

## THUCYDIDES ON THE PLAGUE AT ATHENS.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—In your review of Dr. Raymond Crawford's book "Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art" in THE LANCET of July 4th I note with interest that he holds the view that the disease described by Thucydides<sup>1</sup> as "plague" was really typhus fever. I think that a few extracts from the Greek historian's lurid description should be sufficient to prove the soundness of Dr. Crawford's conclusion.

It matters little whether so obscure an individual as myself agrees with or differs from so eminent a classical scholar as Dr. Crawford, but it may interest him to know that even in isolated spots in South Africa may be found some who appreciate his services to the historical side of medicine. I came to the conclusion many years ago that the disease described by Thucydides was really typhus fever; but I refrained from raising the question in your columns—though I often thought of doing so—for the simple reason that, remote as I am, and have been for many years, from good libraries, it might have seemed presumptuous on my part to offer an opinion one way or other on a subject which I assumed had been decided by scholars long ago. It should seem, however, from your review that this is not the case; and it is certainly matter for astonishment to me that any medical reader of Thucydides should be in doubt as to the nature of the disease he describes under the name of "plague." As a record of disease emanating from remote antiquity, and written by one who suffered from it himself—"the greatest historian that ever lived," as Macaulay styles him—it must always possess an abiding interest, at least for those to whom the large memories of the Hellenic past make any appeal. Nor will the interpretations of modern science—beyond changing the name of the disease—do particular violence to the historian's reputation for accuracy as to statements of fact. In setting forth my reasons for supporting Dr. Crawford's view I may also state the circumstances under which this subject first aroused my special interest.

Some 13 years ago, whilst attached to the South African Field Force, I often found myself compelled to extract what comfort I could from a very limited library. Amongst my books was a copy of Thucydides. The monotony of veld life forced me into communion with this ancient friend, as "something craggy to break my mind against"—to use Byron's metaphor.

I need not pretend that I found the text which alienated Porson, perplexed Arnold, and evoked Macaulay's admiring despair, a source of unmingled happiness. Too often I had to leave the great Athenian alone with his peculiar glory of self-repression and obscurity of phrase. Enough, however, remained to come within the scope of my powers, and of that the description of the plague at Athens claimed my particular attention. In an article written by me then and published in your columns<sup>2</sup> I made a passing reference to the subject, but there I left it, as it was foreign to the matter under discussion.

Now, taking a few of the symptoms of typhus fever as described in a modern text-book of

medicine—such as, for instance, pyrexia, headache, injected conjunctivæ, vomiting, bronchial catarrh, thirst, mottled rash, and sleeplessness—let us see what is to be found in Thucydides about each and all of them. It will, in fact, be seen that each of these symptoms is discussed by him almost in the order in which I have given them: 1. "Violent heats in the head." ("τῆς κεφαλῆς θερμὸν ἰσχυραί.") 2. "Redness and inflammation of the eyes." ("τῶν οφθαλμῶν ἐρυθρήματα καὶ φλόγῳσις.") 3. "Sneezing and hoarseness came on, and in a short time the pain descended into the chest with a violent cough." ("παρμος καὶ βράγχος ἐπιγίγνεται ἐς τὰ στήθη ὁ πόνος μετα βηχὸς ἰσχυροῦ.") 4. Vomiting ("καὶ ὅποτε ἐς τὴν καρδίαν στήριξεν ἀνέστρεφέ τε αὐτὴν")—i.e., "when it settled in the stomach, it upset it." 5. A rash of a "reddish" (ὕπερυθρον) "livid" tint (πελιτνον). 6. Thirst. This was so great that not even the lightest clothing could be borne. The stricken ones lay stark naked, and many threw themselves into the cisterns, "being in the grasp of an unquenchable thirst" ("τῇ διψῇ ἀπαυστῶ ξυνεχομενοι"). 7. Sleeplessness ("καὶ ἡ ἀπορία μὴ ἡσυχάζειν κ.ὶ ἡ ἀγρυπνία ἐπέικετο δια παντός")—i.e., "and the misery of restlessness and wakefulness weighed upon all." This is a fairly good description of the "coma-vigil" of modern clinicians. The other symptoms described correspond to our sequelæ. They are: gangrene of the genitalia, fingers, and toes, loss of eyes, and sometimes complete loss of memory (probably dementia):—"κατεσκηπτε γὰρ ἐς αἰδοῖα καὶ ἐς ἀκρῖς χειρῶν καὶ πόδας," &c. .... "τοὺς δὲ καὶ λήθη ἐλαμβανε," &c.

So far, then, and no farther does it seem to me necessary to quote from Thucydides to establish the view that he is in reality describing typhus fever.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

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Roberts Victor Diamond Mine, Victor, O.F.S., Sept. 1st, 1914.

CENTRAL MIDWIVES BOARD.—A meeting of the Central Midwives Board was held at Caxton House, Westminster, on Oct. 8th, with Sir Francis H. Champneys in the chair. A letter was considered from Miss Llewellyn Davies, general secretary of the Women's Coöperative Guild, asking the Board to appoint a representative to join a deputation to the President of the Local Government Board, in his capacity as such and as chairman of the Government Committee for the Relief of Distress, to consider the care of maternity in time of war. The Board directed that Miss Llewellyn Davies be informed that the Central Midwives Board, while sympathising with any scheme which had for its object the care of maternity in time of war, did not see its way to join the deputation. A letter was considered from the secretary of the County Councils Association transmitting a copy of a resolution passed by the executive council at its meeting on July 29th with regard to the registration and inspection of lying-in homes, institutions, and houses where women are habitually taken in for their confinement for pay. The secretary to the Board reported that the executive council of the County Councils Association had resolved that in the opinion of the council it is desirable that all lying-in homes should be registered and inspected by the inspectors of the local supervising authorities under the Midwives Act. Further correspondence was considered with regard to a complaint made by a certified midwife of the conditions of midwifery practice in Bangor and the absence of inspection by the local supervising authority. The Board decided that the correspondence be referred to the County Councils Association. A letter was considered from a certified midwife approved by the Board for the purpose of undertaking the practical training of pupils at her nursing home, asking that her approval may be extended to cover a second training home not in the immediate vicinity of the first. The Board decided that the application be refused.

<sup>1</sup> Hist., Bk. 2, chaps. 47-53.

<sup>2</sup> THE LANCET, June 27th, 1908, p. 1338.