

II. *A Letter from Edward Milward, M. D. to Martin Folkes, Esq; President of the ROYAL SOCIETY, concerning an Antidote to the Indian Poison in the West-Indies.*

S I R,

Read Jan. 7.
1741-2.

AS the ROYAL SOCIETY, over which you so worthily preside, was instituted for the Advancement and Propagation of Natural Knowledge, and as I am convinced, that every the least Step towards such a Design cannot but be agreeable; I shall do myself the Pleasure of communicating to you, an extraordinary specific Antidote against the *Indian* or *Negro* Poison; which, I doubt not, will be the more acceptable, as this Poison hath hitherto been esteem'd the most destructive of any.

The Knowledge of this Remedy was first purchas'd from a famous *Negro* Poisoner, at a great Expence, by one who styles himself, *Isaiab Burges*, *Doctor of Physic*; and the Secret devolv'd to myself, by means of a Manuscript of the Doctor's, which, amongst others, I have procur'd, for my *History of the Physical and Chirurgical Writers of this Kingdom*. The Author intended this little Tract, which contains *Observations on the most considerable Distempers in America*, should be made public; he wrote it, at the Request of his Friends, about when an Expedition was design'd into *America*; and particularly declares, that he purpos'd

pos'd the Divulgarion of this specific Antidote, *that such as should go to the West-Indies, amongst the Spaniards, might meet with a Remedy in case of Necessity.* What prevented the Doctor from executing this his laudable Design, I know not; but as it was plainly his Intention it should be made public, and as the Knowledge of such a Remedy may be of the greatest Benefit to Mankind, I shall lay it before you, without any farther Preamble; that it may, by means of your *Transactions*, be communicated to the World, provided you shall judge it worthy of so distinguishing an Honour.

“ The *Negroes*, says he, use a Poison of a strange
 “ and extraordinary Nature. The Dose is very
 “ small, and it hath no ill Taste; so that, mixt with
 “ Meat or Drink, it is not perceivable. It causeth
 “ divers Symptoms, and the Effect is various, accord-
 “ ing as the Dose is large or small. It kills some-
 “ times in very few Hours, sometimes in some
 “ Months, and at others in some Years. The Sym-
 “ ptoms are according to the Quantity given: If
 “ great, it causeth Evacuations upwards and down-
 “ wards; of Excrements first, then of Humours, and
 “ lastly of Blood, with Fainting-Fits, and Sweatings.
 “ Death follows in six or seven Hours. The *Ne-
 “ groes* turn white.

“ If the Dose is but small, the Sick loofeth his Ap-
 “ petite, feels Pains in his Head, Arms and Limbs,
 “ a Weariness all over, Soreness in his Breast, and Diffi-
 “ culty of Breathing, (so that one appears as being
 “ in a Consumption) and at last dies languishing.

“ All Remedies yet publicly known, are of no
 “ Force nor Virtue against this Poison; and the Pa-

“ tient certainly dies. Nay, I question whether the
 “ best Cordial Remedies can put the least Stop to
 “ the Efficacy of its Venom, or retard Death, and
 “ put it off, longer than the Intention of the
 “ cunning Poisoner had fixed it, in proportioning
 “ the Dose.

“ I know that the *Spaniards* have Knowledge of
 “ this very Poison, and am satisfied, that I have seen
 “ several *Bocaneers* die of it, given them by *Spanish*
 “ Women. I am also persuaded, that it is the same
 “ Poison used in *Spain* and *Italy*.

“ This Poison hath but one specific Antidote
 “ yet known; the Knowledge of which cost me very
 “ dear: And it was with much Difficulty I could
 “ persuade a famous *Negro* Poisoner to part with
 “ his Secret.

“ The Antidote is, the Root of the *Sensible Weed*,
 “ as it is commonly called, or *Herba Sensitiva*. It
 “ grows like a Shrub, has no Prickles, blossoms
 “ yellow, and bears little Cods, full of small black
 “ pretty Seeds, of which the Women make Neck-
 “ laces and Bracelets. Take none of the Root but
 “ what is in the Ground; wash it well, and split it
 “ in two. Take a good Handful of these Roots
 “ so split, and steep them in three Quarts of good
 “ clear Water in an earthen glazed Pot, having a
 “ Cover. Use but a moderate Fire, that it may boil
 “ but very gently. The Decoction has no ill Taste,
 “ and you may either give it so, or add Sugar, as
 “ you shall think best. Give to the Patient a good
 “ Glass of this Decoction, as warm as he can drink
 “ it; an Hour after give another, and so for some
 “ time, as you shall think it necessary to make a
 “ perfect

“ perfect Cure. There is no Danger of giving too
 “ much ; it can do no Harm at all. Several People
 “ have taken this Decoction, though they have not
 “ been poisoned, thinking it would do them good
 “ in other Distempers ; so that one who any ways
 “ suspects he has had some of that Poison given
 “ him, may drink it very safely, and in what Quan-
 “ tity he pleases. The rest of the Plant is to be
 “ rejected as bad and noxious.”

The Doctor enforces his Observations by remark-
 ing, that he had been a Practitioner in those Parts
 for above Five-and-twenty Years. Many *Negroes*,
 he says, were wonderfully preserved and cured by
 taking of this Antidote, though, for Brevity's sake,
 he gives but one Instance ; which is, “ of a strong
 “ *Negro* Man, about thirty Years of Age, and in
 “ perfect Health, who being one Night at a Planta-
 “ tion four Miles distant from that where he lived,
 “ was invited to drink a Dram of Rum, by another
 “ *Negro*, who mixt Poison with it. The Fellow
 “ drank it up, perceiving nothing to be in it ; but
 “ as he was taking Leave, on the other's bidding
 “ him Farewel, and telling him he should never see
 “ him again, he suspected he was poison'd ; and put-
 “ ting his Finger in his Mouth, vomited up great
 “ part of the Poison, though there remain'd enough
 “ of it to cause continual Evacuations in him up-
 “ wards and downwards ; of Excrements first, then
 “ of Humours, and lastly of Blood. As he was
 “ coming home, he fainted away several times, and
 “ calling at length to some Neighbour's *Negro*
 “ Houses, was brought home extremely alter'd ; turn'd
 “ white ; and was, as it was thought, expiring. The
 “ Root

“ Root was immediately sent for, and the Decoction
 “ made, and given him in great Quantity. He con-
 “ tinued taking it for three or four Days, and on
 “ the Fifth went to work along with the rest of the
 “ *Negroes.*”

That the *Sensible Plant* is endow'd with the Property of resisting Poison, hath been, before this, taken Notice of. For the Honourable Sir *Hans Sloane*, the late worthy President of this SOCIETY, whose Writings will always remain an Honour to his Country, hath observ'd from *Piso*, that the *Root* of this Shrub is an Antidote against the *Shrub* itself, which is very poisonous, and kills by Degrees, making the unhappy Sufferers Cachectical, Short-winded, and Melancholy, till they die *. This greatly corroborates what our Author has advanced; and it is observeable, that he likewise directs all Parts of the Plant, except that Part of the Root which is in the Ground, *to be rejected, as bad and noxious*: Though whether this be exactly the same Plant with what our Author mentions, I dare not determine; as Sir *Hans Sloane* inquires whether it be not the *Æschynomene, seu Mimosa arborescens Americana, &c. flore albo*; whereas Dr. *Burgess* expressly says, that it *flowers yellow*: though this may, possibly, be a Mistake in him.

I am sensible it may be objected, that the *Negro* Poison is of various Kinds; and that therefore, though this Remedy may be so extraordinary a Specific in some Cases, it may be unavailable in others. That

* *Nat. Hist. of Jamaica, Vol. II. p. 57.*

the *Negroes* may have the Knowledge of different Sorts of Poison, I deny not; but it would appear, from the Universality of the Effects of this Medicine, as the Doctor affirms *many have been wonderfully cured and preserved by it*, and does not mention a single Instance of its Miscarriage, as though the *Negroes* in the *West-Indies* used but *one* Kind of Poison, or, if different, yet such as comes within the Power of this Remedy. Besides, as we cannot be assured, but by the Consequence, whether the Poison be of that Sort, as to be within the Reach of this Remedy, or not, I think there is all the Reason in the World it should be administer'd under any Suspicion of the *Indian* Poison: Especially, as the Doctor assures us of its great Innocence; and I believe every one will readily agree with me, that it is no small Recommendation of a Medicine, *That let what will become of its good Effects, it can do no Harm.*

Dioscorides hath rightly observ'd in his *Alexipharmics*, that very different Poisons produce the same Effects upon Human Bodies; and that therefore they are, for the most part, curable by the same Remedies. For though the Kinds of Poisons are various, yet the Effects which arise from them are common, and but few †. And that Ornament of his Profession, the learned and beneficent Dr. *Mead*, who hath given us a more rational Account

† Fere enim plurimorum Venenorum facultates in consimiles effectus Corpus tandem deducunt: quam ob causam plerisque communia conducunt Auxilia. Varia equidem sunt Venenorum genera: communes tamen, nec ita multi, qui ex iis oriuntur, affectus.

of the Nature and Properties of *Poisons*, and taught us to reason with greater Certainty about such abstruse Points, than any that ever came before him, is of Opinion, *that though there be a great Variety of internal Poisons, as well Mineral as Vegetable, yet they do all of them seem to agree in their primary Effects, and manner of Operation.* Ess. III. And in another Place, *That virulent Plants, although they may be distinguish'd even from one another by particular Virtues, do however kill by a like Operation and Force.* From whence it seems reasonable to infer, that although Poisons may be various in themselves, yet it is not impossible they may be cured by the same Remedy; as they produce like Effects, and seem to kill by a like manner of Operation. And a very remarkable Instance of this we have in all corrosive Poisons, whether of the Mineral or Vegetable Kingdom, which, however different in themselves, produce their Effects universally by eroding the Coats of the *Stomach*, and the *Primæ Viæ*; and which are all curable in like manner, by sheathing and blunting their acrimonious Particles, by means of smooth, lubricating and oleaginous Medicines.

But be this as it will, I think the Remedy deserves, at least, a fair and impartial Trial, as the Author has not indulged in any rhetorical Flourishes, or Theory, but seemingly confin'd himself to Truth, and plain matter of Fact. And, indeed, should it be found to succeed but *One* time in *Twenty*, in such deplorable Circumstances, it cannot but be a Discovery of the greatest Consequence; especially as we are sufficiently assur'd beforehand, that all Cordial and
Alexi-

Alexipharmic Medicines besides, can be of no Service at all. And this may serve as another Argument, why, under any Probability of a Person's being injur'd by the *Indian* or *Negro* Poison, this Remedy should be administer'd; even though we cannot positively be assur'd, whether it be by this very Poison or not: For in Cases where all other Remedies are likely, if not sure, to prove unavailable, we may as well advise this as any.

I cannot affirm, I ever knew any Effects from this Remedy on my own Knowledge or Observation; having never resided in those Places where this Poison is frequent: But surely a Medicine which promises such great things for the Good of Mankind, deserves to have a fair and candid *Examination*; and should it prove to be as serviceable as the Author assures us it is, you cannot but receive the highest Satisfaction, in being instrumental in divulging the Knowledge of a Remedy, from whence the Public may receive such unspeakable Benefit. And it would be doing the highest Service to their Fellow-Creatures, if such as have a proper Opportunity in the *West-Indies*, would administer it, according to the Directions here given, and report an exact Account of its Success.

One thing more I must beg leave to add, with regard to the Trial of this Medicine; that it would be necessary to observe, whether the same Root, dried, would be of equal, or any Efficacy: that if so, the Benefits of it may be extended to other Climates wherein this Herb does not naturally grow: Particularly as the Author is convinced, that the same sort of Poison is used both in *Spain* and *Italy*.

I shall do myself the Honour, some other Opportunity, of laying before you the Conjectures of Authors concerning this *Indian* or *Negro* Poison, with the Remarks I have made thereon; and if the present Paper proves acceptable, shall communicate to you the Doctor's other Observations concerning the *Bites of poisonous Snakes, poisonous Fish, Wounds,* and *the most remarkable Distempers in the West-Indies*; which cannot but be of great Service to such as reside in those Parts; especially as he mentions chiefly such Medicines as are *Natives* of the Country he treats of, and which are therefore the more easy to be procur'd.

I am, Sir, (with the greatest Esteem)

Your, and the SOCIETY'S,
most Obedient,
and very humble Servant,

Edward Milward.