Notes on the Epidemic of Bubonic Plague in Hainan.

By P. W. McClintock.

The inception, growth and effects of an epidemic of bubonic plague are so insidious, so mysterious, so awful, that the ordinary native regards it as peculiarly the work of the demons. While usually all sickness is attributed to demoniacal influence, the plague is in particular the special work of a "chief of the devils." He is locally described as blind and exceedingly malevolent, as he must be to account for the enormous death rate. The disease is spread by his agency, his method being to wander about the markets and villages, touching whomever he willeth, and those so designated forthwith contract the disease. Woe to him who speaks of the blind devil, woe to him who mentions the name of one afflicted, for his days are numbered. It is only a question of hours until he is gathered to his fathers. As a consequence, it is well nigh impossible to obtain reliable information as to the course of the disease; as to who are dead, or who have contracted it, or in what part of the market or village it is raging. The only answer obtainable to such questions is "there is no news, the market is at peace." On the other hand, in order, of course, to mislead and to deceive the blind devil, reports are put into circulation that afterwards prove to be false. Those dead are spoken of as being alive and those who are living as being dead.

It is natural at such a time that the idols should be fervently intreated for protection. Endless are the offerings of candles; the odours of ever-burning incense permeate the entire market. Constant is the stream of worshippers and numberless the vows and promises of gifts and pleasures bestowed upon the idols in return for their protecting care. Some strange incidents arise at such a time, exemplifying the fear and contempt in which the gods are held.

The commander of a garrison on the edge of the market ordered prayers to be made and gifts to be offered to the garrison idol, beseeching it for protection, and demanding a promise. No answer was made; no guarantee of protection was granted. Patience was, at last, exhausted, and the commander ordered the idol to be carried out of the temple and beaten by the common soldiers with the soles of their shoes. Could anything be
more degrading? The poor idol (either in pain or feeling the dishonour and loss of face, or perchance in pity), with tears streaming down his ruddy cheeks, confessed his inability to protect against the blind devil, for the "Upper Lord" had shut himself up and refused to hear his prayers. (The "fact" of the tears is certified to by the entire garrison.)

At the market gate is an idol whose duty it is to ward off and prevent from entering the town any evil spirits wandering at large. During the earlier stages of the epidemic he had given promises of protection which were not fulfilled. As the disease spread and the death rate increased he was taken to task for his dereliction of duty. His answer was characteristic. It seemed that the commander of the garrison had, during a recent idolatrous procession, provided eight chair-bearers for the garrison idol, while the market people provided but four for their god. Hence his answer—

"I am here at the head of your market; I ward off the evil spirits and prevent them from entering into your homes. I am your protector, your guardian spirit, yet when you took me out you provided me with but four chair-bearers, while the god from the yamên was provided with eight. If you so degrade me in the sight of all men how can you expect me to protect you?" Evidently jealousy is not unknown among the gods.

One of the idols being strenuously besought for help gave answer that if a certain merchant would become the mediator for the market and humbly entreat him, he would listen to the prayer and exert his saving power. Forthwith he was carried to the merchant's shop, but the bearers in their haste and zeal fell against the merchant causing him to fall and cutting open his head. Probably this fall, and the wound received there in the filthy street, were the direct means of infection, for the merchant died in a few days and the market had lost its mediator.

During the course of the epidemic the villages put into operation the practice or custom, locally called the kim, literally "forbidding." After the performance of certain religious rites on the part of the Taoist priest, a boundary was set about the village and no stranger was allowed to cross the line. Breaking this prohibition destroyed the efficacy of the rite. It lasted during three days—a pity it did not last until the epidemic ceased. Still in a way it was of service, for it proved to be a means of advertising infected villages, as no village kimned (quarantined) until after rats had been found there, either dead or dying.

Two servants belonging to the foreigners inadvertently overstepped this boundary and were seized upon by the villagers and held to ransom. They were only released upon the payment of a fine, with the promise on the part of the villagers that this fine would go toward the erecting of some mat isolation sheds. One fears (with reason) that the fine only went to increase
the profits of the priest. As if in confirmation of their superstition the
disease broke out in the village, followed by several deaths. As a matter of
fact the infection had been previously shown and rats having died it was
almost sure to follow that the disease would attack people.

A neighbouring market possessed three most promising Taoist priests.
"Promising" in two of its meanings; for they promised anything provided
they were sufficiently well reimbursed. Among their promises was that of
perfect immunity, provided the people remained in their homes, for how could
the gods protect if the people forsook the gods! These priests evidently
believed in the doctrine of practising what they preached, for all of them
remained in their homes, contracted the disease and died, and the people are
now mourning over the fact that no longer have they anyone to perform their
rites and represent them before the idols. How many deaths are the direct
result of these same priests it is impossible to imagine. It must be
remembered that at such a time the people are as sheep without a shepherd.
They know not what to do or where to go; nor how to help save
themselves. Anyone who lays claim to the supernatural can lead them as
he wills. As a result the priests on advising "passive resistance," that
is, exhorting the people to remain at home, and to take absolutely no
precautions against contagion, are believed and trusted. As no sanitary
measures whatever are undertaken; as the fact of the presence of the disease
is hidden by every artifice and deception known; and as the village people
are inveigled into the market to buy and sell as usual, the disease is
fostered and spread and the death rate leaps up by bounds. If even a
system of isolation could be carried out the violence of the epidemic could
be mitigated, but on every attempt to this end the priest places his veto.
Would the people only leave their infected homes many might be saved, but
no! the priests say "stay at home." Even those who have sought protection
in flight and for the time have escaped might reasonably hope to escape
entirely—but again the priest steps in saying, "On the tenth of the
fourth moon all danger will be past and you must return home." Surely
superstition has at such a time full play and its awful results in loss of life,
in sorrow and misery, are never so manifest.

It seems that during this time all the heavenly hosts of gods and
demons were at war. Reports of celestial battles were constantly circulated,
and were the results of the battles always propitious. During a season of
seeming indifference on the part of a market idol, he was requested to
explain himself. In reply he stated that for some time he and his attendant
spirits had been engaged in deadly battle with the plague demons. He
had succeeded in forcing them out of the market. Then a parley ensued
and the demons requested permission to enter a neighbouring village called Hamlak. As the idol's business was to protect the market only and not the villages, the permission was readily given, but fearing treachery the god awaited the result of the visit to Hamlak. It was not long until all the demoniacal hosts were seen returning, and as an excuse, returned answer that Hamlak was too small and could not contain them all. A harder and more bloody battle followed, in which the demons were defeated and put to complete confusion. "And how," said the god, "could I attend to your prayers when for days I have been wading up to my knees in blood?" No wonder that, exhausted by such exertions and sickened by the scenes of such a bloody battlefield, he had not "had the heart" to respond to prayer.

It would indeed be amusing were it not so pitiful—this superstition and credulity. No doubt but that it was largely responsible for the spread of the disease, until in almost every house in the market, and almost every village in the district, it had its victims. Burials took place in the early morning, but no mourners followed the bier and no sign of mourning was worn, no matter in what relationship the deceased had stood. During the earlier stages of the epidemic two had died in one house at the same time and the family followed them to the grave, carrying the coffins through the main street. After this no funeral processions were allowed and only the powerful influence of the family prevented difficulty with the market. It was not long before the usual sense of decency in such matters was lost; bodies were robbed by the gravediggers and only a very scanty burial given. The stock of coffins became exhausted and matting took its place, for even the wealthy could not purchase anything better. Men were cast out to die and it is said that even before death their bodies were dispoiled of clothing and jewelry. The gravediggers seemed to be immune, although working constantly with the victims of the disease, and it became a proverb that not until a grave-digger had contracted the disease and died would it stop.

It is awful to contemplate the ravages of this disease as it reaches out wider and wider into China. We may quiet ourselves by saying that it will not reach us. Yet there is no reason to doubt but that it will gradually spread over the land until it will consume it as it is consuming India to-day. The disease spreads slowly but it spreads none the less surely. This is a warning note that all who have to do with the Chinese may well heed. It should also be the endeavour of all to prevent this scourge by teaching and applying the truths of sanitary science and especially those laws of health which will assist in preventing the spread of the plague. To wait until the disease is in our midst is to accomplish nothing. To have it in mind and prepare for it at once will go largely toward prevention.