

The inquest held at the Mirfield Memorial Hospital on the body of a woman who had been suffering from cancer, shed a lurid light on the extraordinary credulity that still obtains even in this enlightened age, as well as upon the quackery which that credulous disposition fosters. The post-mortem examination revealed that the death of this unfortunate woman was due to cancer in the breast, and secondary deposits in other organs of the body; but according to the sworn testimony of the doctor who conducted the examination, if the woman had been surgically treated in the earlier stages, she would have been living now, and have had a good chance of a perfect cure. How came it, then, that this woman had not hastened to avail herself of the best possible medical advice and surgical treatment that the nearest Infirmary or Hospital would have supplied her free of charge? The reason is to be found in that amazing belief in quack remedies, which is far more prevalent than is generally supposed. Instead of seeking the best advice that could be got for the asking, recourse was had to the services of a medical herbalist whose qualifications for dealing with such a case were absolutely worthless. This unqualified practitioner did not even deem it necessary to adopt the ordinary commonsense habit of making a careful examination of the patient who had sought his assistance. A humdrum method of that kind would naturally not appeal to an intellect capable of conceiving the plan that was actually carried into effect. His plan, which can surely claim the merit of originality, was to hypnotise his wife, and obtain from her in that condition of trance the right diagnosis and the proper method of treatment. Having learnt in this unique way that the patient was suffering from a cancerous tumour, which could be "scalded" away, a prescription was made up in accordance with this opinion, and ointment to rub the place where the cancer was located was provided for the sufferer, who followed out all instructions with a trust in the treatment that was quite pathetic. The patient grew rapidly worse, until at last the medical herbalist recommended her to get further advice, but it was then too late. The Coroner commented strongly upon the "gross presumption and idiotic nonsense" of a man who attempted to cure a dangerous disease like cancer through the agency of a person hypnotised, and could hardly credit the fact that a person totally ignorant of the treatment of cancer could have the audacity to undertake a case of the kind. The jury were called upon to decide first whether the death of the woman was accelerated by the treatment to which she had been subjected, and then whether this so-called herbalist had dissuaded her from going elsewhere for treatment. Had the jury answered either of these questions in the affirmative, their verdict would have amounted to manslaughter. As it happened, they decided that "no blame attached to any one" in the matter, being influenced, no doubt, by the statement of the doctor who had been called in after death, that the treatment the woman had undergone had been simply a negative one, so far as his knowledge of the drugs employed went. The case reads more like a tale of the Middle Ages, when ignorance and credulity went hand in hand, than a sober account of events that have taken place within a few weeks of the opening of the twentieth century.