicious influence may probably be much diminished, though not wholly destroyed, by this means. It is, I presume, in its *crude native* state, (as in the examples already detailed) that it exerts its full and destructive energies. I will conclude these remarks by strenuously recommending the *curled* parsley, *apium crispum*, to be cultivated instead of the *common*, as it is not only much more *elegant*, but also possesses the same virtues, and is so widely different in appearance from the lesser hemlock, as almost to preclude the possibility of mistake. I am, &c.

JOHN STEVENSON, Surgeon.

Kegworth, Sept. 7, 1805.

MEDICAL OBSERVATIONS AND CASES.

(Communicated by Dr. ARNEMAN.)

ON THE EFFICACY OF THE SEDUM ACRE, LINN. IN EPILEPTIC FITS.

THE Brunonian doctrine, *beatæ memoriæ*, classes the epileptic fits among the asthenic diseases. However, every practitioner, who has had an opportunity of having a sufficient number of such patients under his immediate care and inspection, laments that it is out of the reach of this doctrine, either by stimulating, volatile medicines, or by the continued and progressive application of tonics, to restrain the return of this baneful disease. We therefore are obliged merely to consult the experiments and observations, made from time to time with new medicines. Two cases of Dr. Laubender, made with the *sedum acre*, claim the attention of the medical world.

A girl, eighteen years old, of a delicate frame, and for a number of years subject to frequent epileptic fits, was ordered to take ten grains of *sedum acre* mixed with sugar every morning and evening. She suffered a good deal by the medicine, being constantly sick, and she believed an emetic had been administered to her. However, she was prevailed on to continue the medicine, and five days after she took fifteen grains at once. These affected her so violently, that she complained much of her stomach and bowels, and had frequent vomitings and dejections. The dose of course was diminished, and the addition of a little cinnamon thought proper; this she bore without the least inconvenience, and continued it for some time. The epileptic