

Scientific.

[Communicated.]

MILK SICKNESS.

This strange and mysterious disease infects those parts of the Western prairie country, though like some other (especially miasmatic) diseases, it is giving way as the country is more closely settled. As its name indicates, it is contracted by partaking of milk (or flesh) of any cow that may be infected with it.

Its origin and nature is shrouded in the densest mystery, which large and repeated efforts of rewards have failed to clear up. Some ascribe it to the heavy prairie dews; some to some particular plant containing an acid alkaline poison, which, when eaten by the animal, passes into the milk; some to the wild prairie grass, which is being superseded by "tame" grasses; and some to a miasmatic alkaline exhalation which is inhaled either by the animal or by the person to whom the animal is supposed to have communicated it.

The symptoms are excessive weakness and trembling after any extra exertion, followed by vomitings and severe sickness. It is considered as being seldom fatal, but its evil effects can never be eradicated from the system. In order to ascertain if a cow has been infected by it, she is made to run quickly some distance. It is impossible to know from the milk, which appears as rich as usual, or from the meat which seems as juicy and tender as that of a healthy animal.

The doctors have been so thoroughly baffled in their efforts to ascertain its nature, origin, and mode of treatment, that many of them have lost all patience with it and deny its existence, resolving all alleged cases of it into some other disease. Some, if not most, of the recent standard works on medicine omit all mention of it. To this the works of Dr. Wood, of Philadelphia, are an exception. There have certainly been many cases of alleged "milk sickness" which were nothing more than bilious fever or intestinal inflammation, but it requires a power of shutting one's eyes to facts, such as we had thought belonged only to hard-shell theologians, to deny its existence in the face of the accumulated evidence to the contrary.

The disease is confined to certain localities—especially damp creek and river "bottoms." "Wherever you go in Southern Illinois, just as "Egypt" is always "about ten miles south of us," so milk sickness is always "about five miles from here." Some old men will point out plants always found where it is prevalent. "We suspect that it has never been subjected to such a thorough scientific examination as it is capable of receiving. We have not been able to find that the stomach of any one subject to it had been subjected to a satisfactory post mortem examination. The only valuable fact ascertained in regard to it, is that it may be prevented, even in the dangerous districts by removing the cattle from the open prairie to enclosed pastures of tame grass, at certain seasons of the year.

The nature of the disease has prevented its transmission to the East under the present method of supplying our meat markets. Should the new plan of refrigerator cars be adopted, we may not enjoy the same impunity. It is to be hoped, however, that it will, like all miasmatic diseases, if it be one, or like the prairie grass, if that be the cause, disappear as the country is brought under better cultivation. When Ulster was settled in the reign of James I., it was a proverb for fever and ague, which is now known there only as "a disease they have in America." Old English medical works are very full on miasma, while later English works are almost silent in regard to it. Even in Illinois the chills (though had enough) no longer shake a man's teeth loose.

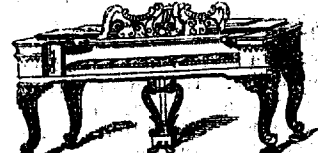
R. E. T.

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