

Case of poisoning by eating American partridge / by John G.M. Burt.

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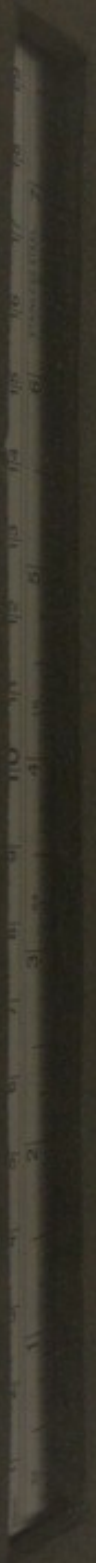
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CASE OF POISONING

BY

EATING AMERICAN PARTRIDGE.

BY JOHN G. M. BURT, M.D., F.R.C.P.

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THE American partridge has, of late years, been much in use in this country, particularly, in winter and spring, when game is scarce, and although, as we have them, they may not realize the description of Audubon as to their surpassing excellence, they are doubtless an agreeable, and generally, a safe article of diet. It does not, however, seem to be generally known in this country, though well known in America, that their use is occasionally followed by most alarming, and sometimes by fatal illness. That this is not uncommon on the other side of the Atlantic, is evidenced by the fact, that Dr Bigelow of Boston, has, in a recent work, detailed a selection of twelve cases from numerous others; whilst on this side, several cases have occurred, some in this city, although they have not been so prominently brought forward, and their histories detailed, as they might, or perhaps ought to have been.

The occurrence of a well marked and most alarming example of poisoning, after eating this bird, having, within these few weeks occupied my attention, in the person of my much esteemed friend, the accomplished author of the *Book of the Farm*, I consider it right to make known the particulars of it, and I feel that I cannot perform my duty so faithfully, as by presenting to the reader, the account given of the case, by the patient himself.

Full and circumstantial as that account is, I am unwilling to abridge it, for, while it is a striking illustration of the possession of consciousness, and the faculty of memory, during hours when the sense of sight, and the power of voluntary motion, were mostly gone, and the circulation apparently suspended, it is a singularly minute account of the feelings experienced, rarely to be met with at the hands of a sufferer by poisoning.

My usual dinner hour is five o'clock, but on Thursday the 13th of March 1856, a friend from the country having called a little before five, I was prevented sitting down to dinner until about a quarter to six. I was in my usual good health on that day. The dinner consisted of a basin of potato-soup, half of an American partridge, a pancake sweetened with apple-jelly, and a bit of

Gruyère cheese. The partridge was split up the back and broiled, not roasted, and served with toast. The drink consisted of water ; and after dinner, of two glasses of Kaltstädter, a light red Rhenish wine, which I have been in the habit of drinking for some time past, in alternation with another red Rhenish wine, Assmaushauser, of a stronger description.

I may mention, that I have, for several years past, in their season, in this country, in the beginning of the year, eaten American partridge with the utmost impunity. I got them always from Mr Muirhead, the poulterer, in Queen Street. The last brace I purchased from him, about ten days ago, and one of them, roasted, I had eaten a few days before last Thursday, without feeling any injurious effect. The part of the bird I usually ate was the white of the breast, but, in this case, I enjoyed the bitterness of the leg, the back and side bones, as we do of grouse of this country.

This bird, though commonly named a partridge, is really a grouse. It is the Ruffed Grouse of America, *Bonasia Umbellus*, and is well and distinctly described by Wilson in his Ornithology of America.

Description of Bird. The male has a crest, the female none. Wilson intimates that when the "birds are allowed to remain undrawn for several days, until the contents of the crop and stomach have had time to diffuse themselves through the flesh, as is too often the case, it may be unwholesome, and even dangerous," and that a week or two may elapse after they are dead, ere they are purchased for the table, and picked and drawn. A much longer time must elapse before they can be used in this country.

The dinner lasted till half-past six, and it being then daylight, I was about to sit down before the fire to read, as is my custom after dinner, when a drowsiness overcame me, which induced me to lie down on the sofa. I had not lain

above a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, when an uneasiness across the region of the stomach, impelled me to rise.

First Sensations. I felt no pain, but only a tension across that region, as if arising from compressed air wanting vent. I had no sooner got to my feet, when an extraordinary sensation came over me. I imagined I *felt* the whole plexus of nerves or of blood-vessels, I know not which, covering the back of my head, shoulders, arms, chest, and abdomen, accompanied with a glowing heat therefrom, and pressing me down with a weight, not unlike what a

Weight on Body. ringed mail shirt of a Circassian chief might do. The face was free from the sensation, but I thought I saw a distinct reticulation of blood vessels on closing my eyelids. Such sensations being quite unusual to me, I did not know what to think of them, and how to get rid of them, and yet felt no alarm as to the results, but hoped that the feeling would soon pass away, and that it might have arisen from a temporary derangement of the stomach. It never occurred to me to take a dram of brandy, and I had no desire to drink anything. I felt an inclination, however, to go to the water-closet. I had taken a Dr Burt's red aperient draught (made from a recipe I have, by Mr Robertson, druggist, George Street), in the morning before breakfast, feeling I would be the better for a clearing out, and it had operated very satisfactorily after breakfast, and this second desire for the stool was just the consequence of that medicine, after again partaking of food. Seeing the fire in a low state, I took the coal scuttle in my hand to the kitchen, on my way to the closet, which is inconveniently situate here out of doors, and I put on my hat to go out, with the sensation of the mailed shirt still upon me. On my return from the closet, I found that the servant had mended the fire, lighted the gas, and closed the shutters. Finding the room in this comfortable state, I sat down before the fire, with the intention of reading, after the sensation should have subsided. The sensation was neither painful nor alarming, but it was anything but agreeable. I had not sat many minutes before the fire, when I suddenly

Blindness. lost my sight ; it was not total blindness, for I could see a red glare from the fire, and a white glare from the gas, not unlike sun-light through a thick haze. The sensation of the mailed shirt as

instantly fled as the blindness had come, and it was succeeded by a sensation of intense cold, as disagreeable as if cold water had been poured upon my head, over my shoulders, and arms, and body. Deeming this change worse than the weight, I felt alarmed for some moments, and thought that rest upon the sofa would do me good. The cold seized my hands and feet so intensely, that I could not continue to lie without a covering of some sort. I groped my way, in the first instance, into my bed-room, which adjoins the dining-room, for my night-cap, which has but little warmth, being made of thread, and then I groped into another room for my plaid. Having procured these, I lay

Desire to Vomit. down again upon the sofa, but had not lain many minutes, when I felt a strong desire to vomit. Still in blindness, I groped my way back into my bed-room for the pot under the bed, but on returning with it to the dining-room, for the sake of the heat, I fell down on the floor, not from tripping, but from sheer prostration of strength, my knees having doubled under me. I got to my feet again, immediately, and sat down on the sofa with the expectation to vomit. I could not vomit, though making vigorous efforts. The noise of the fall had brought up my housekeeper, who was sitting in the room below, and she tells me she found me sitting on the sofa, with my eyes glazed, staring up at the ceiling, my mouth open and gasping, and my face of various colours. She was exceedingly alarmed, and especially when she asked me if she could do anything for me, or that she should send for Dr Burt, and I made her no reply. Her alarm at this sudden change in me was the greater, that she had seen me in my usual good health after dinner. Hearing something extraordinary in the room, the servant next came up from the kitchen, and she found me also in the state I have just described. Both never doubted I was dying. The housekeeper then inquired if I would have water to drink, and I faintly replied, yes. I had distinctly heard her two former questions, but had not then the power to answer them. I constantly evinced abortive efforts to vomit. I drank a little cold water. She then wished to know if I would have warm water, and I replied more promptly, By all means. On drinking the warm water, I obtained some degree of relief by vomiting, which I could not otherwise obtain, and there was also a partial cessation of blindness. Meanwhile the housekeeper had sent the servant to a labourer, who resides in a cottage on the ground, to go with all possible speed for Dr Burt. The labourer sent his youngest son for Dr Burt, whose house he reached about eight o'clock. The relief was very temporary.

The desire to vomit returned with redoubled violence, my
Choking Sensa- throat becoming choked, and my stomach felt so distended as
tion. if it would burst. The blindness returned as darkly as ever.

In this way I alternately gasped and convulsively twitched my arms in darkness, until I recognised Dr Burt's voice. Dr Burt inquired of me what I had taken for dinner, and I replied an American partridge, upon which he declared that I had been poisoned by it. The housekeeper, in an agonised voice, had requested me only to speak to her, but I could not, although I heard distinctly every word she uttered, such was the feeling of suffocation I experienced. Dr Burt gave me a tumbler of warm water to drink, and he

inquired if there was any brandy in the house. The house-
Brandy. keeper found the brandy in the press, and, after drinking a glass of it, I vomited with comparative ease, and there was a partial return of the sight. Again the feeling of suffocation returned, accompanied with a sense of horror, and of the blindness; but I felt no apprehension of death, nor an approach to it. I believe that the sight of my condition was more alarming to others, than the sense of danger to myself. After

Vomiting. repeated doses of warm water and brandy, I had retched up a considerable quantity of matter, but so feeble had I become, that I could not support the pot in my hands, and let it fall unconsciously upon the floor, and broke it, and spilt its contents on the carpet. This accident created a new scene of confusion. A wash-hand basin was provided me, which

I held on my knees while sitting on the sofa. I cannot go through all the particulars of my paroxysms at this period, the spectators being better able to relate them than I can, but I retained my consciousness all the time, and heard every remark that was made, although I could see nothing.

After the symptoms of danger had subsided, when the sense of horror had passed away, and the convulsive twitchings of my arms had ceased, in consequence of the sense of suffocation having left me, the doctor informed me that he had to go to town for something, and would soon return, and recommended me to go to bed in the meantime, to cause the return of warmth into my chilled hands and limbs. I could not take off my clothes without assistance, and it was like a last effort on my part, that any portion of my dress could be removed. I could not walk to my bed, short as the distance was, without support; and on getting into it, I felt as if I was done, and expressed myself so. A cold shivering seized my entire body, and a cold perspiration burst out on my face, and the blindness continued without abatement. At this moment

Sense of Chill. I must have been a pitiable sight, for so great a change to overtake me in so short a time! A creeping feeling accompanied the coldness of the hands and limbs, as when a foot is said to sleep; and yet I could converse, the sense of suffocation having entirely left me.

The doctor returned with my friend Mr Nasmyth. On receiving a glass of brandy from the doctor, while in bed, my sight instantly returned, and I could distinctly see a large print upon the opposite wall of the dining-room, through the open bed-room door. The return of clear light was a cause of great joy to me, as I was by no means certain of its return at all. I felt certain, however, that the cause of my illness was now removed, cold and uncomfortable as I felt. There was no pulsation at the wrist or the temples, and no beating of the heart could be felt on the breast. I had now been in that state for four hours and a half. Means must therefore be used to cause the return of heat to the body, and this must chiefly be done by the application of hot water. There

Application of Warmth. was one copper hot water bottle in the house, but none of earthen ware. At this conjuncture, my neighbour, Mr Child, kindly sent me a number of hot water earthen-ware bottles, and not only so, but caused them to be sent, filled with hot water. My own bottle at my feet, a large one at my back, another large one at the abdomen, and a flat one for the chest, completed these appliances, while my legs were rolled in warm flannel, and the bed clothes increased with additional blankets, plaids, and shawls. With these, and a doze of a solution of a salt of ammonia, with occasional half glasses of brandy, the pulse was again established, and heat returned to the body. By midnight, everything had been done that could be done for me, and my medical friends left me for the night. I attended assiduously to keeping the hot water bottles to their proper positions, as long as necessary, not expecting to enjoy the luxury of a sleep, but thankful of quiet rest alone, after an evening of such awful exertion. Thus situated, I not only returned to heat, but got into a state of perspiration, so much so, that I could not endure the bottles longer than to half-past three, when I called the servant to remove them, except the one at my feet.

Mr Nasmyth kindly called on me early next morning (Friday), and the doctor came at eleven, when I was to breakfast on roll bread steeped in a cup of sweet tea. My pulse recovered its ordinary tone during the morning. I

Condition next day. could hear my heart beat with my head on the pillow, as steadily as the strokes of a steam-engine in the floor below me. My pulse is always slow, never exceeding sixty beats in a minute, and its character is full, steady, and firm. My tongue was in a good state. The muscles of the chest and abdomen felt sore after their last night's exertions. My hands and arms tingled, and then seemed as if heavy weights were thrown over my arms between the elbow and the hand. Feeling thus fatigued, and the air being cold with an east wind, the doctor recom-

mended my remaining in bed all day, and taking nourishing food. I dined in bed at five o'clock, on beef-tea, beef-steak, and Gruyère cheese, and drank two glasses of port, and washed the whole down with some brandy and cold water. I had recovered my usual good health. I felt tingling in my hands and arms all day, whenever I had occasion to use them, and at times I amused myself by *rubbing* my hands against the skin, the shirt, or the sheet, and a very extraordinary sensation was thereby experienced. I felt as if numberless delicate steel springs were attached to, and suspended from, the palms of my hands, vibrating at a high rate, and accompanied with a sensation of heat. The vibrations ceased of themselves in a few seconds, and they ceased, in even a shorter time when I spread out my hands forcibly, tightening the skin of the palms, and then they gradually disappeared from the points of the fingers. The feeling was like the escape of a large quantity of electricity from blunted points. This sensation, though unaccompanied with pain, was by no means agreeable. The vibrations were producible at pleasure. Thinking it too long to fast from five in the afternoon to ten or eleven next morning, I took half a basin of beef-tea at ten o'clock at night, a drink of brandy and water, and about one-third of a wine glass of brandy. The moment I had taken the brandy, the vibrations in the palms of the hands ceased, and have never since returned, and they could not be reproduced by rubbing. I had slept from twelve to six o'clock on Saturday morning, but the sleep was not refreshing.

I rose on Saturday after breakfasting in bed on tea, roll, and F'innon had-dock. The doctor came about eleven o'clock. He took with him half of the partridge I had left at dinner on Thursday, with the exception of a little of the breast, which the housekeeper had given to the young cat in the house on Thursday evening. The doctor also took away the crop of the bird, with its contents, to have them examined and analyzed. The servant had drawn the bird for dressing at dinner, and had taken the crop and head to the dunghill, where the crop was found entire on Saturday forenoon. The skin of the crop was moist when drawn; it had become dry by exposure to the air. After shaving and washing I felt quite well, but thought my eyes seemed more glassy than usual.

I received this information on Sunday from the housekeeper: The young cat had eaten part of the *breast* of the bird on Thursday evening, and was no worse for it. The old cat had eaten the *bones* of the bird I had left, also on the Thursday evening, namely, the bones of the leg, the back and side bones, and the breast bone and ribs; and on Friday forenoon she was observed by the servant, to stagger in her gait when walking in the kitchen and outside the house. She seemed unwell, until she came at length to the kitchen fireside and vomited, when she became better. The young cat had gone to the dunghill on Saturday afternoon and brought away the head and neck of the bird, and eaten them at the stable, and she also became ill, and did not get better until she had vomited, which she also did in the kitchen. From these circumstances, it is probable that these animals had been affected by the poison of the decayed parts of the bird, as well as I had been.

I have been requested to draw up the particulars of this case by Dr Burt, which I have thus done, but perhaps with more particularity than necessary. At all events, I have put down all the particulars I can remember.

HENRY STEPHENS.

Red Braes Cottage, March 17, 1856.

The perusal of the above, I imagine, leaves little to be expected from me; but I think it right to add, that the apprehensions entertained by the females, as to the result, were fully shared in by me. His general aspect was that of a man in a state of complete collapse; his surface of icy coldness throughout, the room being very warm,

having a very large fire in proportion to the size of the room, which is very small. His pupils were much dilated, and he was totally blind. He heard, and evidently understood all that he heard, but his utterance was mostly sluggish, while at times he spoke distinctly. His expression, when I attributed his condition to his having eaten the partridge, I shall never forget; the eyes not sympathising with the other features of his countenance in depicting his astonishment.

He was sitting on the sofa when I gave him the first glass of brandy, I immediately made him recline, when his face changed colour from the unearthly mahogany hue to the most feminine fairness, which it lost, however, in a few minutes.

Improvement was steady from the period of his freely vomiting, which the large quantity of strong brandy assisted in enabling him to accomplish, besides contributing to restore the heat of his surface; and, when I left him, after being two hours with him, he was considerably relieved, though I was by no means satisfied that he was out of danger; and my leaving the domestics to carry out my directions, as to the management of the case, was less for the purpose of obtaining more efficient means of treatment, than for that of apprising his early, intimate, and valued friend, Mr Nasmyth, of his condition, by which I also secured Mr N.'s kind and valuable assistance while danger lasted.

Mr S. informs me that now, after a lapse of five weeks, he still occasionally feels the sensation of weight in his arms.

This case does not seem to bear out either of the conclusions arrived at by Dr Bigelow. His first, "That the bird is affected with some disease at the time of its death," seems quite gratuitous, unsupported by analogous facts. Indeed, the condition of the bird, which in plumage and plumpness differed not from others, is a sufficient answer to this speculation.

His second, "That some slow chemical change, *not putrefaction*, may take place when the flesh is long kept in cold weather," seems as unlikely, for were it so, the cases of poisoning from its use ought to be much more frequent in this country, where the birds can only be obtained after long keeping, and are in great demand and consumed in large quantity; whilst, in the present case, the companion bird, of the brace purchased, had been recently dined upon by my friend, without its producing a disagreeable sensation.

His third, "That the idiosyncrasy of individuals renders some persons intolerant of this species of food," to which latter conclusion Dr B. chiefly clings, can apply with no force here, where the patient had, for years, been accustomed to consume them, and sometimes, as in the present instance, chiefly to dine on a portion of one; and I feel firmly persuaded that a portion of that, which reduced the iron frame of my friend, would have made short work with his venerable and faithful housekeeper.

I am much more disposed to coincide with the view taken by Mr Wilson, and to ascribe the evil, to birds whose crops have recently

been distended with portions of poisonous plants, being allowed to remain for weeks unpicked and undrawn. May it not be, that the fowler, in his desire to make a good bag, picks up birds which have been themselves poisoned, by an over dose of these same plants. The countless numbers consumed, and the only occasional occurrence of the poisoning, might warrant this supposition, which, I confess, I am the more inclined to entertain, from the facts—that Mr Macnab, of the Royal Botanic Garden, who kindly interested himself in the investigation, has failed to discover, in the contents of the crop of the bird, an adequate solution of the difficulty, and that Dr Douglas MacLagan has not been able to throw any further light on the subject, as the following note will show.

28, Heriot Row, April 14, 1856.

MY DEAR BURT,—I have, according to your wish, examined the remains of the partridge which you sent me, but, as we anticipated, without any satisfactory result. There being no specific poison to look for, all I could do was, to examine the contents of the crop, and then to try whether or not the flesh would yield anything of a corresponding nature.

The whole contents of the crop were exhausted by maceration for some days in alcohol, the spirit was distilled off, and the residue mixed with water. The fluid was then agitated with ether, and the ethereal and watery solution separated by the pipette. The ethereal portion was clear, and bright green. It gave, on evaporation, a dry resinous residue, containing abundance of chlorophylle, and having a marked bitterness, with slight astringency, and free from acrimony. The watery portion was slightly turbid, of a pale wine yellow, and gave a sweetish marked residue, without bitterness.

The piece of partridge was treated in a similar manner ; the whole of it, bones included, being chopped down, exhausted with alcohol, and then treated with water and ether. The ethereal fluid, in this case, was pale yellow, and yielded only some brown fat, devoid of all acrimony, but neither bitter nor astringent. The watery portion left an abundant residue, having the flavour of extract of meat (osmazome), with a very slight bitterness and acrimony, but not more so than is to be perceived by the taste in some of perfectly good quality. It is clear that this bitter matter had nothing to do with that of the contents of the crop, for the latter was soluble in ether, while that from the flesh was not. —Believe me, yours very sincerely,

DOUGLAS MACLAGAN.

Dr Burt.

