

**FOLK-MEDICINE; A
CHAPTER IN THE
HISTORY OF CULTURE**

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Folk-Medicine; A Chapter in the History of Culture by William George Black

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WILLIAM GEORGE BLACK

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THE HISTORY OF CULTURE.

BY

WILLIAM GEORGE BLACK,

F.S.A.Scot.

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To the Memory of

C. B. B.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

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HER SON.

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FOLK-MEDICINE.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

IN approaching a subject involved in great obscurity the first duty of a writer must be to strike a note of warning. This is specially necessary when the primitive conceptions of the origin of disease, as suggested or evinced by existing folk-lore and kindred conceptions in Folk-Medicine generally, are to be considered. However well authenticated the facts may seem to be, any conjecture founded on them should, in the present state of our knowledge, be tendered with caution, and only accepted after careful consideration, for generalization on the subject of superstitions must be always perilous.

But, while this is so, it must be obvious that no progress can be made at all unless we grapple with such facts as we have. We have some data to go upon. The possibility of arriving at definite rules in other branches has been proved, over and over again, by the students at home and on the Continent, who have presented the world with studies at once exact and liberal—exact, because they are the fruit of untiring zeal in seeking authentic sources of information; liberal, because the bare facts have been collectively illuminated by a light which could have had no existence had generalization not been attempted.

It cannot be altogether vain to hope that reasons for investigation, of a precise kind, may also be found in the beliefs which are treated of in the following pages, and, although it has always been with hesitation that I have allowed myself to do more than place my notes before my readers, yet these beliefs, like living things, have a beginning and a reason, and some indulgence may perhaps be allowed to one who finds his barque sailing among strange islands.

I may go further, and affirm that in the matter of that which follows there is much which deserves attention. The facts are, indeed, so scattered up and down the pages of travels and histories, of voyages and tales, that it is easy to excuse even a man interested in the proper study of mankind having but hazy notions of the thoughts of his rural countrymen on such a subject; yet, apart from other things, we have in the Folk-Medicine which still exists the unwritten record of the beginning of the practice of medicine and surgery.

Medical science, like everything else, like our language and our mental conceptions, is the reward of long seeking after light. It has been built up from generation to generation by one people after another, by one man finding out the errors of a predecessor, and a third improving upon both. The tendency of all such developments, however, is to follow the conqueror's plan, and burn the ships. In nature the branch bursts from the tree, and the leaf bursts from the branch, but the growth of the branch does not make the tree less useful, nor does the leaf detract from the branch's merit. In the processes of men's minds, on the other hand, things go differently. When a thought has borne a new fruit, a new thought,—the new thought succeeds to the place of the old, as one king succeeds another on a throne. The old idea is consigned at once to the limbo of the forgotten. It seems useless, unnecessary, cumbering, dead, beside the new. In course of time, therefore, a work of no small difficulty lies before the student or philosopher

who attempts to trace the growth of a single science if written records are wanting. It has not been my intention to illustrate of purpose, by Folk-Medicine, the development of medical science; this is not the place for, nor am I competent to undertake, such investigation, but I do not hesitate to say that the early history of medical science, as of all other developments of culture, can be studied more narrowly and more accurately in the folk-lore of this and other countries than some students of modern science and exact modern records may think possible. Mr. Spencer has said* the course of social change is so irregular, involved, and rhythmical, that it cannot be judged of in its general direction by inspecting any small portion of it; but, while this is admitted, when we consider an earlier remark of the same writer,† that true appreciation of the successive facts which an individual life, even, presents is generally hindered by inability to grasp the gradual processes by which ultimate effects are produced, it becomes clear that to elucidate the contending and conflicting facts, as well as may be, by the aid of comparative folk-lore, is at least one reason why such works as deal with the history of culture may advantageously be compiled and consulted.

After the first shock of death the natural task of man was to seek a reason for the sudden lack of life in one who, but a short time before, had gone about the world as did his brothers still. It must soon have been suggested that the rude weapon of the chase which had missed its aim had some volition of its own, or that some mysterious influence, which had protected the victim from injury before, had been absent or unfriendly. Such a thing as natural death was probably for a long time inconceivable, as it appears still inconceivable to such peoples as the Prairie Indians, who treat all diseases alike, since they must all alike have been caused by one evil spirit. In the South

* *The Study of Sociology*, 7th edition, p. 105.

† *Ibid.*, p. 102.