

Extracts From: *An Essay on Hasheesh: Historical and Experimental*



Victor Robinson

Hemp is a constituent in the majority of corn remedies. Not many drugs are used for both the brain and the feet, but with Cannabis we have this anomaly: a man may see visions by swallowing his corn-cure

By Victor Robinson, M.D.

Ailing man has ransacked the world to find balms to ease him of his pains. And this is only natural, for what doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his digestion? Let the tiniest nerve be but inflamed, and it will bend the proudest spirit: humble is a hero with a toothache! It is doubtful if Buddha himself could have maintained his equanimity with a bit of dust on his conjunctiva. Caesar had a fever-and the eye that awed the world did lose its lustre, and the tongue that bade the Romans write his speeches in their books cried like a sick girl. Our flesh is heir to many ills, and alas when the heritage falls due. Even pride and prejudice are then forgotten, and Irishmen in need of purgatives are willing to use rhubarb grown on English soil, while the Foreign Colombo gathered by the feral natives in the untamed forests of Quilimani is consumed by ladies who never saw anything wilder than a Fabian Socialist.

The modern descendant of Hippocrates draws his Materia Medica from the uttermost ends of the earth: linseed from busy Holland and floretted marigold from the exotic Levant; cuckoo's cap from little Helvetia, and pepper-elder from ample Brazil; biting cubeb from spicy Borneo and fringed lichens from raw winded Iceland; sweet flag from the ponds of Burmah, coto bark from the thickets of Bolivia, sleeping nightshade from the woods of Algeria, brownish rhatany from the sands of Peru, purple crocus from the pastures of Greece, aromatic vanilla from the groves of Mexico, golden seal from the retreats of Canada, knotty aleppo from the plains of Kirghiz, fever-tree from the hills of Tasmania, white saunders from the mountains of Macassar. Idols are broken boldly nowadays, but the daughter of Aesculapius does not fear, for Hygeia knows she will always have a frenzied world of worshippers to kneel at her every shrine in every land All the reservoirs of nature have been tapped to yield medicines for man. From the mineral kingdom we take the alkali metals, the nitrogen group, the compounds of oxygen, the healing waters, the halogens, the nitrate of silver, the sulphate of copper, the carbonate of sodium, the chloride of mercury, the hydroxide of potassium, the acetate of lead, the citrate of lithium, the oxide of calcium, and the similar salts of half a hundred elements from Aluminium to Zincum.

From the vegetable kingdom we extract the potent alkaloid; all things that blossom and bloom, we knead them as we list: the broad rhizome of iris, the wrinkled root of lappa, the inspissated juice of aoes, the flower-heads of anthemis, the outer rind of orange, the inner bark of cinnamon, the thin arillode of macis, the dense sclerotium of ergot, the ovoid kernel of nutmeg, the pitted seed of rapa, the pale spores of club-moss, the spongy pith of sassafra, the bitter wood of quassia, the smoothish bark of juglans, the unripe fruit of hemlock, the fleshy bulb of scilla, the brittle leaves of senna, the velvet thallus of agaric, the balsamic resin of benzoin, the scaly strobiles of hops, the styles and stigmas of zea. [...]

But although the time of relief be limited, the simple fact that there are substances which do have some power over pain is sufficient to make the study of narcotism highly important. And of all the narcotics-a narcotic being roughly defined as a substance which relieves pain and produces excitability followed by sleep-none is more alluring to the imagination than the intoxicating hemp-plant, scientifically known as Cannabis sativa and popularly famed as hasheesh-those strange flowering-tops that appeal to a pot-bellied bushman of Australia who smokes it in a pipe of animal tusks, and to so hyper-esoteric a littérateur as Charles Baudelaire of the Celestial City of Art. [...]

The official definition of Cannabis indica as given by the Eighth Decennial Revision of our Pharmacopeia is as follows: "The dried flowering tops of the pistillate plants of Cannabis sativa Linné (Fam. Moraceae), grown in the East Indies and gathered while the fruits are yet undeveloped, and carrying the whole of their natural resin." Three preparations of the drug are official: an Extract, a Fluid extract, and a Tincture.

In the last (third) edition of the National Formulary, hemp enters into four galenicals: in chloral and bromine compound which is used as a sedative and hypnotic, in chloroform Anodyne which is used in diarrhea and cholera, in Brown-Sequard's anti-neuralgia pills, and in corn collodion. Hemp is a constituent in the majority of corn remedies. Not many drugs are used for both the brain and the feet, but with Cannabis we have this anomaly: a man may see visions by swallowing his corn-cure. [...]

A strange thing about hasheesh is that an overdose has never produced death in man or the lower animals. Not one authentic case is on record in which Cannabis or any of its preparations destroyed life. We thus have a poison which lacks a maximum and a fatal dose. Indeed, if we desire to be finical, we can claim that according to what is now considered the best definition of a poison, Cannabis is no poison at all, for the aforesaid best definition defines a poison as "any substance which is capable of causing death, otherwise than mechanically, when introduced into the body or applied to it"—and Cannabis does not seem capable of causing death by chemical or physiological action. [...]

There yet remains my own case. On March 4, 1910, I came home, feeling very tired. I found that some Cannabis indica which I had expected had arrived. After supper, while finishing up an article, I began to debate with myself whether I should

join the hashees heaters that night. The argument ended in my taking 20 minims at 9 o'clock. I was alone in the room, and no one was aware that I had yielded to temptation. An hour later I wrote in my memoranda book: Absolutely no effect. At 10:30, I completed my article, and entered this note: No effect at all from the hemp. By this time I was exhausted, and being convinced that the hasheesh would not act, I went to bed in disappointment. I fell asleep immediately.

I hear music. There is something strange about this music. I have not heard such music before. The anthem is far away, but in its very faintness there is a lure. In the soft surge and swell of the minor notes there breathes a harmony that ravishes the sense of sound. A resonant organ, with a stop of sapphire and a diapason of opal, diffuses endless octaves from star to star. All the moonbeams form strings to vibrate the perfect pitch, and this entrancing unison is poured into my enchanted ears. Under such a spell, who can remain in a bed? The magic of that melody bewitches my soul. I begin to rise horizontally from my couch. No walls impede my progress, and I float into the outside air. Sweeter and sweeter grows the music, it bears me higher and higher, and I float in tune with the infinite-under the turquoise heavens where globules of mercury are glittering. I become an unhindered wanderer through unending space. No air-ship can go here, I say. I am astonished at the vastness of infinity. I always knew it was large, I argue, but I never dreamed it was as huge as this. I desire to know how fast I am floating through the air, and I calculate that it must be about a billion miles a second.

I am transported to wonderland. I walk in streets where gold is dirt, and I have no desire to gather it. I wonder whether it is worth while to explore the canals of Mars, or rock myself on the rings of Saturn, but before I can decide, a thousand other fancies enter my excited brain. I wish to see if I can concentrate my mind sufficiently to recite something, and I succeed in correctly quoting this stanza from a favorite poem which I am perpetually re-reading:

“Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat, night, has flown,
Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone;
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
And the musk of the rose is blown.”

It occurs to me that it is high honor for Tennyson to have his poetry quoted in heaven. I turn, I twist, I twirl. I melt, I fade, I dissolve. No diaphanous cloud is so light and airy as I. I admire the ease with which I float. My gracefulness fills me with delight. My body is not subject to the law of gravitation. I sail dreamily along, lost in exquisite toxication. New scenes of wonder continually unravel themselves before my astonished eyes. I say to myself that if I could only record one one-thousandth of the ideas which come to me every second, I would be considered a greater poet than Milton.

I am on the top of a high mountain-peak. I am alone-only the romantic night envelops me. From a distant valley I hear the gentle tinkling of cow-bells. I float downwards, and find immense fields in which peacocks' tails are growing. They wave slowly, to better exhibit their dazzling ocelli, and I revel in the gorgeous colors. I pass over mountains and I sail over seas. I am the monarch of the air. I hear the songs of women. Thousands of maidens pass near me, they bend their bodies in the most charming curves, and scatter beautiful flowers in my fragrant path. Some faces are strange, some I knew on earth, but all are lovely. They smile, and sing and dance. Their bare feet glorify the firmament. It is more than flesh can stand. I grow sensual unto satyriasis. The aphrodisiac effect is astonishing in its intensity. I enjoy all the women of the world. I pursue countless maidens through the confines of heaven. A delicious warmth suffuses my whole body. Hot and blissful I float through the universe, consumed with a resistless passion. And in the midst of this unexampled and unexpected orgy, I think of the case reported by the German Dr. Reidel, about a drug-clerk who took a huge dose of hasheesh to enjoy voluptuous visions, but who heard not even the rustle of Aphrodite's garment, and I laugh at him in scorn and derision.

I sigh deeply, open my eyes, and find myself sitting with one foot in bed, and the other on my desk. I am bathed in warm sweat which is pleasant. But my head aches, and there is a feeling in my stomach which I recognize and detest. It is nausea. I pull the basket near me, and await the inevitable result. At the same time I feel like begging for mercy, for I have traveled so far and so long, and I am tired beyond limit, and I need a rest. The fatal moment approaches, and I lower my head for the easier deposition of the rising burden. And my head seems monstrously huge, and weighted with lead. At last the deed is done, and I lean back on the pillow.

I hear my sister come home from the opera. I wish to call her. My sister's name is Ellen. I try to say it, but I cannot. The effort is too much. I sigh in despair. It occurs to me that I may achieve better results if I compromise on Nell, as this contains one syllable instead of two. Again I am defeated. I am too weary to exert myself to any extent, but I am determined. I make up my mind to collect all my strength, and call out: Nell. The result is a fizzle. No sound issues from my lips. My lips do not move. I give it up. My head falls on my breast, utterly exhausted and devoid of all energy.

Again my brain teems. Again I hear that high and heavenly harmony, again I float to the outposts of the universe and beyond, again I see the dancing maidens with their soft yielding bodies, white and warm. I am excited unto ecstasy. I feel myself a brother to the Oriental, for the same drug which gives him joy is now acting on me. I am conscious all the time, and I say to myself in a knowing way with a suspicion of a smile: All these visions because of 20 minims of Cannabis indica. My only regret is that the trances are ceaseless. I wish respite, but for answer I find myself floating over an immense ocean. Then the vision grows so wondrous, that body and soul I give myself up to it, and I taste the fabled joys of paradise. Ah, what this night is worth!

The music fades, the beautiful girls are gone, and I float no more. But the black rubber covering of my typewriter glows like a chunk of yellow phosphorus. By one door stands a skeleton with a luminous abdomen and brandishes a wooden sword. By the other door a little red devil keeps guard. I open my eyes wide, I close them tight, but these spectres will not vanish. I know they are not real, I know I see them because I took hasheesh, but they annoy me nevertheless. I become uncomfortable, even frightened. I make a superhuman effort, and succeed in getting up and lighting the gas. It is two o'clock. Everything is the way it should be, except that in the basket I notice the remains of an orange-somewhat the worse for wear.

I feel relieved, and fall asleep. Something is handling me, and I start in fright. I open my eyes and see my father. He has returned from a meeting at the Academy of Medicine, and surprised at seeing a light in my room at such a time, has entered. He surmises what I have done, and is anxious to know what quantity I have taken. I should have answered, with a wink, quantum sufficit, but I have no inclination for conversation; on hearing the question repeated, I answer, "Twenty minims." He tells me I look as pale as a ghost, and brings me a glass of water. I drink it, become quite normal, and thus ends the most wonderful night of my existence.

In the morning my capacity for happiness is considerably increased. I have an excellent appetite, the coffee I sip is nectar, and the white bread ambrosia. I take my camera, and walk to Central Park. It is a glorious day. Everyone I meet is idealized. The lake never looked so placid before. I enter the hot-houses, and a gaudy-colored insect buzzing among the lovely flowers fills me with joy. I am too languid to take any pictures; to set the focus, to use the proper stop, to locate the image, to press the bulb—all these seem Herculean feats which I dare not even attempt. But I walk and walk, without apparent effort, and my mind eagerly dwells on the brilliant pageantry of the night before. I do not wish to forget my frenzied nocturnal revelry upon the vast dome of the broad blue heavens. I wish to remember forever, the floating, the mercury-globules, the peacock-feathers, the colors, the music, the women. In memory I enjoy the carnival all over again. "For the brave Meiamoun," writes Theophile Gautier, "Cleopatra danced; she was apparelled in a robe of green, open at either side; castanets were attached to her alabaster hands. [...] Poised on the pink tips of her little feet, she approached swiftly to graze his forehead with a kiss; then she recommenced her wondrous art, and flitted around him, now backward-leaning, with head reversed, eyes half-closed, arms lifelessly relaxed, locks uncurled and loose-hanging like a bacchante of Mount Maenalus; now again active, animated, laughing, fluttering, more tireless and capricious in her movements than the pilfering bee. Heart-consuming love, sensual pleasure, burning passion, youth inexhaustible and ever-fresh, the promise of bliss to come—she expressed all. [...] The modest stars had ceased to contemplate the scene; their golden eyes could not endure such a spectacle; the heaven itself was blotted out, and a dome of flaming vapor covered the hall."

But for me a thousand Cleopatras caroused—and did not present me a vase of poison to drain at a draught. Again I repeated to myself: "And all these charming miracles because of 20 minims of Fluidextractum Cannabis Indicae, U. S. P."

By the afternoon I had so far recovered as to be able to concentrate my mind on technical studies. I will not attempt to interpret my visions psychologically, but I wish to refer to one aspect. Spencer, in Principles of Psychology mentions hasheesh as possessing the power of reviving ideas. I found this to be the case. I spoke about air-ships because there had been a discussion about them at supper; I quoted from Tennyson's Maud because I had been re-reading it; I saw mercury-globules in the heavens because that same day I had worked with mercury in preparing mercurial plaster; and I saw the peacock-tails because a couple of days previous I had been at the Museum of Natural History and had closely observed a magnificent specimen. I cannot account for the women. All poets—with the possible exception of Margaret Sangster—have celebrated Alcohol, while Rudyard Kipling has gone so far as to solemnize delirium tremens; B. V. has glorified Nicotine; DeQuincey has immortalized Opium; Murger is full of praise for Caffeine; Dumas in Monte Cristo has apotheosized hasheesh, Gautier has vivified it in Club des Hachicins, Baudelaire has panegyricized it in Artificial Paradises, but as few American pens have done so, I have taken it upon myself to write a sonnet to the most interesting plant that blooms:

Near Punjab and Pab, in Sutlej and Sind,
Where the cobras-di-capello abound,
Where the poppy, palm and the tamarind,
With cummin and ginger festoon the ground—
And the capsidum fields are all abloom,
From the hills above to the vales below,
Entrancing the air with a rich perfume,
There too does the greenish Cannabis grow:
Inflaming the blood with the living fire,
Till the burning joys like the eagles rise,
And the pulses throb with a strange desire,
While passion awakes with a wild surprise
O to eat that drug, and to dream all day,
Of the maids that live by the Bengal Bay!