

Helleborus niger, a study
and
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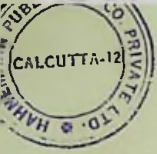
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881



Helleborus niger, a study

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PHARMACOGNOSY

Helleborus niger, the Christmas rose, is probably the most ancient member of that primitive family of plants, the Ranunculaceæ. Disregarding blatantly the normal annual plant rhythm of dying and becoming, this beautiful plant blooms amid the snows of winter. Moreover it shows no unseemly haste, no panic of growth, but usually takes from five to seven years before it blooms at all.

Few plants are more elegant; the large cup-shaped flowers, white with a tinge of bluish-colour contrast finely with the ample dark and shining foliage. The whiteness of the flower suggests a waxen tablet on which is painted a succession of brilliant hues ranging from the vivid vermilion of dawn to a deep shade of rose. Again, the flowers after fertilization do not wither, but persist and turn green, thus revealing their true nature as sepals not petals. Inside each flower are not only the nectaries (petals) but also a cluster of almost a hundred stamens arranged round a central group of 7 to 10 pistils. The flower gives off a delicate scent.

The flower stem is erect, smooth, fleshy and succulent-looking and rises to a height of 6 to 8 inches from a circle of ground leaves. The leaves of the plant also are in no hurry, taking many years to develop and become full-grown; as they gradually increase in size they divide more and more into long blade-like fingers, deep green in colour, with a shiny surface and small notches in the distal half. Only when the leaves are fully developed do the flowers open.

Both flower stems and leaf stems are often shaded pink, whereas the root stock is dark brown or black, possessing numerous rootlets and having the appearance when lifted of a large multi-legged insect.

The plant is found in most parts of Europe and favours rocky or wooded sites on the slopes of limestone mountains.

The mother tincture is prepared from the fresh root, dug up during the winter months.

Paracelsus extolled the virtues of this herb in relation to gout, epilepsy, jaundice, apoplexy and dropsy. Philosophers of old drank an infusion of the plant before engaging in intense and prolonged meditation. Here too there is the suggestion of longevity of effect rather than sudden impatient activity, a feature of the *Aconitum* picture. Medicinally the drug has been found especially effective in torpid, phlegmatic types.

PHARMACOLOGY

The powdered root has a bitter-sweet sharp taste; if inhaled it causes violent sneezing. Its toxic effects are due to the presence of two crystalline glucosides. One of these, helleborin, has a burning acrid taste and possesses narcotic properties; the other, helleborein, has a sweetish taste and is a cardiac poison somewhat similar in its effects to *Digitalis*. It is also a drastic purgative.

Symptoms of poisoning include salivation, nausea, repeated vomiting, difficulty in swallowing, pains in the belly, diarrhœa, blood-streaked stools, cramps in the calf muscles, pallor, vertigo, photophobia, tinnitus auri, interference with vision. Later symptoms are delirium, sobbing, feeble irregular pulse, dyspnœa, somnolence, convulsions and death.

The prominent feature of more chronic poisoning is related to disturbance in the sphere of the body fluids. The tendency is for displacement of fluid to the upper pole of the body as evidenced by hydrocephalus, exudative meningo-encephalitis and other effects of derangement of the normal flow of fluid in the region of the choroid plexus; such disturbances tend to produce stupor and sluggishness of responses.

Other aspects of disturbance of fluid balance in the body are seen in the development of pleural effusion, ascites and anasarca, the latter possibly in association with renal dysfunction and oliguria.

PHYSIOGNOMY

The picture presented by a patient requiring this drug may include the following features:

Eyes turned upwards, pupils wide and non-reactive, or unequal.

Pallor and cold sweat on forehead.

Sooty appearance of nostrils.

Head burrows into pillow, or is thrown from side to side.

Dorsal decubitus with limbs drawn up.

Chewing movements of the jaws with wrinkling of the brow.

Automatic movements—continuous movement of one arm or leg, while the other limbs lie as if paralysed.

Very slow answers in response to questions.

Possibly a stuporous state accompanied by involuntary cries and groans.

Horrible fœtor oris.

Picks at lips which are dry, cracked and peeling.

PSYCHOLOGY

Mental processes are so sluggish that the subject feels utterly stupid and unable to memorize anything, what has just been read, what he was intending to say, et sic.

There is a tendency to melancholy and despair, especially after debilitating illness such as typhoid fever or in amenorrhœa setting in after menstruation has just started. There is no wailing or wringing of hands, as with *Aurum metallicum*, but the subject just sits around in apathetic silence. Attempts at consolation are resented and only make matters worse.

There is great aversion from making any effort, and the sufferer is very easily angered. Odd ideas may be entertained, which become fixed and obsessive.

PHYSIOLOGY

Hunger may be voracious and thirst intense, for cold water which is gulped down greedily. The recipient may bite the spoon without being aware of it.

Sleep is stuporous. Dreams are anxious and confused, and not remembered.

As to *modalities*, there is aggravation from contact with cold air, from uncovering, from exertion, from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. and during the night.

The sufferer feels better from warmth and being well wrapped up, also when lying quietly at rest and undisturbed.

PATHOLOGY

General. Stupefaction in greater or lesser degree is the hall-mark of this remedy. There is a peculiar type of virtual imbecility, and an extremely sluggish type of response both in mind and in muscle. The will seems to lose full control over the muscles; any object held in the hand is apt to be dropped if attention is diverted. Another feature is a widespread sensation of numbness.

Head. A stupefying type of headache occurs in the occipital region or the nape of the neck, accompanied by numbness, and aggravated by any movement of the head. There may be a feeling as if the contents of the skull were being extruded per forehead and orbits.

Vertigo is associated with nausea and vomiting, and is made worse by stooping.

Marked retraction of the head may be present.

Eyes. Severe pain may occur in the eyes or a feeling of great heaviness. Twitching of the lids may cause distress.

Respiratory System. Violent sneezing has been recorded in provers, especially in the morning.

Dyspnœa may be present with a dry hacking cough, worse at night with gagging. Pleural effusion may occur.

Alimentary System. The mouth, and palate especially, are very dry, or salivation may be increased. The tongue is apt to be swollen and feel numb. Aphthous ulcers may be present.

Abdominal symptoms include nausea, distaste for any kind of food, flatulent rumbling, and possibly ascites.

Watery diarrhœa is associated with tenesmus and the stools contain jelly-like mucus. Stools may be passed involuntarily, or days may pass without a stool as the result of the atonic state of the bowels.

Cardiovascular System. The heart muscle may partake of the general muscular weakness and cause palpitations associated with anxiety. General circulatory atonia gives rise to decidedly subnormal temperatures.

There may be quite sudden onset of widespread anasarca or effusion into a serous cavity.

Urinary System. Retention of urine may occur, possibly with distension and overflow. Again, in the presence of kidney involvement, only scanty amounts of urine are passed, often dark in colour with a sediment resembling coffee-grounds. Albuminuria may be present.

Nervous System. Meningitic conditions are often accompanied by exudative inflammation. Hydrocephalus may be present.

Convulsions are associated with extreme coldness of the body apart from the head, which is hot.

Delirium, if present, is not wild or violent but of the low muttering variety, possibly accompanied by hallucinations.

Locomotor System. Quite apart from the tendency to muscular weakness, almost paresis, a variety of twitchings, pinchings, tearing or shooting pains have been recorded in the dorsum and limbs, in many instances involving articulations.

Skin. Pallor is marked. Angio-neurotic œdema may occur, but is likely to be less acute and more persistent than the type associated with *Apis*.

POSODOLOGY

The main sphere of usefulness of this remedy is in acute inflammatory conditions of the brain and spinal cord and their membranes. A further indication is in dropsical states of sluggish type.

It is worthy of note, in children especially, that in recovery from the stuporous state there may be bouts of sweating, vomiting, or diarrhœa. Again, intense itching of the skin and tingling in the limbs may cause the child to start screaming and throwing itself about. These happenings, though alarming to those in attendance, are evidences of curative reaction and should not be interfered with. They will subside naturally.

HOMŒOPATHIC EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Appeal for funds

Contained in this number of THE BRITISH HOMŒOPATHIC JOURNAL will be found a leaflet issued by The Homœopathic Research and Educational Trust appealing for a sum of £50,000 for research and education in Homœopathy. For this important work the Trust is entirely dependent on voluntary help derived mainly from those people who, through personal experience, are best able to appraise the value of this form of medical treatment and who wish to extend its benefits and practice. The Council of the Trust therefore desire to enlist the help of the subscribers and readers of this JOURNAL in bringing this appeal to the notice of all those who may be sympathetic to the cause of Homœopathy. Donations will be gratefully received and copies of the appeal leaflet will be gladly supplied by the Secretary of the Trust, Mr L. J. Knowles, 85 Marylebone High Street, London W1.

Aconitum, a study

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PHARMACOGNOSY

Aconitum napellus, monk's hood, wolf's-bane, is a member of the Ranunculaceæ, a family which also includes such remedies as *Cimicifuga*, *Helleborus*, *Hydrastis*, *Pæonia* and *Ranunculus*.

This is a very striking plant; its tall, upright, 4 to 5 foot stem is resplendent at the top with a thick cluster of deep blue sombre-hued flowers arranged in a spike. The leaves are deeply cleft. The root, a dark conical tuber, is whitish on section and has a bitter taste, associated with tingling and numbness in the mouth if eaten. The root has on occasion been mistaken for horseradish and eaten with disastrous results.

The habitat of the plant shows preference for damp shady spots in hilly or mountainous country, but it is the flowers that are remarkable. These blooms, shaped like a monk's cowl, are no longer radially symmetrical like those of the spring Ranunculaceæ, anemones, aquilegia, pæonia, but are isobilateral. They have given up the radiate flower form and attained a higher form of symmetry suggestive of the animal kingdom. The higher invertebrates as well as all vertebrates possess bilateral symmetry as their fundamental morphological concept.

Figuratively speaking, the flowers of the plant reach out, as it were, into the sphere of animal life, and the extremely poisonous nature of the whole plant may be connected with this fact. From the root upwards all parts of the plant contain the aconitine alkaloids; the whole plant is used in the preparation of the mother tincture.

It is of interest that *Aconitum napellus* is in polar contrast to *Helleborus niger*, the Christmas rose, which is the most ancient member of the Ranunculaceæ. *Aconitum* is a more recent representative of this very primitive family of plants. It shows much more advanced structures, in the specialized upper sepal which forms a protective covering for the other parts of the flower, in the deep blue colour of the flowers, and in the arrangement of the blossoms not on single stems but in an inflorescence.

Seasonally also the plant is at the opposite pole to the Christmas rose. Instead of pushing its way up through the snows of winter it springs vigorously upwards to burst into bloom at the peak of summer. Thus instead of torpor, the characteristic of *Helleborus*, there is here a suggestion of terror. Instead of the sluggishness of winter growth this upstanding summer-flowering plant betokens swift, sudden, strenuous activity.

PHARMACOLOGY

There is something rather sinister and suggestive of death about this plant, its forbidding appearance, its rather menacing hue, its fondness for "hiding away in damp woods and shady hedgerows". It is said, indeed, to be Britain's most poisonous plant.

Down the ages the poisonous proclivities of the plant have been widely known. Plutarch gives an account of Mark Antony's army being in want of food, grubbing up some of these roots, which they devoured, with the result that "every man died in a paroxysm". The root was formerly known as "kill-panther"; the sorceress Hecate was said to have discovered its properties and passed on the knowledge to her lethally minded daughters Circe and Medea.

The plant was the chief ingredient of the deadly draught employed on the island of Ceos for the liquidation of "senile persons of no value to the state". It has been used as an arrow poison, and even in recent times murders have been committed with an infusion of the leaves, or by means of the chief of the poisonous alkaloids in the plant, namely aconitine.

This swiftly acting alkaloid is deadly in its effects; three milligrams are sufficient to kill a horse. The symptoms of acute poisoning by the plant have been observed in numberless instances. The sequence is as follows:

Within a few minutes to half an hour the mouth and throat begin to burn and tingle. The tingling spreads over the whole body and causes the victim great distress. It is perhaps the most characteristic symptom. The hands seem to be "made of fur and enclosed in a glove".

Cold sweats and shivering are followed by generalized numbness with a peculiar feeling of deathly chill over the whole body, as if the veins contained iced water instead of blood.

Agonizing pains are felt in head, neck, back and in the cardiac region. The face becomes grey, cheeks sunken, and in a half to three hours death ensues as the result of total circulatory failure, respiratory paralysis and cardiac arrest.

The pulse is at first slowed, then becomes irregular and finally imperceptible. The embarrassment of the circulation with consequent anoxia of tissues gives rise to a feeling of intense terror and fear of imminent death, tending to complete panic, not lessened by acute palpitation and suffocative dyspnoea.

Towards the end the mind becomes clouded, with total inability to formulate an idea (cerebral anoxia). Hearing becomes disturbed, also vision—glistening white objects are seen as yellowish green in colour. A rapid onset of blindness precedes death. The pupils, however, are unaffected unless actual convulsions occur, when they tend to dilate.

The drug has a two-fold action on the heart. In the first place the heart beat is slowed in rate by stimulation of the inhibitory vagus centre in the medulla; secondly, a direct action on the organ itself involving the bundle of His leads to an increased rate of beat, followed by irregularity of rhythm, even reversed rhythm, the ventricle contracting ahead of the auricle.

There is an action on the peripheral nervous system with stimulation of the terminal organs of the sensory nerves in the skin, producing prickling and tingling sensations. In the mucosa of the mouth the tingling sensation is accompanied by profuse salivation.

A special affinity is noted with the trigeminal nerve leading to severe facial neuralgia (probably due to ischaemia of the Gasserian ganglion, intensified by vaso-constriction). Affinity with the respiratory organs and with articulations tends to induce violent inflammatory reactions of transitory character.

PHYSIOGNOMY

Aconitum is most likely to be indicated in robust, sthenic persons rather than in the weak and debilitated.

A red countenance is probable, or possibly showing a unilateral flush. The expression is often scared, even terrified.

Piteous wailing may occur with a child.

The skin is hot and dry. Temperature is apt to reach a peak at 9 p.m. The pupils remain small.

A marked feature is great restlessness with incessant tossing and turning to and fro.

PSYCHOLOGY

The chief characteristic of the *Aconitum* mentality is fear, a most acute anxiety, a horrible fear leading to panic and frantic impatience.

There may be fear of the dark, of ghosts, of crowds, of crossing the road or even going out on the street. Sometimes it is a fear of imminent death with actual naming of the hour of decease, or perhaps an intangible but very real fear of "doesn't really know what".

There is great intolerance of pain, which becomes unbearable, also of noise, even music. The sufferer tends to become quite inappeasable, "beside himself", demanding that "something must be done, and done quick".

The subject is very easily startled. Children are apt to be alert and alarmed. On the other hand there may be confusion of mind, thoughts and ideas chasing each other in a confused riot.

A feature is a marked aversion from being touched or uncovered, probably due to hypersensitivity of the skin.

Obviously the *Aconitum* picture may be precipitated by any situation or experience which holds a threat, real or imaginary, and thus is liable to induce fear.

PHYSIOLOGY

The *Aconitum* subject is alternately cold and hot, vasomotor control being badly off poise and the distribution of bloodflow correspondingly irregular.

Thirst is usually intense, for large quantities of cold water.

There is a tendency to drowsiness during the day, but sleep may depart at night with a liability to excessive yawning; or sleep may be disturbed by a plethora of dreams or even nightmares. Restless insomnia in old age may respond to *Aconitum*.

Sweating may occur on covered parts, with relief of symptoms; cool clammy sweat may be present on the palms.

As regards *modalities*, either extreme of temperature will aggravate symptoms; these tend to be worse also in a warm room, in direct sunlight, from taking wine or stimulants, if lying on the affected side, and at night, especially around midnight.

Relief is felt in the open air, as result of sleep, and after profuse sweating.

Aconitum may often be indicated when complaints are brought on with suddenness either by bitter cold in winter or by excessive summer heat, that is dry cold or dry heat. Other factors which may precipitate an *Aconitum* picture are bathing in cold water, surgical operation, and associated shock.

PATHOLOGY

General. Typical is a sudden onset of high fever with burning head but the rest of the body cold. This acute onset may occur within a few hours of exposure to

the causal factor; it is likened by one writer to "the storm which sweeps the mountain heights where the *Aconitum* plant grows". The high temperature is usually preceded by a severe chill. Hence the advice to take a dose of *Aconitum* "at the first shiver".

Pains are particularly severe and unbearable, driving the sufferer to desperation, so that he "screams with pain" which is described as burning, stinging, cutting or stabbing. Moreover the pains are likely to be accompanied by numbness, tingling, formication and, possibly, sudden flashes of heat. The severity of the pain experienced is probably due to hyperalgesia, a lowering of the pain threshold, the result of interference with bloodflow inducing anoxia of the sensory nerves.

Another *Aconitum* feature is hæmorrhage, sudden severe bleeding of bright blood from nose, uterus, rectum or other site, and associated with acute mental turmoil and alarm.

Head. Giddiness is a prominent symptom, with "everything twirling and whirling". It is especially noticed on rising from the recumbent posture, or it may come on suddenly as the result of some frightening or upsetting experience.

Headache is sudden and severe with pains described as shooting, pinching or squeezing, and a burning hot head; the headache is made worse by movement, by talking, by attempts to sit up, even by the act of taking a drink. It is somewhat relieved in the open air.

Neuralgic pains are described affecting the face, like "hot wires piercing the tissues", associated with formication and, perhaps, a sensation as if "iced water were poured along the nerves".

Eyes. Eye symptoms are very acute, out of the blue, with heat, redness and lachrymation, photophobia, and possibly sudden dimness of vision. There is not usually much discharge, but on separating the lids there may be a gush of hot watery fluid. Opening the lids may be quite difficult owing to the extreme swelling.

It is worthy of note that the remedy is of special value in relation to eye injuries, and *Aconitum* has been described as "the *Arnica* of the eye".

Ears. Acute pain of throbbing, cutting intensity may come on suddenly after being out in severe cold; it is accompanied by hypersensitivity to noise, and music is unbearable.

Respiratory System. Smell is acute and especially sensitive to unpleasant odours. Coryza is brought on by exposure to cold winds: the discharge is fluent, especially in the morning, with dripping or dropping of clear hot water. The condition is aggravated by talking; it is relieved in the open air.

Sore throat is accompanied by dryness, numbness and tingling, with a feeling of constriction and pain on swallowing.

A hoarse, croaky, convulsive cough is easily intensified by eating or drinking, by lying down, by attempting to talk, by contact with tobacco smoke, as the result of emotional upset, and at night.

Various shooting or stitching pains are felt in the chest. Suffocative asthmatic attacks occur, associated with great anxiety. The child may wake in the first half of the night, after exposure to cold, with violent croupy, choking cough.

Aconitum is indicated in first stage pneumonia with sudden onset, great pain in chest, of shooting, tearing, burning type, especially affecting the upper half of the left lung; it is only possible to lie on the back; there is a hard dry cough and cherry red sputum.

Alimentary System. Numbness and tingling is noticed in lips and tongue. Taste is affected, everything tasting bitter except water.

The mouth is excessively dry. Toothache is caused by exposure to cold wind; the teeth are very sensitive to cold in any form.

Hiccough, belching, waterbrash, bilious vomiting may occur, as also a sensation of fullness, tension and weight in the epigastrium or lower left chest. Stomach upsets of sudden onset are accompanied by intense craving for water, just "cannot get enough to drink".

Pinchings, burnings, cuttings are felt in the belly, associated with great tenderness to touch and intolerance of movement.

Sudden onset of acute diarrhoea may occur in summer, with choleraic stools, collapse, deathly anxiety and great restlessness. Stools may look like chopped spinach. Intussusception may occur.

Cardiovascular System. Sudden violent attacks of palpitation are accompanied by intense fear and anxiety; the sufferer sits bolt upright and can hardly get a breath.

Shooting or squeezing pains are felt in the chest, aggravated by going up stairs or by walking fast.

Urinary System. Sudden acute onset of urinary distress with cutting, tearing pains. Urine is hot, dark, reddish, even bloody.

Acute retention from shock; retention in the newly born.

Genital System. Sudden orchitis due to exposure to cold, violent in nature.

Gynæcological complaints prominently associated with nervous upset or actual fear.

Nervous System. Numbness and weakness are noticed in the limbs, especially the left arm. Tremors occur in the hands. Creeping pains are felt in the fingers. Palms of hands are hot while the feet are as cold as ice. Varied stitches, twitches, paræsthesias and pareses occur in limbs or back.

Locomotor System. Acute inflammation of joints. Special mention is made of pain in the hip-joint which forces a cry at every step. Weakness and instability is felt at both knee and hip. Limbs feel heavy, bruised, numb.

Skin. In addition to the paræsthesias mentioned already, a purpuric or morbilliform eruption may occur. Pruritus is associated with desquamation. The skin may be so sensitive that the least touch or contact is resented.

POSOLOGY

Aconitum is a short-acting remedy of immense value in the early hours of acute illness. Its use in this way may abort a more serious condition, but if symptoms persist the use of a different remedy must be considered. If the skin has become

moist and profuse sweating has occurred the opportunity for *Aconitum* has probably passed.

A condition calling for the remedy may, however, ensue at any moment during the course of an illness, in chronic disease, or after a surgical operation.

Aconitum rivals *Chamomilla* and *Coffea* as a pain-reliever.

The remedy is followed well by *Arnica*, *Belladonna*, *Bryonia*, or *Ipecacuanha*, according to the symptom picture, and at times *Sulphur* will be called for to complete the cure.







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