

‡ 19. GOÏTRE AND CRETINISM.

“*Quis tumidum guttur miratur in Alpibus.*”—*Juv.*

It is a remarkable fact that, amidst some of the most magnificent scenery of the globe, where Nature seems to have put forth all her powers in exciting emotions of wonder and elevation in the mind, man appears, from a mysterious visitation of disease, in his most degraded and pitiable condition. Such, however, is the fact. It is in the grandest and most beautiful valleys of the Alps that the maladies of *goitre* and *cretinism* prevail.

Goitre is a swelling in the front of the neck (of the thyroid gland, or the parts adjoining), which increases with the growth of the individual, until, in some cases, it attains an enormous size, and becomes “a hideous wallet of flesh,” to use the words of Shakspeare, hanging pendulous down to the breast. It is not, however, attended with pain, and generally seems to be more unsightly to the spectator than inconvenient or hateful to the bearer, but there are instances in which its increase is so enormous that the individual, unable to support his burden, crawls along the ground under it.

Cretinism, which occurs in the same localities as *goitre*, and evidently arises from the same cause, whatever it may be, is a more serious malady, inasmuch as it affects the mind. The cretin is an idiot—a melancholy spectacle—a creature who may almost be said to rank a step below a human being. There is a vacancy in his countenance; his head is disproportionately large; his limbs are stunted or crippled; he cannot articulate his words with distinctness; and there is scarcely any work which he is capable of executing. He spends his days basking in the sun, and, from its warmth, appears to derive great gratification. When a stranger appears, he becomes a clamorous and importunate beggar, assailing him with a ceaseless chattering; and the traveller is commonly glad to be rid of his hideous presence at the expense of a batz. At times the disease has such an effect on the mind that the sufferer is unable to find his way home when within a few feet of his own door.

Various theories have been resorted to, to account for this complaint: some have attributed it to the use of water derived from melting snow; others, to the habit of carrying heavy weights on the head; others, again, to filthy habits; while a fourth theory derives it from the nature of the soil, or the use of spring-water impregnated with calcareous matter.

As the *goitre* occurs in Derbyshire, Notts, Hants, &c., where no permanent snow exists—and no rivers spring from glaciers—also in Sumatra, and in parts of South America, where snow is unknown, it is evident that the first cause assigned is not the true one; as for the second and third, they would equally tend to produce *goitre* in the London porters, and in the inhabitants of the purlieus of St. Giles's. If the limestone theory be true, all other rocks should be exempt from it, which is not the case, as far as our experience goes.

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