

On a widely spread Superstition in connection with Hernia in young children.

BY F. H. MEAD, M.D.

THE curious and interesting superstitious custom in connection with the treatment of Hernia in young children, I find in my own district around Bishop's Lydeard, to be so widely known among the older people, that I am almost led at the outset of this paper to apologize for bringing it forward, feeling that I am describing a familiar folk lore custom, and nothing more.

And yet I have ascertained in the course of my enquiries, that this custom is not one of those things that is on the surface as it were. The popular, widely known methods of "wart charming," a mine which would yield in Somerset ample returns to an earnest worker, come up to one's notice almost every week.

But it was by chance that I met with my first case of Hernia treatment, if I may call it so; and yet when I came to enquire of the older folk; and set my friends in various parishes to enquire of them what they knew, almost one in three had heard of the practice.

Our own *Proceedings*,* as far as I know, contain no mention of it, and I was the more drawn to make a record of the custom, in order that the survival of an ancient curious ritual,

* This subject is noticed in the Transactions of the Devon Association, vol. viii. (1876), p. 54, by the late R. Dymond, and is treated at length by W. Pengelly, F.R.S., in op. cit. vol. ix. (1877), pp. 94, et. sq. [ED.]

might be recorded, before the practical teaching of the modern Board School had banished it even from memory.

In the early part of the spring season of this year (1892), I was requested by some old patients of mine to see one of the sons of the family, who I was informed was suffering from Hernia. I found that his symptoms, to the knowledge and perceptions of the mother, undoubtedly would suggest Hernia, but that they were due to another cause.

This led the mother afterwards to tell me why she regarded the case as a Hernia case, viz.: the occurrence, with to her somewhat similar symptoms seventeen years ago, of an undoubted case of Hernia in an elder brother of my patients.

I must pause to remark, as regards the practice I am about to relate, that the father and mother of the boy are folks in a comfortable position in life, enjoying a wide reputation for the craft they follow, and are intelligent people.

The mother imparted the information to me, in a way that suggested that they had heard of the custom, and had undertaken the ritual after other treatment had failed, and more at the request of friends than with the ultimate idea of cure following. She did not attach any peculiar mystery, or exhibit that reverence for superstition, which one so often encounters in those who engage in like practices.

Twenty years ago there was born to them a son, who, owing to a fall at the age of three years, according to her account, became afflicted with Hernia. There is no doubt this was a genuine case, as he was taken to skilled people, and was under treatment for some three years. The parents found that the methods followed, while keeping the Hernia in check, did not effect radical cure. At this period the boy was between six and seven years of age, when some friend—who it was is not remembered—imparted the method of the so-called ash tree cure.

First of all a ground ash tree must be selected—a maiden ash—a tree which had grown up without ever having been

topped or cut. The tree must be sufficiently large to allow the child to be passed through a longitudinal fissure, formed by partially cleaving the stem and holding open the sides of the tree by suitably-applied wedges. A ligature applied to the upper end of the split would prevent its going too far. The ceremony must take place in the early morning, at the time of the rising of the sun, the preparations necessary being made in the dawn. The child must be first stripped naked and passed from east to west through the fissure, "between the barks," as a commonly used expression has it. A virgin must introduce the child, and a boy take him out on the other side. He should be passed feet first. I need not add that cure was assured to the patient, but under certain conditions following. Immediately after the ceremony the wedges were to be removed from the tree, when the natural elasticity of the ash would cause the sides to spring together. Further accurate adjustment must be made by the aid of bark bands and a plastering of mud or clay on the exterior. Then, if the tree grew together and flourished, as it usually did, only having been split longitudinally, cure would follow; if not, the case would remain unaltered.

No prayers or incantations were indicated, and, as far as the mystery was imparted to them, any person might act as director of the ceremony.

I may add I have been shown the tree and spot where the rite in this case was celebrated.

In accordance with the instructions given, the father of the child, with one of his workmen, some day or so before the ceremony was essayed, went forth to explore the lanes for a suitable ash tree in a sufficiently retired spot. They did not fear the jeers of neighbours exactly, but did not court interruption. Both were found, and a morning appointed on a Monday, as they both informed me, seventeen years ago this year, about two a.m., on a June morning. The father, mother, boy, an elder brother, and sister, who were to act the part of

positors, and the workman, all set out for the appointed spot, which was about a mile-and-a-half from home. On reaching the ash, tools were produced, and soon the necessary opening was made.

The sun had not yet risen, and it was necessary to climb a bank to survey the eastern horizon. The scene of the rite lay in a hollow. The workman stood on the bank to watch; and as the orb of day appeared over the ridge of the eastern Quantock hills, he apprised the parents: the child, previously stripped naked, was then handed to his elder sister, who introduced his feet first into the cleft, through which he was drawn, and received by his elder brother on the western side. He was then dressed.

The wedges were removed from the sides of the cleft, and, as the workman told me, the sides "sprang together." Some bands or withies of ash were then applied, and finally, a mud plastering; when the party returned home.

Some months afterwards, the father and the workman visited the spot, and found the ash flourishing like the psalmist's bay tree; the wound healed, the cicatrix apparent.

The conditions had all been accurately obeyed; but as the parents told me, it made no difference to the Hernia.*

The same workman who assisted at the above function, at my request, has prepared in a similar way, an ash sapling, which I have deposited in our Museum, where it is on view beside a tree, deposited by Mr. Elworthy, which had some years ago, been used for the purpose, and which plainly exhibits the partially united cleft.

This narrative set me at once enquiring amongst the old people; and in all the villages around Bishop's Lydeard, I found many persons who had heard of the practice. An old

* According to local belief, no benefit could have been expected in this case. This treatment is held to be a cure for Congenital Hernia only, and not for accidental rupture. The entire significance of the custom agrees with that condition. [Ed.]

inhabitant of Lydeard St. Lawrence recollects a case at an ash tree, in a locality called the "Red Post," fifty years ago. The folks in the Bishop's Lydeard alms house could tell me it was practised "ages ago." Friends in Devonshire, Dorset, Hants, Wilts, Warwickshire, all found, on enquiry, the practice known—I do not say the entire ritual—amongst the older folk. I understand from our esteemed Secretary, Mr. Elworthy, that in the *Transactions* of the Devonshire Association is a notice of the custom: to these, however, I have not had access.

I have, however, to thank Miss Elton, of Heathfield Hall, for enquiries made at a hamlet called Hill Common, near Milverton, amongst the inhabitants there.

Urania Chorley, of Hill Common, supplied the following details of a case she was concerned in. The process took place in May, 1885. It must be performed in the month of May, when the sap "begins to run up the tree." The child was dressed in white, and passed three times through the fissure, and head first. The mother introduced the child, the father held the sides of the tree apart, and the master of the ceremonies received him. The tree was afterwards bound up with hay-bind, and plastered with manure.

A woman named Sarah Ann Garnsey, who also resides at Hill Common, supplied the narrative of a second case here. The ash tree used was situated in the parish of Langford Budville. A detail supplied by the mother is curious:—

"After the tree was bound up, and the child nearly cured, some workmen felling trees close by, by some means injured the particular ash; and the child got worse, but improved again, and is now quite well."

The master of the ceremony in both these, and many other cases, was a man named King, who is now dead, and who lived at Wiveliscombe. He is said to have "muttered some prayers" during the process. He made no special charge for his services, saying that would break the spell; but his clients presented him with what they deemed a fitting honorarium, in this last

case, money, amount not specified, and four sittings of eggs.

I may mention the description of another observer, the Rev. Gilbert White, in his perennially fascinating *Natural History of Selborne*.

The following passage occurs in his 28th letter to the Hon. Daines Barrington :—

“In a farm yard near the centre of this village stands at this day a row of pollard ashes, which, by the seams and long cicatrices down their sides, manifestly show that in former times they have been cleft asunder. These trees, when young and flexible, were severed and held open by wedges, while ruptured children, stripped naked, were pushed through the apertures, under a persuasion that by such a process the poor babes would be cured of their infirmity. As soon as the operation was over the tree in the suffering part was plastered with loam and carefully swathed up. If the parts coalesced and soldered together, as usually fell out where the feat was performed with any adroitness at all, the party was cured ; but where the cleft continued to gape the operation, it was supposed, would prove ineffectual. Having occasion to enlarge my garden not long since, I cut down two or three such trees, one of which did not grow together.

We have several persons now living in the village who in their childhood were supposed to be healed by this superstitious ceremony, derived down, perhaps, from our Saxon ancestors, who practised it before their conversion to Christianity.”

The letter is dated January 8th, 1776.

A brief glance at the origin of this most curious custom will bring my paper to a close. First, as regards the ash, I could never find from my informants that any other tree was used. I asked why? to the intelligent workman who prepared me the model. He returned the very practical reply that he did not know, unless it was that the wood was so easily cleft.

Greeks, Romans, Scandinavians, have all joined in reverencing the ash as a sacred tree, as one of good omen, and

of great veneration. I need only mention the sacred ash, the Yggdrasill of the Scandinavian Eddas, the world tree. As Carlyle writes :—"Igdrasil, the ash tree of existence, has its roots deep down in the Kingdom of Hela or death ; its trunk reaches up heaven high, spreads its boughs over the whole universe. It is the tree of existence. At the foot of it, in the death Kingdom, sit three Nornas—fates, past, present, future, watering its roots from the sacred well. Its boughs, with their buddings and disleafings—events, things suffered, things done, catastrophes—stretch through all lands and times."

A Norse tradition has it also that from the wood of the ash man was first formed. Hesiod, too, derives his brazen race of men from it.

I may refer you for further detail to Mr. Folkard's interesting work on "Plant Lore ;" but enough has been cited to show the veneration which the tree enjoyed.

This curious Hernia custom carries, down in fact to the last quarter of this nineteenth century, the oldest form of worship of our ancestors, sun worship, sun reverence. The daily returning planet in all his glory was to them, if not the actual Deity, yet the symbol of everything of vital importance, victory over darkness, restoration of glorious light, warmth, growth, rising

" Right against the Eastern gate,
Clad in flames and amber light,"

and passing away in the evening through the gates of the West, always to return to victory like the legendary heroes of after days, whom we now indissolubly associate with sun legend.

Later, the mysteries of the propagation of the race fascinated the minds of early man, and the Phallic cult arose, at first a pure cult be it understood, which was largely associated with the primæval sun worship. Our ritual partakes of both cults. On examining the drawings that have come down to us of the Egyptian gods and goddesses, we find in almost every

case a peculiar symbol, which they usually hold in the left hand—the Crux Ansata.

In Mr. Hargreave Jennings's interesting work, "The Rosicrucians," a full explanation of this emblem is given.

The Crux essentially consists of an elliptical figure—the Yoni of Hindu mythology—crossed by a vertical line, the Lingam, with the horizontal sigma or earth line. The whole symbol is the same as the Hindu Linga Yoni.

The whole rationale, the whole idea of this mysterious ash tree ritual is that of second birth—of being born again. The child it would seem to these ancients, would be free from its defect, could but a second entry into the world under proper auspices be arranged.

The Yoni in the ash shall figure the earth mother—the birth shall take place, under the influence of the all potent sun—"the creator, light, source of life, and the giver of food."

I think it will be agreed that it is well we had some record of this superstition, in our volumes of *Proceedings*.

As Mr. Froude remarks, when speaking of curious Scandinavian customs, the passing children through fires, on the night of the summer solstice—"old as the Israelitish prophet, who saw the children passed through the fire to Moloch," in words which we may apply to the ritual we have passed in review.

"Thousands of years it has survived, down to these late times of ours, in which like much besides, it will now end, dissolved in the revolutionary acids of scientific civilisation."

Op. Cit.

White, Rev. Gilbert—"Nat. Hist. of Selborne."

Carlyle, T.—"Heroes and Hero Worship."

Folkard, R., Junr.—"Plant Lore Legends and Lyrics."

Jennings, Hargreave—"The Rosicrucians."

Anon.—"Phallic Worship."

Froude—"Story of Spanish Armada," etc., p. 305.