

I.

RECENTLY a limited edition of a very rare book — Martin's *Western Islands of Scotland*—has been published. It contains many curious things, among them an account of the remedies used in those days (1695), previously, and to some extent since, in the Highlands and Islands of the West, for all kinds of ailments to which man or beast was liable. It is thought that a brief reference to some of these, with a few examples taken from other sources, may prove interesting to the reader. We shall first deal with those remedies used for the ailments of the people themselves, after which we may have something to say about those applied for the cure of cattle, and other animals.

Two or three hundred years ago, such a person as a professional doctor was unknown in the Highlands. The people were naturally healthy, and the little ailments which affected them were quickly relieved by some simple concoction of herbs. They found healing in the roots, stones, shells, and other objects of nature which lay close at hand, and although at times their remedies showed traces of superstition, in general they served their purpose well enough. Some of these remedies are used in the Highlands to the present day, and their efficacy is in many instances undoubted. What, for example, can be better for a cough than plenty brochan or gruel and butter, which was and is still the sovereign cure for that complaint in the Western Isles? Nettle roots and the roots of reeds boiled in water with yeast was also used. Speaking of the men of Lewis, Martin says, when the uvula falls they cut it in this curious manner—"They take a long quill, and putting a horse-hair double into it, make a noose at the end of the quill, and putting it about the lower end of the uvula, they cut off from the uvula all that is below the hair with a pair of scissors; and then the patient swallows a little bread and cheese, which cures him. This operation is not attended with the least inconvenience, and cures the distemper so that it never returns." He tells us that John Campbell, the forester of Harris, when he had caught a cold, walked into the sea with his clothes

on, and then went to bed in his wet garments, but well wrapped up in the bedclothes, and the perspiration thus induced cured his cold by the next day. Another common remedy for a cold was a decoction of colt's-foot. A cure for coughs and hoarseness was to bathe the feet in hot water, and then to rub some deer's grease to the soles of the feet in front of a good fire at bed-time. The following recipe for a cold is taken from *Nether-Lochaber* :—
“ Take a pint—say a tumblerful—of sea water that has been heated to the boiling point, without having been allowed actually to boil. Sprinkle over it some pepper, rather more plentifully than you do in your soup ; drink this as hot as you can bear it as you step into bed at night.” This is said to be even yet a popular cure in Lochaber.

Fresh wounds were dressed with a salve made of golden rod, mistletoe, and fresh butter. A broken limb was first rubbed with the white of an egg mixed with barley meal, and tied up in splints for a day or two. An ointment composed of betony, St John's wort, and golden rod, all pounded together in butter or sheep's grease, was afterwards applied. Sometimes the fat of a sea bird was made into a pudding, and being placed in the stomach of the bird, was applied as a kind of poultice to fresh wounds. This was called “Giben of St Kilda.” The plant called shepherd's purse was applied to cuts to arrest the flow of blood, but yarrow was considered the best remedy for that purpose. The latter plant was used also for headaches, the leaves being pushed up the nostrils until the blood sprung, from which very likely it took its Gaelic name of *lus na fola*, or the blood-weed. In the Island of Gigha nettles were used to stanch bleeding, and also the common fungi called puff-balls. Ribwort, wood mercury, herb Robert, and bloody cranesbill were all used for the same purpose, the Gaelic name of the last-mentioned plant, according to Cameron, being *creachlach dearg*, the red wound healer.

The following amusing cures for the jaundice among the Lewis men are taken from Martin :—“ The first is by laying the patient on his face, and, pretending to look upon his back bones, they presently pour a pailful of cold water on his bare back ; and this proves successful. The second cure they perform by taking the tongs and making them red-hot in the fire ; then pulling off

the clothes from the patient's back, he who holds the tongs gently touches the patient upwards on the vertebrae of the back, which makes him furiously run out of doors, still supposing the hot iron is on his back, till the pain be abated, which happens very speedily, and the patient recovers soon after." In Shetland the remedy for this disease was to mix powdered snails in the patient's drink.

Diarrhœa and dysentery were treated in Lewis with a beverage composed of what Martin calls "the kernel of the black molocca beans," ground to powder, and mixed with boiled milk. Moderate doses of strong whisky and juniper berries were also taken for these ailments. In Harris powdered cuttle-fish bone was given to the patient in boiled milk ; and in Uist the great cures were to eat seal, and drink plenty whisky in which a hectic stone had been quenched. Another remedy for diarrhœa was red coral and a roasted yolk of egg.

In cases of fever, whey, in which violets had been boiled, was given as a cooling drink. Distilled raspberry and whortleberry juice were used for the same purpose. For what Martin calls "spotted fever," probably measles, they drank freely of brandy ; and for scarlet fever the same remedy was used in smaller quantities. In the case of infants, the nurse drank the brandy, to qualify the milk ; and, it is feared, the nurses of those days frequently discovered symptoms of scarlet fever in the infants under their care.

Serpent bites were cured in a variety of ways. The people followed the old proverb—"Take a hair of the dog that bit you ;" for Martin states that in Skye the principal cures for serpent bites were to wash the wound in water in which the forked tongue of the serpent had been steeped, and to apply the head of the reptile which gave the wound. Another was to place the hind part of a living cock to the bite, which was thought to draw out the venom. New cheese, promptly applied, was found effectual ; as were also juniper berries, ground ivy, and decoctions of oak bark, acorns, and ash leaves.

In Harris the remedy for gravel was an infusion of wild garlic. In Skye it was cured by taking broth made of dulse, or ometimes of the large, pale whelk, pounded in its shell, boiled and strained. Another remedy was water gruel without salt.

For sleeplessness after fever the patient washed his feet, knees, and ancles in a warm infusion of chickweed, and on going to bed a poultice of the same plant was applied warm to his neck and between his shoulders. A poultice of chopped nettle-tops and raw white of eggs applied to the forehead and temples at bed-time was also used to induce sleep. A kind of heath called *Erica baccifera*, boiled in water, and applied to the crown of the head and temples, and the green sea plant, called in Gaelic *linnearach*, were remedies for sleeplessness, and an infusion of thyme was a certain preventive against nightmare and horrible dreams.

To raise a blister the Highlanders bruised spearwort, and applied it in a limpet shell to the spot where the blister was required. This very soon took effect, and when the blister burst the wound was healed with *linnearach*. Another blister they used was groundsel, applied much in the same way.

For consumption a common remedy was the broth of a lamb in which the plants lovage and Alexanders were boiled; another being milk or water in which a red-hot hectic stone had been cooled, to which they sometimes added yarrow. In Skye they used an ale composed of hart's-tongue and maiden-hair ferns boiled in unfermented beer, and sometimes also brochan without salt. Lungwort was a very common cure. In Black's *Folk-Medicine*, it is stated that "In the county of Moray the people were formerly in the habit of paring the nails of the fingers and toes of persons suffering from hectic and consumptive diseases. The parings were put in a rag cut from the patient's clothes, and waved three times round his head, with the cry *Deas soil* [*? Deas-iuil.*] After this the rag was buried in some unknown place."

The cure for fluxes in Uist was dried seal's liver, pulverised, and taken with milk or whisky. In Skye a syrup extracted from blackberries was used, and a decoction of plantain in which hectic stone had been quenched.

For sciatica the Uist men bound a girdle of sealskin round the hips, to which was also applied the fat of a sea-bird which Martin calls a "bonnivoichil."

Megrim and headache were cured by applying the sea-plant *linnearach* to the side of the head affected, and also by a plaster of cold dulse.

Colic was relieved by taking broth made of dulse, and for stitches the Skye-men, if bleeding was ineffectual, applied an ointment composed of camomile, or brandy and fresh butter, or a poultice of raw scurvy-grass chopped fine. It was cured in Jura by a vapour-bath formed of the fumes of ladywrack and redfog boiled in water, the patient sitting upon the vessel which contained the herbs.

To expel worms the Highlanders took dried bruised dulse, or an infusion of tansy in whey or brandy, taken fasting. Bog-myrtle tea and the powdered roots of shield ferns in water were also used with success. Worms were expelled from the hands by washing them in salt water in which the ashes of burnt seaweed were mixed.

Regarding ringworm, *Nether-Lochaber* informs us that, "There is a very wide-spread belief over the West Highlands and in the Hebrides that ringworm can be readily cured by rubbing it over and around once or twice with a gold ring—a woman's marriage ring, if it can be had, being always preferred." In *Folk-Medicine*, we are told that "in Shetland a person affected with ringworm takes, on three successive mornings, ashes between the forefinger and thumb, before taking food, and, while holding them to the part affected, says—

' Ringworm, ringworm red !
Never may'st thou spread or speed
But aye grow less and less
And die away among the ase ' (*ashes.*) "

H. R. M.

II.

MARTIN describes several methods which the Islesmen had for inducing perspiration. In Skye, the patient boiled his shirt in water, and then put it on, and this soon had the desired effect. Another way was to pile live peats upon an earthen floor until it became sufficiently hot, when the peats were removed and a quantity of straw substituted. Water was then poured upon it, and the patient lay down upon the steaming straw until the perspiration came on. When it was desired to make any particular part of the body perspire, a hole was dug in an earthen floor and filled with dry sticks and rushes. A red-hot hectic stone was placed upon these, and water being poured over the whole, the patient held the special part of his person over the vapour evolved until he obtained the desired result. A bowl of hot gruel and butter was taken at bed-time to produce a copious perspiration all over the body—a remedy common to this day.

Their cure for faintness of spirits cannot be better described than in Martin's own words. It was performed by a blacksmith in the parish of Kilmartin as follows :—"The patient being laid on the anvil with his face uppermost, the smith takes a big hammer in both his hands, and making his face all grimace, he approaches his patient ; and then drawing his hammer from the ground, as if he intended to hit him with his full strength on the forehead, he ends in a feint, else he would be sure to cure the patient of all diseases ; but the smith being accustomed to the performance, has a dexterity of managing his hammer with discretion, though at the same time he must do it so as to strike terror in the patient ; and this, they say, has always the designed effect."

For costiveness there were a number of remedies, one of the most common being to boil a quantity of dulse in water, and drink the infusion with a good-sized piece of butter in it. Some of the Skye people took an infusion of spearwort in melted butter, but as this was rather a violent remedy it was not generally used. Wood mercury and horehound were often found effectual. In St Kilda the natives drank the oil which the fulmar, a species of petrel, spouted from its bill when alarmed, and which contained valuable laxative properties.

For bloodshot and inflamed eyes, the Skye people applied a poultice of yellow fern and white of egg laid upon coarse flax. An infusion in milk of the plant called eyebright, applied with a feather, was also used with success, and dulse eaten in liberal quantities was thought to improve the eyesight.

In cases of toothache, spearwort was applied to the temples, another remedy being to heat a turf and place it to the side of the head affected as hot as it could be borne. In *Folk-Medicine* it is stated that "to go between the sun and the sky to a place where the dead and the living cross (a ford), and lift a stone from it with the teeth, is thought in the North-East of Scotland a cure for toothache."

The iliac passion was treated by giving the sufferer a drink of cold water and oatmeal, and then suspending the patient by the heels for some time, poultices of hot dulse being applied to the abdomen, until relief was obtained.

To ripen a tumour or boil they used a warm poultice of

female jacobea, cut small, and mixed with fresh butter on a hot stone, and this was also applied to hard and swollen breasts.

Benumbed feet were scarified with a lancet, and when swollen and blistered with walking long distances they were bathed in a decoction of alder leaves. Rheumatic pains were relieved by rubbing the affected parts with fulmar oil, and the juice of the crab-apple was considered good for sprains and cramps. For flatulency the people ate the roots of knaphard and lovage, taking nothing else, however, the same day.

In Colonsay, the people had a curious custom of fanning the sick with the leaves of the Bible. Martin states that while he was there the loan of his "book" was thrice requested and given for that purpose, and he was informed next day that the patient had benefited considerably by the use of it.

The remedies for the ills which afflict man have hitherto been entirely dealt with. We shall now give a few of those used for the diseases of cattle, sheep, and horses.

In Harris, the sheep which fed upon sandy ground became afflicted with a film which grew over their eyes and caused blindness, and to cure this the eyes were rubbed with chalk or powdered cuttle-fish bone. Lovage was a sovereign remedy for sheep troubled with cough.

To cure cramp in cows, the part affected was bathed in water in which a curious kind of stone found in clay banks had been steeped for some hours. These stones were called cramp-stones. For blindness, chewed wild sage was put into the animal's ears. Costiveness was cured by giving the sea-plant slake, boiled with some butter.

Horses troubled with bots were washed with water in which a peculiar stone, called by the Skye people bot-stones, had been steeped. Wild sage chopped small, or an infusion of it, were given to horses to kill worms, the animal being kept from drinking for at least ten hours after the dose.

These are some of the most curious remedies given in Martin's work, which contains a valuable store of information regarding the life, manners, and customs of the Western Islesmen two hundred years ago.