



BRIEF REPORTS

The purpose of this department is to facilitate the reporting of interesting cases and observations that otherwise might not be recorded.

THE ROYAL TOUCH

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"KING'S EVIL" AND "ROYAL TOUCH"

In the history of mediaeval medicine the "King's Evil," a group of diseases, and the "Royal Touch," a therapeutic measure, were related. The King's Evil was a term applied to various kinds of skin manifestations, such as scrofula, tuberculous glands, cancers, wens, dermoid cysts and leprosy. Besides applying the ordinary treatments such as liniments, ointments and adhering to various diets, Christian patients afflicted with the above-named diseases often sought what was called the Royal Touch, an elaborate Christian service in which the king, by means of divine power supposedly conferred upon him, touched the sick and healed them.

The idea of the Royal Touch can undoubtedly be traced back to the records of the Lord and his apostles. The Lord touched the leper and healed him. Even the touch of the hem of His garment brought healing. It is also said of the apostles, and especially of Paul, that to obtain healing some used handkerchiefs and aprons worn by the apostle (Acts 19:12).

After the apostolic age the gift of miracles ended, at least in the New Testament sense. But the many promises of scripture referring to the healing of disease, and the frequently peculiar means used to obtain the promised healing, made some adherents of the early church turn to the use of various relics as a means of obtaining miraculous cures.

THE FRENCH CEREMONY

The relics of dead saints failing, the church again turned its attention to the living. The king was invested with certain divine powers, among which was that of healing by simple touch. Scrofulous patients were brought to Philip I and to St. Louis I, and these kings

made use of these supposed powers for state purpose. The Day of Pentecost was especially set aside for this purpose. The king would proceed with his sacred wand and would touch the sick in a ceremony accompanied by much pomp and precision.

It is claimed that after King Clovis accepted Christianity in 481 A. D. he exercised this power of Royal Touch in healing disease. King Louis I (936-954 A.D.) elaborated the ceremony by adding the sign of the cross to the ceremony. This was to indicate that the power was not inherent in man, but proceeded only from God through choice and human channels to God's suffering creatures. Before this official service of healing, the king fasted for nine days and did other penances, and even then through probable careless preparation the gift was not always certain. The French ceremony included a procession of the clergy in full clerical dress, of the soldiers in uniform and of the Benedictine monks. After the fast of nine days communion was observed in the cloister of St. Francis. Then the king would touch the sick and say to each one separately: "Rex tangit te, Deus sanat te, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti!" The whole made a very impressive service and could not help but have some physical affect stimulating the powers of restoration. The custom was common in France up to about 1776.

THE ENGLISH CEREMONY

In England the custom dates back with certainty to King Edward the Confessor (1042-1066 A.D.). Legends have it that toward the end of the life of this pious king, God conferred upon him the power of healing, the first king of England to have it. His biographers record many persons afflicted with sores and various kinds of skin diseases who were miraculously healed by the king's touch. Even after his death miracles are said to have been performed at his shrine. The same power was afterwards attributed to other English sovereigns and conferred upon them publicly in the ceremony of their consecration. Edward, the Confessor King, who died in 1066, was buried in the Westminster Abbey, the worthy edifice he built and near the sacred courts of which he had turned his attention to the poor, sick and even those afflicted with leprosy. Pictures of Edward the Confessor touching lepers have come to us from an early date. He was canonized by Pope Alexander III in 1161.

That the Royal Touch was fairly common in England we gather from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. There Malcolm is made to say:

A most miraculous work in this good King,
Which often since my here remains in England

I've seen him do. How he solicits heaven
 Himself knows best; but strangely visited people,
 All swollen and ulcerous, pityful to the eye,
 The mere despair of surgery, he cures
 Hanging a golden stamp about their necks
 Put on with holy prayers; and 't is spoken,
 To the succeeding Royalty he leaves
 The healing benediction.

The English king not only healed by this Royal Touch, but each person successfully touched received a small coin worth about one penny. This was called the "touch piece." If this coin was lost it was thought that the sickness would recur, hence the touch piece was treasured with almost sacred reverence. The value of a gold touch piece as later given by King Henry the Seventh, (1505 A.D.), is estimated at six shillings and 8 pence, or about as much as physician's fee of that day. On it was the figure of St. Michael slaying the dragon. The legends were "Jesus antem transiens per medium illerum ibat," and "Per crucem tuam salva nos, Christe Redemptor."

It is said that William and Mary and Queen Anne did not believe in the Royal Touch, much as they made use of it. It is said that King William would frequently say after touching: "God give you better health and more sense." Dr. Samuel Johnson claimed that when he was a child he was touched by Queen Anne.

IN SPAIN

The last of the kings who is recorded to have touched a leper was King Alfonso of Spain. It is said that shortly before his abdication he was asked by a leper to give him the healing touch. The news item at the time did not mention whether the leper was healed. It only indicated that the democratic king saw no reason why his leprous subject should not be touched by him, and if it could bring healing, Alfonso concluded, such a handshake or touch would have the double value of friendship and of healing.

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that some of the persons who received the Royal Touch were cured of their ailments. As is known to all physicians, psychical stimuli can do a great deal to tide a patient over the crest of a disease. It must also be remembered that the patient who presented himself to the King had to prepare for the ceremony. This meant out-door travel, cleansing and a change of diet, and it instilled hope. Only those who had faith in the efficacy of the ceremony and who were able to make the trip started

out. Then came the stimulation of the ceremony and subsequently the long period of after-treatment inspired by the possession of the touch piece. The treatment, too, was given to selected cases. It is true that some cases seemed hopeless. According to an early picture Edward the Confessor touched a crippled leper who from the picture may have been past the infectious stage. Such a person expected from the Royal Touch only a prolongation of his life, and he got it, not necessarily because of the Touch but rather because of the stage of the disease. Nevertheless, the Royal Touch, frequently resorted to and performed by the most illustrious person in the kingdom, forms an interesting historical therapeutical measure in the treatment of stubborn diseases.

Some of Europe's most famous mediaeval medical men recommended the Royal Touch. John of Gaddesden (1280-1361), mentioned by Chaucer in his Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, spoke of it as a measure not to be overlooked in the treatment of scrofula and other skin diseases. However, generally speaking, it was not the medical profession but the church which was largely responsible for the persistence of the idea of the Royal Touch.

DESCRIPTION OF PLATE

PLATE 13

FIG. 1. Westminster Abbey, originally built by King Edward the Confessor; an early sketch showing its probable appearance at the time the Royal Touch was applied by the early English kings.

FIG. 2. King Edward the Confessor touching a leper in the court of Westminster Abbey from an ancient painting reproduced in Aesculape, August, 1930.

