

AELIUS ARISTIDES, A HYPOCHONDRIAC
IN THE TIME OF THE ANTONINES.*

BY WARD A. HOLDEN, M.D.,

of New York City.

IF any god is worthy of worship it is Aesculapius. I had returned home from Italy after having procured various things for my body, because of the ills with which I had been afflicted and of the ordeals I had undergone while passing through Thrace and Macedonia, having been in fact ill when I started from home. . . . There was a great dispute

*"I have the pleasure to observe that those fevers, in this neighborhood at least, have of late years greatly decreased. This must chiefly be attributed to a system of management lately introduced, much to the honor of our present practitioners and of those nurses who seem sensible of the advantages arising from it; and I must here do my brethren the justice to assert that I do not know a place where midwifery is more successfully practised."
—*Loc. cit.*, 1st edition, p. 153.

*Read before the Charaka Club.

among the physicians, since they could neither wholly diagnose my case nor at all relieve my condition. The most trying thing of all was my shortness of breath. I could breathe only with difficulty and finally only with the utmost effort. I had a constant feeling of suffocation, and my nerves had grown cold so that I required more clothing than I could bear the weight of, and an infinite number of other troubles afflicted me. Therefore it seemed well to try the hot baths in the hope that I might grow strogner and be better able to resist the wintry air. Here the *σωτήρ* (i. e., the savior Aesculapius) delivered to me his oracles. He ordered me to go barefoot and I sleeping, as though I were awake and had been dreaming, was heard to cry out: 'Great is Aesculapius, his will be done.'"

This is a quotation from the second of the sacred discourses of Aelius Aristides who is supposed to have been born in the year of our Lord 117, and to have died in the year 189.

In his day the Roman empire under the Antonines was enjoying a century of peace in which there was a revival of the arts, and letters particularly were cultivated. The second age of Greek eloquence it has been called, and Aristides was its most accomplished rhetor. At that time too, the old religious beliefs were passing, new Asiatic religions were welcomed, and there was a general superstitious belief in the direct intervention of individual gods in human affairs. The cult of Aesculapius had then reached its highest efflorescence. He was worshipped at Epidaurus, Pergamus, Smyrna, Tricca, Cyzicus, and indeed in every part of Greece, Italy, Egypt and Asia Minor in which Hellenic influences prevailed. A mania for monuments had begun, and many temples with the image of the god in the center, were built in solitary groves near streams of water.

Aristides was born at Adriani in Asia Minor. His father Eudaemon was priest in a temple of Olympian Zeus situated on a neighboring height flanking one of the many sacred mountains called Olympus. So from childhood his mind was directed toward temples and divinities. Early in life he showed a fondness for letters and he had for instructors Herodus Atticus and also Alexander the grammarian, who later went to Rome and became instructor to the young Marcus Aurelius. The declamations of Aristides early gained him local fame and when later he traveled through Greece, Italy, and Egypt, he was everywhere flattered until he came to have an exaggerated idea of his talents.

An illness which came on when he was about thirty, led him

to invoke the aid of Aesculapius, and thereafter he frequently had visions, and the god not only directed his manner of life but also inspired his writings. He traveled much, sought out many temples of Aesculapius, and finally settled down in Smyrna where he spent the remainder of his life, frequenting the hot baths near the river Aesopus. When Smyrna was partly destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 177, he wrote a moving address to Marcus Aurelius who was then emperor, which led to the restoration of the city, and the grateful citizens erected a bronze statue of him, made him priest in the temple of Aesculapius, and revered him as founder of their city.

Aristides composed half a hundred eulogies of divinities and men and panegyrics on cities, which won him great fame in his life time, but to-day scholars regard these literary efforts as having been much overrated.

There is a lasting interest, however, in his six discourses of sacred things or sacred orations. These orations were written late in life, after his recovery. They describe his ordeals and sufferings during the thirteen years of his illness, his treatment at the hands of physicians, his visions of Aesculapius, and the directions of the god which sustained him and finally led to his complete restoration to health—in all a sort of votive offering to the god.

Some freely rendered excerpts from the second oration which follow, give a fair idea of the matter of these discourses.

. . . "The juice of a balsam, the gift of Telesphorus, which was to be used when passing from warm water to cold; then purgatives made of raisins mixed with various substances, and an infinite number of other things, all of which I shall refrain from mentioning save such as were marvelous and the effects of which I remember with gratitude." Again, "We had returned to Smyrna. Here the god appeared to me and with him Apollo. He stretched out his fingers and standing before my bed counted off ten years for him and three for Serapis, assuring me that this was not a dream but a reality. He ordered me to bathe in a stream that runs by the town, taking as a guide a beardless youth whom he designated. It was midwinter, the North wind was blowing, there was ice, the pebbles were frozen together, and the water was as cold as the air. However, after the vision was explained, our friends led us forth, accompanied by physicians and their families and other persons, some drawn by interest and some by curiosity. There was, besides, a great crowd which

scattered beyond the gates, and everything could be seen from the bridge. Heracleon, a physician, a friend of ours, confessed to me the following day that he feared I might be thrown into opisthotonos or something of the sort. But after reaching the river I had no need of urging for I was filled with a warmth conceived by the sight of the god, and after undressing, without being rubbed I plunged into the deepest part of the river and stayed there as if in a warm fish pond, swimming about and splashing the water over me. When I emerged my skin glowed and my body appeared vigorous, and great was the acclamation of the spectators who shouted the famous cry: 'Great is Aesculapius!' All the remainder of the day and until I went to sleep, my condition remained the same. My body was neither dry nor moist, nor did its warmth increase or diminish. It was not a warmth that human agencies could produce, but an equal glow giving strength throughout the entire body. Nor was it different with my mind. There was no acute exhilaration, but an ineffable tranquility of mind in which I postponed all things for the present and believed that I did not perceive the things which I actually saw. Thenceforth I gave myself up to the god."

Again, "Then I abstained from all food except milk, and I felt a constriction of the chest, violent fever seized me, and a hundred days after leaving home I reached Rome. Here my intestines swelled, my nerves grew cold, my entire body became frigid and my breath was cut off. But since the physicians advised purgatives, I purged myself until the blood came. The fever increased and all the physicians were uncertain and offered no hope of my recovery. Finally the physicians made an incision from my throat down to my bladder and applied cups. My breath failed altogether, a dull pain spread through me, everything was spotted with blood, and I was tortured with the greatest anguish."

Aristides was at home in Adriani when he noticed the first symptoms of the illness which so profoundly changed him. He lost weight and strength and feared to undertake the journey he had planned, but Aesculapius appeared in a dream and ordered him to set out, notwithstanding the wintry weather. After an irksome journey of a hundred days he reached Rome, where his symptoms became more pronounced and he was confined to the house. All the remedies of physicians failed, including the incision mentioned above, but he was comforted and

cosseted by Alexander, his former teacher, in return for which he delivered a eulogy on Alexander after his death.

Aesculapius never abandoned Aristides, he believed, but the god seemed more disposed to test him and console him than to cure him. In Rome he regained his strength sufficiently to compose a poem in honor of Apollo, the father of Aesculapius. This appeared at a time when feasts were being held in the temples of Apollo, and Aristides, a recluse, had been unaware of the approach of the festivals, so that this coincidence seemed to him a fresh proof of divine guidance.

When he took ship to return home, he encountered severe storms, but he got ashore at Delos where there were two temples of Apollo. It was Apollo, therefore, whom he thanked for his deliverance. The fatigues of travel aggravated his symptoms, and when he arrived at Smyrna the physicians and gymnasts whom he consulted were unable to understand his condition and, after trying several remedies in vain, they sent him to the hot baths in the vicinity. The twelve succeeding years of his illness were spent almost entirely in Smyrna, and here later he composed the sacred orations, making use of the copious notes he had taken during the course of his illness. In one place he writes: "No one who has not seen me with his own eyes could form any idea of the deplorable condition to which I was reduced. A violent catarrh never left me day or night. I suffered from palpitation and my breath was short. From time to time I thought I was dying, but I was unable to make an effort to call any of my people. Some foods I could swallow only with great difficulty. I could not lie down, and was forced to pass the night sitting up, my head on my knees, covered with woollen and other warm vestments. Thus condemned to the life of a recluse, I invoked sleep in vain; but the details of all these symptoms would be infinite and he alone who would wish to count all the attacks of pain, all the intolerable crises to relieve which the god sent me to bathe in the sea or the waters of rivers and springs, enjoining me always to endure the rigors of winter—he alone could realize the extent of the care my savior took of me."

Once Aristides was sent to consult the oracle at Pergamus. The oracle ordered bleeding from the arm and forehead and a plunge into the river Caicus. The directions were minute. He was to go on foot. He was to stop at a point where he saw a horse in the water and a sacristan of Aesculapius on the bank.

All took place according to the dream and he experienced great relief.

At one time, when a rest of several months had restored his forces, the god counselled him to overcome his repugnance for work, to think, to compose, to break his silence, and a subject for a declamation was suggested to him which he, still weak, pronounced in bed before a circle of his friends.

After the thirteen years of suffering his health was restored as had been foretold, indicating that in all probability he had had no organic affection. A few months after his recovery, however, the plague broke out in Smyrna, and all of his servants died. Aristides himself was attacked so severely that his physicians gave him up. But in a dream Aesculapius appeared to him, presenting Minerva with her aegis as Phidias had represented her, and she urged him to have courage, recalling the ordeals of Ulysses and Telemachus. He was ordered to use Attic honey to purge himself of bile and to eat goose livers and fish. He slowly improved, but the fever did not leave him until a favorite foster brother died. "On the day," he wrote, "that Zazine died, as I learned later, the plague left me and I found myself well and strong. Thus, as previously my existence had been due solely to continuous favors on the part of the gods, even so on that day I was restored to life by an effort of their goodness; but on this occasion I received life for life. I owed my salvation to a substitution."

In the author of these jumbled and fantastic discourses we may distinguish three personalities and, recognizing them, we may make the necessary allowances for the manifest exaggerations they contain. First, there was the introspective neurasthenic, keeping a diary of his symptoms; second, there was the votary of the Aesculapian cult, glorifying the god; and third, there was the habile writer, one of whose addresses had moved Marcus Aurelius to tears, striving to arouse the sympathies and excite the wonder of his readers.

An edition of the writings of Aristides by Jebb, Oxford, 1730, includes a Latin version of the Greek text and a life of the author in Latin; and a paper by Cherbuliez entitled "La ville de Smyrna et Aristide," gives an account of his life and of his relations to the city which so highly honored him. A statute of Aelius Aristides is preserved in the Vatican museum.