

# MISS PATTY'S CASE

## AN EXERCISE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY THERAPEUTICS

*by*

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WRITING in 1638, a prominent Yorkshire doctor, himself the son of a clergyman, commented that

Among men of Ecclesiastical order that have dedicated themselves wholly to God and the Churches commodity, there are many that do seriously and greedily, and with much gain to themselves undertake the cure not of souls only but of bodies likewise, and strive to their uttermost to get patients to themselves for the healing of their bodily diseases, even in such places where there is store of physicians.<sup>1</sup>

It is natural to suppose that the store of physicians would not look kindly on such an interloper, yet fifty years after this some of the pleasanter incidents in the diary<sup>2</sup> of the Reverend Roland Davies are convivial junketings with his professional rivals.

Even though his peculiar situation as a refugee may have occasioned sympathy, these easy relations say much for the good sense of contemporary Norfolk physicians, for the Eastern Counties with their tradition of malarial agues and comfortable prosperity have never been an under-doctored area.

A man of forty, Davies had fled his Irish deanery in March 1689 in the face of the landing of the deposed James II, and making London his base had sought preferment by the usual seventeenth-century method of appeal to the powerful. More fortunate than most of the exiled clergy, by July he was established as Lecturer to the Corporation of Great Yarmouth, an office which the Dean of Norwich assured him 'would be worth one hundred pounds per annum, paid quarterly; without any cure of souls, but preaching twice a week on the Lord's Day and on some weekday'. Although in practice the duties seemed to have comprised a good deal more than preaching, they were insufficient wholly to occupy a man of Davies's energy and it was not long before he began to take patients.

On arriving in Yarmouth, the Dean had been welcomed into the household of Alderman Anthony Ellis, the contemporary great man of a family notable in the commercial aristocracy of the borough. The alderman was probably already a widower, his two sons had left home, and the predominant influences in his house in the city and his country house at Burgh were his three daughters Mary, Hannah and Patty. The last and youngest, seemingly in her mid-teens at this time, was to be Davies's most critical and interesting case.

We first hear of her on Friday, 13 September, when the Dean records in his diary that 'This evening Miss Patty Ellis came sick from Burgh; she was ordered straight to bed, and directed to be sweated.'

This conservative treatment did not answer, for on the following evening

after visiting another patient, he 'had two epispaster plasters applied to Miss Patty's thighs, she being delirious, and had her blooded in the foot'.

On Sunday, Davies first attended to the duties of the lectureship, preaching in the morning, and in the afternoon read prayers and christened six children. He then squeezed in visits to two patients, one of whom died later that night, and on his return home 'in the evening I found Miss Patty still delirious. I ordered her abdomen to be fomented with a hysterical decoction, then gave her thirty drops of ipec in a hysteric julip, whereon she took some rest'.

The choice of site for the fomentation was rational enough by contemporary theory which associated certain cases of delirium with a womb upset. Later, the management of the case closely follows the principles set out in a well-known compendium of therapeutics which had appeared in the 1680's.

A delirium happening upon continual and malignant Fevers, requires a peculiar way of Cure, for it particularly indicates that the morbid matter, dangerously convey'd towards the Head, ought to be revulsed some way or other; for which end let Vesicatories be applied to the Neck; Plaisters or Cataplasms on the flesh or warm Viscera of Animals, to the Feet. Inwardly let Temperate Cephalicks be given, as Powders of Coral and Pearl, the Waters of Black Cherries, of the flower of Cowslips and Poppies, and other things refreshing and soothing the spirits.<sup>8</sup>

On Monday, the fourth day of the girl's illness, Davies decided to adopt more energetic methods and ordered 'a clyster for Miss Patty, and a plaster to her poll which caused a great blister, but her distemper not altered by it'.

By the following morning the Dean had evidently become seriously worried, and possibly not unreflective that the alderman's brother, John Ellis, M.D., and Master of Gonville and Caius College might have a certain amount to say if Patty died incontinent on his unqualified hands. He writes: 'I found Miss Patty in a very ill condition, her eyes clouded, her pulse languid, and her senses dozed, wherefore I desired a consultation, and that her father would send for Dr. Cotton; Dr. Hudson was sent for.' Cotton and Hudson were the two principal professional men resident in Great Yarmouth, and the Dean knew them well. Before the arrival of the two doctors Davies had to go out to administer the sacrament to another of his patients, and on returning home he 'found Miss Patty in a sweat, and in a fair prospect of doing well'. This improvement was short in duration, for in the evening, 'she fell into a convulsion fit, upon which Dr. Hudson directed for her'. What Dr. Hudson directed is not described, but any omission was quickly supplied, for Davies adds: 'In the evening also we had a consultation with him and Dr. Cotton, and it was ordered that blisters should be raised behind the ears, leeches having been applied to her temples, and that a cephalic hysterical emulsion with peony seeds only, should be made for her.'

Despite several hours of this treatment, on Wednesday Davies had to report that the patient 'continues ill with convulsive motions'. After an early morning consultation with the doctors, he went to church on lectureship duties, where he read prayers and churched eight women. The afternoon was taken up by

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the husband of a very sick woman and the funeral of a Mr. Bowyers—no doubt an ex-patient of the group, for the Dean remarks that he 'came home with the doctors'. In the evening he supped at the house of Alderman Ellis's son, and afterwards, with a plurality of motives which is rather characteristic, 'sat up this night with Miss Patty till two o'clock, to see the eclipse, but the night being cloudy I was frustrated'.

During the next two days there were consultations, but the diary has only two entries: 'Miss Patty continues very ill'; 'appeared in a more hopeful way'. By Saturday morning she was seen to be worse.

Miss Patty having many fits last night, but rather hysteric than convulsive, appeared very heavy this morning. In the evening I perceived her mightily stupified, and observing the situation of the moon I feared the return of the convulsions; and in order to prevent it we had blisters applied to both her arms and all the places being used so before.

This prophylactic blistering had no effect, for on Sunday,

about four in the morning, on the change of the moon, Miss Patty fell into violent convulsions whereon I was called and Dr. Cotton sent for. By the time he came she appeared to be apoplectic, whereon I had her cupped in each shoulder, which brought her a little to her senses. Then the doctor advised an application of pigeons to her head which made some fermentation and disorder, but she came not to herself all day but her pulse being vermicular and all other symptoms ill, I despaired of anything but death suddenly. I went to church . . . in the afternoon I read prayers and baptised seven children.

The pigeons, to use the words of Dr. Willis's treatise, were an application of 'the warm Viscera of animals'. This therapy, which is of extreme antiquity, had come into considerable vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as an heroic treatment *in extremis*. Indeed Dr. William Butler went so far as to insert one moribund patient into the interior of a freshly killed cow,<sup>4</sup> but even contemporary opinion felt this to be a little excessive. Pigeons were not only much cheaper but were capable of much more precise local application. The technique was to chop a living pigeon in half and immediately to clap the raw portion to the point of application, usually the feet. In Elizabethan times the pigeons were often not removed until they waxed green. The Caroleans, no doubt against the opposition of a more conservative school, had progressed to fairly frequent changes.

Surprisingly enough, the young girl did not die under this course of treatment. On Monday Davies 'found Miss Patty a little more lively than I expected. Nature having had some relief and the doctor proposing some narcotics for her I opposed it.' By the following afternoon he thought her 'in a better condition than she had been of late; whereupon after supper the doctors came to see her and we determined not to alter the present course, till some fresh indication moved it'.

The improvement continued on Wednesday, 'Finding Miss Patty still better, I went to church and read prayers,' and although a week-day lectureship duty, 'went into Captain Robbins house . . . and after eating till nine o'clock,

with dancing and singing . . . I came to my lodging, where finding Miss Patty still dozed, I ordered a continuation of the pigeons for the night'.

On Thursday morning 'Miss Patty appeared somewhat better in her senses, and it was concluded to take off the pigeons, and having washed her head with a decoction of warm and sweet herbs and annointed it with aromatic oils, to put on a spiced cap by order of Dr. Willis for amaurosis.' After three days of pigeon applications perfumes were no doubt highly necessary.

From the tone of the entry for the afternoon it is clear that the assembled doctors were well pleased with the outcome of their conduct of the case. Davies says, 'we went with Dr. Cotton, Mr. Reynolds and Dr. Hudson to the coffee house, where we sat and drank four pints of sherry, and so came home and supped on sea blown herrings'. From similar causeries since 1689 it is not hard to guess the place which pigeon therapy will have had in the accompanying discussions.

The girl's convalescence continued apparently without incident, for she is not mentioned for over a week, until on Saturday, 5 October, Davies says, 'it being a wet morning I did not stir out, but after dinner Miss Patty being so well recovered as to sit up, I spent some time with her and her sisters in their chamber until evening prayer'.

Nearly three months later, on 28 December, her name appears for the last time when the Dean writes: 'I went to church and on my return I called at the stationers and bought *The Whole Duty of Man* to bestow on Miss Mary Ellis; *The Advice to a Daughter* for her sister Hannah; and *The Countess of Morton's Devotions* for Miss Patty; all of which cost me one Pound five Shillings.'

Davies left Great Yarmouth in February, and by way of a chaplaincy in William's Irish Expeditionary Force soon reconquered his lost preferments. The Ellis family and his other friends parted from him with all the signs of genuine regret, and much feasting. Dr. Cotton took him to The King's Arms, 'where they treated me with wine and oysters'. Dr. Hudson had preferred The Feathers, where, Davies gravely adds, 'he gave me a bottle of liquid laudanum, and my sermon I had lent him'.

On the day following, Hudson obliterated this felicitous piece of ambiguity by the gift of two surgical textbooks. Here too his choice had sardonic overtones. He was confident that the new regimental chaplain would do more than preach.

#### REFERENCES

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