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ON SOME UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF LAENNEC

By W. S. THAYER

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ON SOME UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF LAENNEC *

By W. S. THAYER

One hundred years ago, on or about the 15th of August, 1819, [425] there appeared a book which marked the beginning of an epoch in medical history. One hundred years ago to-day the author was a tired, ill man, seeking a little rest and recreation in his beloved Kerlouarnec near Douarnenez on the coast of Brittany, endeavouring to stay the inroads of a disease which had carried away already his friends Bichat and Bayle, that malady to which he had devoted such brilliant and fertile studies only to fall in the end its victim.

The last two years have brought to me several opportunities to visit some of the scenes of Laennec's boyhood, and through the great kindness of his biographer, Professor Rouxeau and Dr. Cornillot, librarian of the *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole de médecine* in Paris, I have had the opportunity to examine the relics preserved at the museum of the *Ecole de médecine* at Nantes, and to study some of his precious manuscripts.

A few days before my return from Paris last September it was my good fortune to come into possession of the three letters which I take pleasure in showing you.

A word to begin with on the circumstances of his life. René Théophile Hyacinthe Laennec was born at Quimper, in Brittany, on the 17th of February, 1781. 'Tis a charming little town, Quimper, situated at the junction of the rivers Steir and Odet. The town, flanked by a high hill, lies along the banks of the Odet with its rushing tide. The house in which Laennec was born stood on the quay itself. His father, Théophile Marie Laennec, was a notary, a native of Quimper. His mother was an Angevine of noble extraction. The name,¹

* Read before The Johns Hopkins Hospital Medical Society on March 29, 1920.

¹ Saintignon, Dr. Henri: Laennec: Sa vie et son œuvre, 12°. Paris, J. B. Baillière et fils, 1904.

[425] Celtic in origin, comes probably from the word "*Lenn*" which signifies study or reading; it might properly be translated "reader" or "man of study." It is pronounced as if it were spelled "Lennec"; that is, it *should* so be pronounced. Oddly enough, even in France, it is commonly mispronounced "Laënnec." This is wrong, the diæresis having been added only in recent years by one of his biographers, Théophile Ambroise. None of his family use the diæresis in the spelling of their name, and his collateral descendants pronounce their name "Lennec."

[426] Five years after his birth his mother died, probably of tuberculosis, and Théophile and his younger brother "Michaud" were placed under the care of their uncle, the Curé of Elliant. On the removal of the uncle two years later, the two boys were sent to Nantes, where they were put under the care of another uncle, Dr. Guillaume François Laennec, who, at this time, was rector of the local university.

Laennec's early education was gained at the *Institut Tardivel* and the *Collège de l'oratoire*, which in the school year '91-'92, when Théophile entered, was under the direction of no less a personage than the celebrated Fouché, then a priest. In his uncle William, who was a physician of no mean ability, who had studied with John Hunter in London, Laennec found a devoted friend and adviser, a father indeed, far more of a father than his own brilliant but vain and scatter-brained parent. Some of the talents and tendencies of this parent he inherited and manifested early in his career, to the considerable discomfiture of his uncle; such for instance as a remarkable facility in versification.

In 1795 he began to study medicine at the Hôtel-Dieu de Nantes. At the same time he was an ardent student of the classics. At the age of 11 he translated the first eclogue of Virgil into excellent French verse. He was especially interested in Greek. While devoted to out-door sports and to natural history, the boy, rather early, became impressed with the desirability of perfecting himself in a variety of arts and graces which might fit him better to commune with the great world. He desired earnestly to take lessons in dancing. He felt that he should learn how to play some musical instrument

and, indeed, became a flute player. He could not help playing [426] the flute. No one with an upper lip like his could fail to play the flute.

In 1798 a severe continued fever, probably typhoid, nearly cut short his career.

In 1800 he accompanied the forces of General Grigny as an army surgeon during the campaign in le Morbihan, passing his time principally at Vannes and Redon. During this campaign he wrote an amusing poem entitled "*La guerre des Venètes*" which purported to be a translation of the work of an old Celtic bard, Cardoe, by a Breton of the name of "*Cenneal*"—obviously his own name reversed. The manuscript of this interesting production which his father had, or sought to have done into Celtic, was lost for a number of years. It has recently been found and is now in the possession of Professor Rouxau.

For several years it looked as if the improvident parent might fail to produce the wherewithal to send his brilliant son to Paris, but finally, in 1801 Laennec entered the *Collège spécial de santé*. There he devoted himself especially to study in the clinic of Corvisart at the *Charité*, then known as the *Unité*. He became a companion of the brilliant Bayle, with whom he began important anatomical and pathological studies under Dupuytren. This early anatomical work, normal and pathological, was notable. He was the first to describe the subdeltoid bursa, as well as the fibrous capsule of the liver. At the age of 21, in a remarkable communication, the result of the analysis of six cases with necropsies, he set forth the first clear clinical and anatomical picture of peritonitis. For general peritonitis Laennec did that which, some 80 odd years later, Fitz did for appendicitis.

At the same time his brother Michaud, who was preparing for the law, was gaining new laurels. In 1802 this brilliant boy entered three contests at the *Ecole des quatre nations*, taking the first prize in all—French, Latin literature and general grammar. In the following year Théophile, in the *Concours des Ecoles spéciales de Paris*, took the first prize in medicine and surgery. He was bitterly disappointed in missing like honours in chemistry and anatomy. The reputa-

[426] tion of the brothers had, however, become so formidable that when at the next concours of the *Ecole pratique*, his name was entered, there were no contestants, and at the request of his instructors, he withdrew from the contest.

In 1804 Laennec published a remarkable article on "*Vers vésiculaires*." Some of his original drawings for this publication I saw last summer at Nantes. He cannot be said to have been an artist, but the work was carefully and well done.

In the same year he published his thesis, "*Propositions sur la doctrine d'Hippocrate relativement à la médecine*." The thesis contains much that is interesting and sound. Here is a paragraph:

The only method by which one can acquire solid knowledge in medicine depends on avoiding the adoption of any principle which is not proven by many individual facts; by studying with care the character and course of diseases and by treating them according to the indications drawn from the observation of that which has succeeded in like cases. This is the method which Hippocrates asserts to have been known long before him, which he presents as the only way by which one may make real discoveries.

In the same year he became a member of the *Société de l'Ecole de médecine*, the precursor of the *Académie de médecine*. He was likewise made an editor of the *Journal de médecine*.

In 1805 he published a valuable article on the classification of organic changes; this led to a distressing quarrel with Dupuytren, which lasted for several years. He was feverishly active, working day and night. Delicate, rather frail physically, he was very fond of out-door sport for which, alas, he had small opportunity, and his uninterrupted studies told upon his health. The happy presence of a cousin, Madame de Pompéry, at the *Château de Couvrelles*, near Soissons, afforded him the opportunity for a much needed vacation. Rouxau, in his biography,² gives a charming account of his visit, during which he met the young woman who was later to be his wife. This account bears interesting testimony to his social charms and to the ease with which he wrote really rather clever verse.

² Rouxau, Alfred: *Laennec avant 1806*, 8°. Paris, Baillière et fils, 1912.

In 1812 he was made *médecin suppléant* at the Beaujon. In [426] 1814 he was attending physician at the Salpêtrière which was then a military hospital. In 1805 he had taken up the study of the native tongue of his people and had acquired a reading and speaking knowledge of the Celtic dialect of lower Brittany. In 1814 there were, in the Salpêtrière, many young Breton [427] conscripts, wholly unable to speak French and wretchedly home-sick. To these poor fellows Laennec was a God-send. "More than one," says Rouxau,³ ". . . doubtless owed his recovery to the joy of finding in Paris a compatriot who knew so well how to comfort them in their maternal tongue."

In 1816 he became chief of service in the Hôpital Necker. It was in this year that he made his famous discovery of the stethoscope. The story has been told so often that one need not repeat it here. With the introduction of the stethoscope and the revelations following its use, he began immediately to accumulate the material which later formed his book. Under the strain of his increasing practice and his constant and engrossing studies, his health began seriously to give way, and in August, 1818, he took a vacation of several months in Brittany, whence he returned on the 1st of November. While correcting the proof of his book, he was at the same time busy with the manufacture of his stethoscopes. Professor Rouxau tells me that it is probably true that all the stethoscopes in existence at the time of his death were made by Laennec himself. Working with a lathe in his own room, he sought to prepare enough instruments so that whosoever bought the book might have a suitable implement with which to pursue his studies.

In these days of prolific terminology, when so many of us coin with delight strange, new, and often barbarous words to express simple things, it is interesting to know that Laennec, who wrote and spoke clearly and simply himself, resisted the introduction of any term for the instrument beyond the simple word "cylinder." Others, however, sought to name the implement for him, and in the end, somewhat reluctantly, he gave way, modifying the term "thoraciscope," suggested

³ *Op. cit.*

[427] by his uncle Guillaume Laennec, by substituting the other Greek root.⁴

About August 15 the book finally appeared, marking, as Rist⁵ has well pointed out, the beginning of modern clinical medicine.

But in its precious folds were imprisoned the heart's blood of its author, and on the 16th of August he writes to his colleague Pérusel of his suffering, his "*hypochondrie, goutte, asthme*" and says: "I am determined to abandon medicine and Paris and retire to Brittany, where few patients, I hope, will be tempted to seek me." At the end of the year, exhausted and suffering from that "asthma" which but too clearly must have been the beginning of his fatal illness, he retired to Kerlouarnec where he spent two years in rest and recuperation.

But he could not resist the call of life and activity in the capital. Health, or the semblance of health returned, and early in 1882, he reappeared in Paris to find himself appointed physician to the Duchesse de Berri, an honorable post but not a sinecure. He was soon made professor of medicine at the *Collège de France*. His practice became arduous. His lectures at the university were carefully prepared and revised, as is testified to by the notes which remain. The first of these, delivered on the 22d of August, 1822, forms the introduction to the *Archives générales de médecine*.

At that time Broussais, with his doctrine of irritation, held full sway. With him the clear-seeing Laennec could not fail to clash. Impetuous, ardent, dogmatic, eloquent, Broussais had a large and enthusiastic following, and the controversy between the two professors was celebrated. It is interesting to-day to read the fine, impassive, logical comments of Laennec upon the views of his fantastic adversary. While Broussais captured the popular imagination and had a large following, the real ability of Laennec soon made itself felt among the more thoughtful students. His clinic grew in popularity; his name became more widely known, but his health could not long stand the strain.

⁴ Rouxau: *Paris méd.*, 1919, XX, No. 44, III.

⁵ Rist, E.: *Presse méd.*, Par., 1913, XXI, 357.

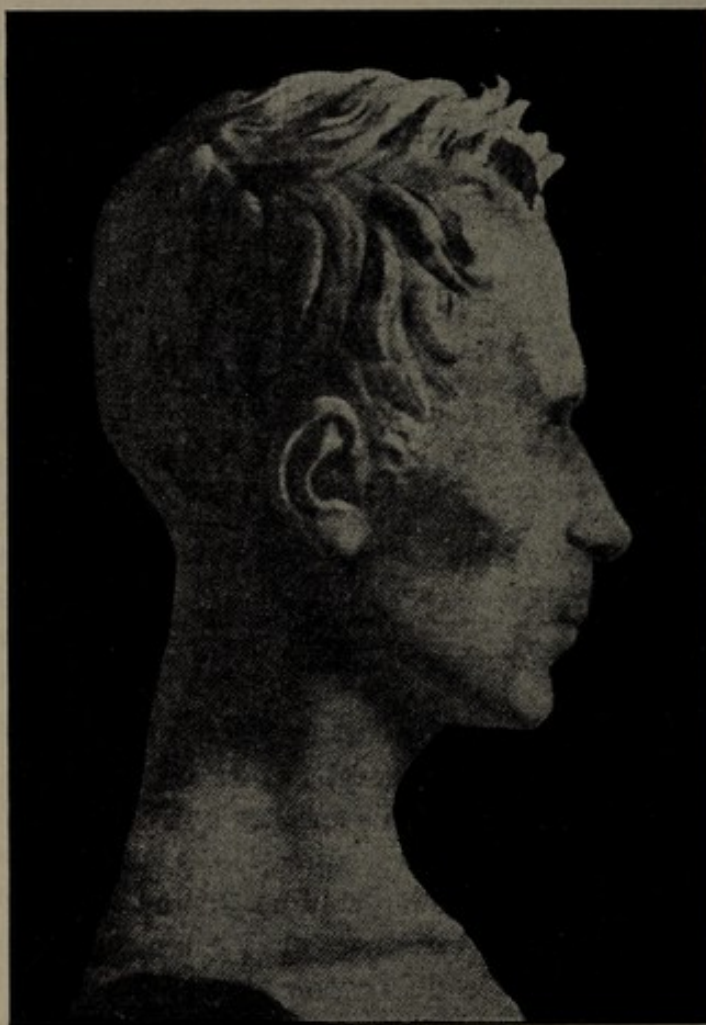
In 1824 he married Madame Guichard-Guéguen, veuve [427] Argou, his devoted companion and house-keeper for many years. He was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour. Already in 1824 the first edition of his book had given out. With the new material that he had collected, Laennec had been busily engaged on a second edition in which the original book was almost rewritten. By May of 1826 the revision was finished, but its preparation had exhausted the physical capital of its author. At the end of June, he gave up his work in Paris and returned to Kerlouarnec, where he died on August 14 at the age of 45.

It was a life of great achievement. He had made important contributions to anatomy; he had taken his place among the great pathological anatomists. He had been the first, anatomically and clinically, to describe peritonitis, bronchitis, emphysema, pulmonary oedema, pulmonary apoplexy. He was the first accurately to describe the character of the sputa in pneumonia, and his pictures, anatomical and clinical, of pneumonia and of pulmonary tuberculosis will always remain classics. His methods of clinical study have never been surpassed, and stand a model for the clinician of to-day. He might almost be called the father of modern clinical medicine. For with all the work of Auenbrugger and Corvisart, the art of physical diagnosis hardly existed before Laennec.

Personally he was a small, rather delicate looking man, with curly chestnut hair. The face was rather thin and oval with a particularly long, typically Celtic upper lip, which is striking in the bust of Toulmouche at Nantes. Last summer, through the courtesy of Professor Rouxeau, I had the happy chance of seeing not only this bust, but also the one good portrait of Laennec which exists. This portrait, painted by Dubois in 1812, is owned by his great-nephew M. Robert Laennec, who most graciously received us at his charming place in the suburbs of Nantes. The picture is life-like; one feels that it must have been a good portrait. The face and figure are most interesting. The expression, somewhat *narquois*, is attractive—a fine, witty, rather whimsical look. Although the man seems small and thin and delicate, yet the long, pointed, typically Irish upper lip and something

[427] about the mouth give a strong suggestion of vigour and spirit and humour. One can well fancy his physical energy. 'Tis a striking painting of an engaging figure.

The three letters which follow were written to an old school
[428] mate, Dr. Courbon Pérusel, of Carhaix, in Finisterre, who has



BUST OF LAENNEC BY TOULMOUCHE (1844). TAKEN
FROM PARIS MÉDICAL, NOVEMBER, 1919.

consulted him because of a "*dartre*," a term which, in those days, evidently covered a large variety of cutaneous manifestations from simple seborrhœa and senile keratosis to graver affections. 'Tis clear from the context that the good fellow's annoyance was based largely on moral compunctions as to the justification of his contemplated matrimony. Laennec endeavours to reassure him, and upbraids him for what he con-

siders purely hypochondriacal fancies. But it is three years [428] before Pérusel is convinced; and before he can persuade himself that he is justified in taking the momentous step, he has consulted the fashionable dermatologist of the day, Jean Louis Alibert, with regard to whose methods Laennec expresses himself with some severity.

The first letter was begun on the 22d of April, 1817, and the first folio, in which Laennec gives so vivid a description of his busy life, is written evidently at one sitting, one might fancy before going to bed. The next four pages are written on separate sheets. The fourth page ends with the words: "*Je crois qu'en—*." The fifth page continues the sentence, "*somme, on ne doit,*" etc., but is written with another pen and in a somewhat different form, clearly at another time. The sentence is finished, however, before the confession which follows in two lines, in the shape of a new date "*29 Avril,*" and an acknowledgment that there has been a week's interruption in the letter. How many of us have done the same!

The second letter in which he speaks of his intention to retire to Brittany, is written on the 16th of August, 1819, the very day after the publication of his book. The third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh lines are in great part erased, "scratched out," the erasures apparently made by his own pen. By careful study with a lens it has, however, been possible to discover the original text. The same is true of his later reference to Alibert. The several words erased in the thirteenth line of the second letter I have not been able to read.

Paris 22 avril 1817*.

Je vous demande mille pardons, mon cher Daru, d'avoir tant tardé à répondre à votre lettre du 28 février que j'ai reçue le 8 mars. Depuis ce jour il ne s'est pas passé un, sans que je me proposasse de vous écrire le lendemain. Je vous dois des excuses pleines et entières, car je suis honteux d'avoir été tout de fois en arrière vis-à-vis de vous; et en conséquence je vais vous expliquer par le détail comment il se fait qu'on a le plus grand désir de savoir des nouvelles de nos amis et même de leur écrire, je suis presque toujours par ce leur jamais écrire que dans les cas de la plus urgente nécessité. Il faut pour cela vous expliquer mon genre de vie. Je me lève à 7h^{1/2} ou même à 8h, car j'ai besoin de beaucoup de sommeil. Je m'habille très souvent en donnant des consultations. Je vais faire une visite d'hôpital (à l'hôpital neuffer) et ensuite un bout de clinique aux élèves qui le suivent. Cela me mène à 10h^{1/2} et déjà le temps me paraît assez pour que les élèves ne puissent pas retrouver leur moi pour déjeuner: je commence donc une tournée qui ne finit que vers 5h^{1/2}. après dîner, c'est à dire vers 6h^{1/2} j'en recommence une autre jusqu'à 10h. il me reste ensuite une heure jusqu'à 11h que je me couche après quelques minutes avant de tenir à jour avant le déjeuner et le dîner, pour tenir à jour mes correspondances de toute espèce, corriger et dactyler en ordre les observations recueillies par les élèves dans mon

* The letters are reduced to one-half their original size.

hôpital, régler mes petites affaires (la). ~~depuis~~ ^{depuis} cette
première ne vous donne qu'une faible idée de ce que c'est
pour un homme un peu occupé, que ce tourbillon
~~de~~ ^{des} relations de toute espèce dans lequel on
se trouve emporté à Paris, quelque fois qu'on s'attache à
les simplifier. J'ai souvent été étonné que vous et
quelques autres de nos confrères vous soyez retirés
dans de très-petites villes. aujourd'hui je vous lève
et approuve très-fort et je salue moi-même très-vivement
(entre nous) à arranger mes affaires de manière à
pouvoir sous très-peu d'années me retirer en bonne retraite
si j'avais ce qui m'est dû ici, ~~ce~~ ^{ce} ce serait probable-
ment aujourd'hui.

Je viens à la question sur la quelle vous me
consultez. je ne conçois pas que vous puissiez
la délicatesse à une pareille extrémité. La contagion
des dartres dans les cas les plus graves mêmes, est
assurément très-obscur. je ne sais si l'application
immédiate et continue pendant quelque temps
d'une dartre phagédénique en ~~phagène~~
suppuration produirait autre effet que celui
d'un rubéfiant, mais je sais bon nombre de
maris qui ont des dartres ruineuses au
croire sans avoir jamais rien communiqué
à leurs femmes et vice versa. quant aux dartres
torpéennes comme les vôtres, un bon tiers du
genre humain en est attaqué à une époque quelconque
de la vie, et après 60 ans, ~~il~~ ^{il} n'y a guère d'individus
sur lesquels on n'en trouve en cherchant bien. le
pou de l'insensibilité de la peau à cet âge fait qu'on les

porte le plus souvent sans s'en douter.

Si l'on s'en rapportait à l'opinion de la plupart des docteurs et surtout des docteurs, ils auraient contracté cette affection par contagion : mais en observant avec un peu d'attention, on voit que tous le rapport du caractère propre de l'affection les docteurs se rapprochent par des nuances insensibles d'autres affections cutanées dans lesquelles on ne s'est jamais avisé de supposer la contagion et particulièrement de certains variétés de l'érythème à marche chronique. 2^o que tous le rapport étiologique, pour un cas où l'on pourrait soupçonner la contagion, on en voit des milliers qui prouvent le contraire ; que chez un très-grand nombre d'individus, les dartres sont le produit d'un mauvais régime et particulièrement de la misère, de la malpropreté, des veilles trop habituelles, des excès d'étude, ~~de~~ des excès de table, de l'impression habituelle du froid ou de l'humidité (humidités ouvrieres) et en général de toute les causes qui dérangent la transpiration insensible. or les maladies réellement et absque dubio contagieuses, flag. la peste, la petite vérole, la gale contagieuse, la syphilis ne se produisent point par des écarts de régime. on ne doit même appeler contagieuses mais épidémiques et endémiques les maladies dues à des erreurs analogues qui se propagent le plus rapidement comme le typhus ~~contagieux~~ des camps et hôpitaux ; car quelqu'un qu'on ait dit pour établir l'existence de la contagion dans ces cas, on a prouvé facilement qu'une trop nombreuse réunion d'hommes dans un lieu trop étroit fait naître un foyer d'infection ~~au lieu d'être~~ et que l'on ne peut l'éviter et quelquefois même l'éviter sans y contracter

une fièvre grave à laquelle on a vainement cherché des caractères propres, car ils varient dans chaque épidémie. Séparer les malades; donner à chacun d'eux de l'espace et des soins de propreté la prétendue contagion cesse. qui oserait proposer un pareil remède contre la peste et la peste vérolée?

Pour revenir aux dartres, il me semble que les faits démontrent que presque tous les hommes y sont disposés plus ou moins; que beaucoup d'enfants nés de parents non dartreux en sont affectés dès leur bas âge (il en est même des scrophuleux); que d'autres sujets en contractent aux diverses époques de la vie par suite d'erreurs hygiéniques, et que la vieillesse surtout, à quelque âge moins susceptible de contracter les contagions, en guérit beaucoup de gens qui n'en avaient jamais eues. Je pense ~~néanmoins~~ qu'on en doit les regarder ~~comme~~ quand elles sont à un degré médiocre et qu'elles ne sont pas dues à des causes accidentelles, comme une simple incommodité produite d'un défaut d'équilibre dans une constitution d'ailleurs très-bonne. ~~Je dis~~ je les comparerais au rapport aux scrophules qui lorsqu'ils existent chez des sujets à un très-léger degré (chez des sujets d'ailleurs sains et robustes ne sont réellement que l'exès d'une constitution d'ailleurs la meilleure de toutes, le tempérament lymphatico sanguin, et ne sont aperçus que par les médecins. Les dartres se voient naître comme les scrophules chez des enfants nés de parents atteints de ces affections: mais l'une et l'autre se communiquent quelquefois par la génération ~~et~~ comme la constitution même des parents, leur physiologie et leur sou de voir. Je crois qu'il

comme, on ne doit les regarder comme une maladie, à traiter que quand elles sont très-fortes.

29 avril j'avais daté une lettre du 22 courant expirant l'après-demain à jour lui. vous veni à la fin du mois et j'ai encore pu terminer cette lettre écrite comme tout ce que j'ai fait, à bâtons rompus. Il faut pourtant que vous ne l'attendiez pas davantage car d'ici en vérité il n'en va pas la peine et j'ai va le terminer en vous disant deux mots de ce qui m'a le mieux réussi en fait de traitement.

Je n'ai jamais retiré aucun effet sensible de la scabieuse, de la fumeture, de la reine de perles d'acvange (qui est un employé) des préparations d'antimoine. Les autres ont été vains par avoir été appliqués dans les cas où l'on peut supposer une principe syphilitique déguisé. La dose m'a aussi merveilleusement dans deux ou trois cas de dartres croûteuses très-intenses: mais dans une multitude d'autres cas, j'en n'ai obtenu rien, quoique poussé graduellement à la dose de 3 à 6 oues pour trois, verres de décoction, que la malade prenait chaque jour et continuait pendant dix-huit mois et au-delà.

à dose aussi forte et qqfois même à deux onces
je l'ai vue produire ~~tt~~ char qqfois individuellement
spasme touxique d'un ^{côté} de l'autre avec distorsion
de la bouche qui au premier abord aurait pu
être prise pour un signe d'~~un~~ d'hémiplegie
et accident cessa en trois ou 4 jours en interrompant
le remède.

De tous les diurétiques celui qui m'a le mieux
réussi, c'est l'usage des bains sulfureux préparés
avec trois onces de sulfure de potasse solide
pour un bain auquel on ajoute en outre
un demi-verre de vinaigre ou le gros d'acide
sulfurique. Dans votre cas j'en contenterais
de prendre une vingtaine de ces bains au
moins de vrai, autant en ^{faux} et celui en
pendant plusieurs années s'il le fallait et je
prendrais ^{en outre} pendant un ^{trimestre}
plus long, ^{ou 3 ou 4 fois} ~~un verre~~ d'eau sulfureuse
une quart d'heure avant chaque repas
suivant la formule suivante.

℞. poivre de soufre solide	3i
huile	3j
faite poudre dans	16 ij
eau chaude chaude	
mettre en bouteille laisser refroidir.	

je me suis délivré il ya dix ans de
deux dartres purpures-moutantes par l'usage
continu à haute dose continué huit mois.

l'usage de la liqueur sulfurée ci-dessus
 mais d'après ce que j'ai obtenu depuis de
 succès & de non succès, si pareille chose
 ne arrivait encore j' préférerais les bains
 si quelque docteur se trouvait sur une
 partie d'où il fut bon de la déplacer
 le plutôt possible, comme la figure, le
 coin de la bouche &c. je vous conseillerais de
 la toucher légèrement avec la pierre
 infernale; ~~mais~~ le procédé qui auroit
 un fait qui changer la nature de l'inflam-
 mation, est sans inconvénient. j'ai vu ici
 un malade âgé de 80 ans qui a été guéri
 à 86 de dactres étendues par l'usage
 de l'huile de tartre par défaillance
 que l'on étendait avec une pince sur
 l'écruption, on le coupait d'abord avec
 3/4 d'eau et on finit par l'employer
 pure le traitement interne employé au
 même temps équivalait à rien ^{voudrais}
 avoir le temps de m'étendre d'avantage,
 mais intelligence pauvre

j'ai fait dans le temps des démarches
 pour voir votre père. mais j'aurais dû
 voir que l'attachement aux principes n'est
 pas un titre de recommandation auprès
 de bien des gens et rien n'a changé encore

ici à cet égard.

j'ai été bien fâché de n'avoir pas 3 ou 4 jours de moi lorsque j'ai été à quimper en 1814. ~~Je~~ je me propose d'y aller faire un tour l'année prochaine et cette fois j'espère bien que j'pourrai m'arranger de manière à y aller voir. j. vous embrasse de tout mon cœur.

Votre confière et ami
Des Larnaudie

à Monsieur
 Monsieur Capitaine Général
 Docteur en Médecine à
Carthage
 Finistère

Paris 16 août 1819.

je ne conçois pas, mon cher général, vos inquiétudes sur le fond et les circonstances des très-légères incommodités que vous éprouvez. ~~pour moi je ne suis nullement inquiet~~ ~~de ces légères incommodités~~ ~~qui ne sont que des symptômes d'un état de faiblesse~~ ~~de la jeunesse, de la chaleur du sang~~; ~~un tantôt vous êtes un peu indisposé~~ ~~et d'autre fois vous êtes parfaitement bien~~ et j'ai et à me retirer en Bretagne où peu de malades, je l'espère, seront tentés de venir me rejoindre. je pars d'ici vers les 25 et probablement j'aurai le plaisir de vous voir en Gênes car une petite affaire me conduira à Gênes et je passerai certainement en allant ou revenant par Carthage. Nous pourrions alors causer à loisir ~~à loisir~~.

De votre place je me bornerais à prescrire tous les ans un traitement de bains sulfureux au printemps et surtout en automne pour atténuer les dartres et je ne chercherais pas à m'en débarrasser tout à fait de peur de pis. quant à la crainte de la contagion j'ai très réellement scandalisé (médicalement parlant) que cela vous trotté encore dans la tête. en bonne conscience, si j'avais une fille ou une sœur à marier, votre état ne m'empêcherait nullement de vous la donner. les dartres, les scrophules, la phthisie, et beaucoup d'autres maladies ne sont soupçonnées d'être contagieuses que parce qu'elles sont très communes, et au premier attentif des faits ditrent facilement à soupçonner.

j'ai communiqué votre mésevoir à Albert. ~~avec lui et son jeune mari~~ ~~qui sont tous deux~~, je lui ai dit qu'il s'agissait d'un confrère afin de faire d'avantage son attention et en conséquence j'ai vous envoyé votre mandat. vous verrez que ma prescription n'a pas servi à grand chose: car il nous a donné comme à un autre une formule banale de consultation, on vous trouvera ce que vous savez aussi

Kerlouarnec par Douarnenez 18 janvier
1820

j'ai reçu en son temps, mon cher
Jerupel, votre lettre du mois dernier,
à laquelle la vie errante que je mène
ici pendant que l'on rebâtit à grands
en entier mon héritage, m'a empêché
de répondre plus tôt.

j'avais appris par Toulgoët votre
mariage, et je vous en félicite d'autant
plus sincèrement que je sais que vous
êtes homme à apprécier toutes choses
à leur valeur véritable, ce qu'on ne peut
pas dire de tous les gens qui se
marient. il en est un cependant à
laquelle vous donnez, à mon avis,
beaucoup trop d'importance; c'est le
cas de médecine dont vous me
parlez. je ne puis vous blâmer d'avoir
suivi le conseil d'Alibert quoique (entre
nous) vous pourriez être sûr qu'il l'a
donné aussi légèrement que presque
tout ce qu'il donne au public; mais

je crois que vous ferez bien de
vous en tenir là pour le moment et
surtout d'être réservé sur l'usage des
diurétiques minéraux. vous savez
comme moi que le long usage du
sulfate d'arsenic quelquefois des
crachements de sang, et vous souve-
ner tout aussi bien les inconvénients
d'un genre différent des préparations
d'hydrargyre.

[431]

optima interdum aedicina, medicina
non agens. j'ai ~~plutôt~~ pour mon
compte et pour celui d'autrui (quand
je trouve les gens assez sages) cette
maxime de Celse, dans tous les
petits maux qui sont beaucoup
plus difficiles à guérir qu'à
supporter, et je vous conseille en
ami d'en faire autant.

j'irai, au surplus, vous surmonter
à ce sujet, comme je vous l'ai
promis et j'espère que ce sera

avec le courant des priéteurs
en attendant recevoir l'assurance
de votre sincère attachement de

[432]

Votre tout dévoué confrère
ami
H. J. Lœnnberg

[432] First letter written to,
M. Courbon Pérusel,
Doctor of Medicine at,
Carhaix, Finisterre,

PARIS, 22 April, 1817.

I beg a thousand pardons, my dear Pérusel, for having so long delayed in answering your letter of the 28th of February, which I received on the 8th of March. Ever since that day not one has passed without my having intended to write to you on the following day. I owe you full and entire apologies, for I am ashamed to have been so often in arrears to you, and consequently I am going to explain to you in detail how it comes about that with the greatest desire to learn all the news of my friends and even to write to them, I end almost always by writing to them only in the case of the most urgent necessity. In order to do this I must explain to you my manner of life. I rise at half past seven or even at eight o'clock, for I need much sleep. I dress myself, generally, while giving consultations. I make my hospital visit (at *l'hôpital Nécker*) and then a bit of clinic to the students who follow me. This brings me to half past ten, and already time presses me to such an extent that generally I cannot return to my house for luncheon. Then I begin a round of visits which ends only at about half past five. After dinner, that is to say at about half past six, I begin another round which lasts till ten o'clock. There then remains for me one hour until eleven when I go to bed, plus several minutes from time to time before breakfast and dinner to keep up-to-date my correspondence of all sorts, to correct and put in order the observations gathered by the students in my hospital, to arrange my little affairs, and so forth. This picture gives you but a feeble idea of that which, for a man who is rather busy, is this whirlwind of relations of all sorts in which one finds himself carried away in Paris, however hard one tries to simplify them. I have often been astonished that you and some others of our confrères should have retired to very small towns. To-day I applaud you and approve very strongly. For myself I think very seriously (*entre nous*) of arranging my affairs so as to be able, in a very few years, to retire to lower Brittany. Had I that which was due me here it would probably be to-day.

I come to the question on which you have consulted me. I can not see how you can push your delicacy to such an extremity. The contagious nature of *dartres* in the gravest cases is certainly very obscure. I know not if the immediate and continued application during a period of time of a phagedenic dartre in full suppuration could produce an effect other than that of a rubefacient, but I know a good number of husbands who have exudative *dartres* on the scrotum without having communicated anything to their wives, and *vice versa*. As for furfuracious *dartres* like

yours, a good third of the human race is attacked at one period [432] or another of their lives, and after 60 years there are no individuals on whom one may not find them if one search well. The slight sensitiveness of the skin at this age brings it about that people have them generally without suspecting it.

If one were to turn to the opinion of the greater part of the men and especially the women affected with *dartres* they would have it that they had all contracted the affection by contagion, but on observing with a little care, one sees, 1°, that considering the essential nature of the affection *dartres* approach by insensible nuances other cutaneous diseases of which we have never thought of suspecting the contagiousness, and particularly certain varieties of erysipelas of a chronic course. 2°, that from an ætiological standpoint, for one case in which one might suspect contagion one sees thousands which prove the contrary; that in a great number of individuals *dartres* are the product of a bad régime and particularly of want, of uncleanness, of too habitual loss of sleep, of excesses in study, of excesses of the table, of habitual exposure to cold or humidity (in certain workmen) and, in general, of all those causes which disturb the insensible perspiration. But the diseases really *et absque dubio* contagious, *e. g.*, plague, smallpox, contagious itch, syphilis, do not arise from transgressions of régime. One should not call *contagious*, but epidemic and endemic those diseases due to analogous errors which spread most rapidly, such as typhus of camps and hospitals; for whatever has been said to establish the existence of contagion in these cases, it has been proved only that a reunion of too many healthy or diseased men in too restricted an area gives rise to a centre of infection which one may not frequent or sometimes even approach, without contracting there a grave fever for which one has vainly sought specific characteristics, for they vary in each epidemic. Separate the patients, give each one of them space and attention as to cleanliness, and the supposed contagion ceases. Who would dare to propose a like remedy against plague and smallpox?

To return to *dartres*, it seems to me that the facts show that almost all men are more or less subject to them; that many children born of non-dartrous parents are affected with them in their early age (the same is true of scrofula); that others contract them at various periods of their life as the result of hygienic errors, and that old age, the age least susceptible to contagious diseases, brings them to many people who never have had them. I think that when they are of moderate degree and not due to accidental causes, one should regard them as simple incommodities, the result of a loss of equilibrium in a constitution in other respects very

[432] good. I should compare them from this point of view to scrofula, which when it exists to a slight degree in a subject in other respects healthy and robust, is really not more than the excess of a constitution which is indeed the best of all, the lymphatico-sanguine temperament, and is recognized only by the physician. *Dartres* arise as does scrofula in infants born of parents free from these affections. But both of these diseases are communicated sometimes by generation as is the very constitution of the parent, their physiognomy and the sound of their voice. I think that⁶ on the whole one should not regard them as a disease *to treat* excepting when they are very severe. 29 April—I had dated my letter the 22d current hoping to have finished it on that day. Here we are at the end of the month and I have not yet been able to finish this letter written, as is everything that I do, in broken periods. You must not, however, wait for it longer. The affair, indeed, is not worth the trouble, and I am going to finish by saying two words to you concerning that which has given me the greatest success from a point of view of treatment.

I have never accomplished any appreciable effect with *scabiosa*, with *fumaria*, with the root of wild pansies (which I have employed but little), with preparations of antimony. Anti-scorbutics have seemed to me to have some value in scrofulous *dartres*, sublimate in cases in which one may fancy a syphilitic base. I have had *remarkable* success with bitter almond in two or three cases of scaly *dartres* of great intensity: but in a multitude of other cases, I have obtained *no* results, although pushed gradually to a dose of 3 to 4 ounces for three glasses of decoction, which the patient took each day and continued during eighteen months and more thereafter. At a dose so large as this and sometimes even of two ounces I have seen it produce in some individuals a tonic spasm of one side of the face, with distortion of the mouth and embarrassment of speech, which at first glance might have been taken for a sign of hemiplegia. This accident ceases in three or four days on interrupting the remedy.

Of all the depuratives that which has given me the best results is the use of sulphuric baths prepared with three ounces of solid sulphate of potassium for a bath, to which is added besides, a half glass of vinegar or four drachms of sulphuric acid. In your case I should content myself with taking twenty of these baths in the month of May, as many in September, and this for several years if it should be necessary. And I should take in addition for a longer time, that is say 3 or 4 months, a glass of sulphurous water

⁶ Here ends the fourth page of the manuscript. The continuation on a new sheet is written with a different pen and clearly at a later date.

a quarter of an hour before each repast according to the following [433]
formula:

℞ Solid sublimated sulphur.....5 i
Sugar5 iv
Dissolve in hot water.....0 ii
Put in bottle, cork and allow to cool.

I freed myself ten years ago of two furfuracious, scaly *dartres* by bitter almond in large doses continued eight months and the use of the above sulphurous fluid. But from the successes and the non-successes, if indeed I have had these, which I have obtained since then, I should prefer the baths.

If a *dartre* should exist in a region where it were well to remove it so soon as possible, on the face or at the corner of the mouth, etc., I should advise you to touch it lightly with nitrate of silver; this procedure which, at the bottom, but changes the nature of the inflammation is without inconvenience. I have used it upon myself. I have seen here a patient of 80 who was cured at 56 of extensive *dartres* by the use of deliquesced oil of tartar ("par défaillance") which was painted upon the eruption with a brush. It was first diluted with three-fourths water and in the end employed pure. The internal treatment employed at the same time was of no significance. I wish I had the time to go into the matter more extensively, but *intelligenti pauca*.

I have taken some steps recently to assist (?) your brother. But I had occasion to observe that attachment to "*principes*"[†] was not a title of recommendation with many people and nothing has yet changed here in this respect.

I was much vexed not to have three or four days to myself when I was in Quimper in 1814. I propose to go there on a trip the coming year and I hope sincerely that this time I may arrange to be able to visit you. I embrace you with all my heart.

Your confrère and friend,

R. T. H. LAENNEC, D. M.

Second letter, written to,

M. Courbon Pérusel,

Doctor of Medicine at,

Carhaix, Finisterre,

PARIS, 16 August, 1819.

I can not conceive, my dear Pérusel, your anxieties as to the essence and the circumstances of the very trivial inconveniences from which you are suffering. (So far as I go I should be well content to have nothing more. It is true that I have fully as many

[†] Underscored in the original. Are we, perhaps, to accept the word in its Latin sense?

[433] as you, or approximately, and in addition hypochondriasis, gout, asthma, and so forth; so much, indeed that I am determined to abandon medicine)⁸ and Paris and to retire to Brittany where few patients I hope, will be tempted to seek me out. I am leaving on about the 16th of September and probably I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in October, for a small affair will bring me to Morlaix and I shall certainly pass through Carhaix in going or returning. We can then speak at leisure.⁹

In your place I should restrict myself to taking yearly thirty sulphurous baths in the springtime and as many in the autumn to attenuate the *dartres*, and I should not endeavour to free myself entirely for fear of making things worse. As to the fear of contagion I am really *scandalized* (medically speaking) that such an idea still runs in your head. On my conscience, if I had a daughter or a sister to marry, your condition would hinder me in no way from giving her to you. *Dartres*, scrofula, phthisis, and many other diseases are suspected of being contagious only because they are very common, and a careful examination of the facts destroys this suspicion very easily.

I have communicated your memorandum to Alibert. (As he is always as frivolous as you have found him)¹⁰ I told him that it was the question of a colleague in order better to fix his attention, and as a result I am sending you your prescription. You will see that my precautions have not been of great service: for he has given you, as he would to another, a common formula of consultation, where you will find that which you know as well as he and not an idea from which you may profit. You will see that he talks to you as if one could not take sulphurous baths excepting in Paris, forgetting in this that he is writing to a physician. Certainly it would not be more difficult at Carhaix than in the Rue St. Lazare to put into a bucket 4 ounces of sulphur and one-half ounce of sulphuric acid, and if one wishes to prepare douches for spraying, it is not difficult to have made a tube of white metal and to fit upon one end a spray to convey the water from the first storey to the ground floor. His article 4° *there are indeed other early procedures*, etc., signifies this: "If the patient were under my observation I should apply to his *dartres* different mild caustics and repercussives." He has adopted this practice and makes use especially of nitrate of silver, and indeed in his position it is desirable to cure *dartres* promptly even if it were only for a time. This gives him the vogue especially with the ladies, and as he sees only strangers who come to Paris to be treated, he never

⁸ These lines are erased by heavy marks of his pen.

⁹ Here several words are crossed out so successfully that one is unable to read them.

¹⁰ Erased but deciphered with the lens.

sees that which follows. One must acknowledge, however, that [433]
the use of these caustics rarely has grave inconveniences. But
certainly you are not such a child as to desire that your skin be
clean at whatever price as do the greater part of the patients of
Alibert.

Your ever devoted confrère and friend,

R. T. H. LAENNEC, D. M.

Third letter.

KERLOUARNEC PAR DOUARNENEZ, 18 January, 1820.

In its time, my dear Pérusel, I received your letter of last
month, to which the wandering life that I am leading here, while
they are almost completely rebuilding my hermitage, has hindered
me from answering earlier.

I had learned through Toulgoët of your marriage, and I con-
gratulate you, all the more sincerely in that I know that you are
a man who can appreciate all things at their true value, that which
one cannot say of all people who marry. There is one thing,
however, to which in my opinion you ascribe far too much
importance: namely, the question of medicine of which you speak
to me. I cannot blame you for having followed the advice of
Alibert, although (between us) you may be sure that he gave
it to you as frivolously as almost all that which he gives to the
public: But I think that you would do well to stop there for the
moment, and especially to be guarded in the use of mineral depura-
tives—you know as do I that the long use of sulphur sometimes [434]
brings about blood spitting, and you know equally well the incon-
veniences of another sort of the preparations of mercury.

Optima interdum medicina, medicinam non agere. For my own
account and for that of others (when I find the people intelligent
enough) I follow this maxim of Celsus, in all the little ills which
are much more difficult to cure than to endure, and I advise you
as a friend to do the same.

I am going to lecture you, however, on this subject, as I
promised, and I hope that this will be in the course of the spring.

In the mean time accept the assurance of the sincere attachment
of your devoted confrère and friend

R. H. T. LAENNEC, D. M.

There is much in these brief lines on which one might com-
ment or moralize. Especially interesting is the reference in
the second letter to the non-contagiousness of phthisis.
Laennec is very careful in his statements as to the con-
tagiousness of tubercle. In the manuscript notes for his
twentieth lecture at the *Collège de France*, which I was able to
examine last summer through the great kindness of Dr. Cor-

[434] nillot, I find the following entry: "*Tuberc. sont il contag.? Contag. des scrophules et des tuberc. crus dans bp de pays. mesures administr. Faits pour et bp plus contre. Observ. de tub au doigt par inocul. ne pas trop s'y fier: mais certes pas facilement contag. en nos climats:*"

But later there is added with another pen: "*Toutes les malad. contag. peuvent l'être plus ou moins. petite vérole, syphilis, peste elle même, moins vers la fin d'épid, mais contag. n'est pas moins certaine.*"

This might be translated "Are tubercles contagious? The contagiousness of scrophulosis and of tubercles, believed in many countries. Administrative measures. Facts for and many more against. Observation of tuberculosis on the finger by inoculation. Don't rely on it too much: but certainly not easily contagious in our climate. . . . all contagious diseases may be so more or less—small-pox, syphilis, plague itself, less toward the end of epidemics, but contagious none the less certainly."

In the second edition of his book he discusses the question in much the same way. "Tuberculous phthisis," says he,¹¹ "has long been considered contagious and is now so regarded in the popular mind, and in the opinion of magistrates and of some physicians in certain countries, and especially in the southern parts of Europe. In France at least, it does not seem to be. One sees often among people of moderate circumstances, a large family sleeping in the same room with a phthisical patient, a husband sharing to the last moment the bed of his phthisical wife without contracting the disease. The woolen clothes and mattresses of the phthisical, which in certain countries are burned and which in France, as a rule, one does not even wash, have never seemed to me to convey the disease to anyone. However, prudence and cleanliness would demand more precautions than are usually taken in this respect. Many circumstances, however, prove that a disease which is not habitually contagious may become so under certain circumstances." He then goes on to ask whether a direct inoculation may produce the disease at least locally, and describes an

¹¹ *Traité de l'auscultation médiate*, 2me édition, Paris, Chaudé, 1826, I, 649 et seq.

instance in which he infected himself at a necropsy with the [434] subsequent development of an anatomical tubercle. Later he says: "If the question of contagion may be regarded as in doubt with relation to tuberculosis, there is no doubt as to hereditary predisposition."

It is interesting and remarkable that, with his clear recognition of the manner of spread of chronic tuberculosis in the lungs, the repeated fresh outbreaks following so often the softening of caseating areas, the idea of direct inoculation should not have imposed itself upon him more forcibly.

The reference in his first letter to the development of facial spasm following the prolonged use of oil of bitter almond is also interesting. Laennec was so careful an observer that any such statement deserves consideration. I have, however, found no support for the assertion in the literature.

The same might be said of his statement with regard to the influence of sulphur in inducing hæmoptysis.

The notes of his lectures at the *Collège de France*, half of which are in the possession of the *Ecole de médecine*, half owned by his great nephew in Nantes, are written on small quarto sheets, 12 cm. square. Each page is divided into two columns, the division apparently made by folding rather than by ruled lines. The main substance of the lecture is in the right-hand column; the space on the left is reserved for notes entered in a small, close hand. The lectures are not written in full. They are rather in the nature of carefully prepared memoranda. Laennec wrote a sort of personal short hand. Many words are abbreviated. Much is in Latin, which is also abbreviated. Some of his abbreviations are interesting. In the termination "*ation*" the "*ti*" is often omitted, as in old Latin texts, and written "*aon*," "*dans*" is written "*ds*," "*beaucoup*" is written "*bp*," "*quelquefois*" is almost always written "*qqfois*." Capitalization is often omitted, and punctuation is very crude. The latter peculiarities may, indeed, be noted in the letters which have been reproduced above. In the main his notes are not hard to read while he writes in French. His short-hand Latin is not so easy.

Some of his entries are interestingly epigrammatic. In his opening lecture are notes like this: "*Science, ce que l'on*

[434] *sait.*" "Science, that which we know." "*théorie, manière de voir. on ne voit [sic] tout et surtout tout à la fois. Donc, indispensable. mais pas oublier qu'échaffaudage, s'en servir comme d'un instrum. prêt à le rejeter et changer dès qu'un fait résiste.*" "Theory, way of looking (at things). We do not see all and especially all at one time. Therefore, indispensable. But not to be forgotten that, scaffolding, one must make use of, as of an instrument ready to throw it aside and change it so soon as a fact holds its own."

The notes of his twentieth lecture, that on tuberculosis, are deeply interesting. The kernel of the description of pulmonary tuberculosis in the second edition of his book is clearly discernible.

As one glances over the notes of his lectures he is impressed with the clearness of view, the remarkable objectivity and the [435] sane and accurate ratiocination. The more one considers Laennec's career the more deeply is he impressed by the greatness of the man and the magnitude of his work. And in thought, in methods, in expression he had that clearness and simplicity that marks the truly great. Here are the closing words of his introductory lecture taken down from the notes in his own hand:

"As for me, I shall not quit the path traced by the medical observers who have successively increased the treasure of science from Hippocrates to our day. If I diverge from some of them I do not fear to say that 'tis from a leaning toward simple observation—even though I may be accused of empiricism. Corvisart was my master, and 'tis perhaps to him that I am indebted for a certain distaste for explanations and theories. I shall make every endeavour to present the facts alone and connected by their most striking analogies, and if sometimes I am obliged in their exposition, to have recourse to some theoretical, hypothetical views, I trust that it may be evident that I am not insisting upon them, and that I may never put forward my individual opinion for *science*—that is to say, *that which we know.*"

Preceding the presentation of the above paper at the meeting of the Laennec Society on March 29th, 1920, in commemora-

tion of the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of [435] Laennec's book on Auscultation, Dr. Henry Barton Jacobs brought before the Society a complete series of the editions of this book with the possible exception of one or two English translations. Dr. Jacobs is preparing a bibliography of these editions with reproductions of title pages, etc., which will be published later.



