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Excerpt

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THE DESIGN
OF
A TREATISE
ON
THE PLANTS OF INDIA.
BY THE PRESIDENT.

THE greatest, if not the only, obstacle to the progress of knowledge in these provinces, except in those branches of it, which belong immediately to our several professions, is our want of leisure for general researches; and as ARCHIMEDES, who was happily master of his time, had not *space* enough to move the greatest weight with the smallest force, thus we, who have ample space for our inquiries, really want *time* for the pursuit of them. “Give me a place to stand on, said the great mathematician, and I will move the whole earth:” *Give us time*, we may say, *for our investigations, and we will transfer to Europe all the sciences, arts, and literature of Asia.* “Not to have despair-
ed,” however, was thought a degree of merit

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in the *Roman* general, even though he was defeated; and, having some hope, that others may occasionally find more leisure, than it will ever, at least in this country, be my lot to enjoy, I take the liberty to propose a work, from which very curious information, and possibly very solid advantage, may be derived.

Some hundreds of plants, which are yet imperfectly known to *European* botanists, and with the virtues of which they are wholly unacquainted, grow wild on the plains and in the forests of *India*: the *Amarcôṣṭ*, an excellent vocabulary of the *Sanskrit* language, contains in one chapter the names of about three hundred medicinal vegetables; the *Médirî* may comprise many more; and the *Dravyâbhidhâna*, or *Dictionary of Natural Productions*, includes, I believe, a far greater number; the properties of which are distinctly related in medical tracts of approved authority. Now the first step, in compiling a treatise on the plants of *India*, should be to write their true names in *Roman* letters, according to the most accurate orthography, and in *Sanskrit* preferably to any vulgar dialect; because a learned language is fixed in books, while popular idioms are in constant fluctuation, and will not, perhaps, be understood a century hence by the inhabitants of these *Indian* territories, whom future botanists

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may consult on the common appellations of trees and flowers: the childish denominations of plants from the persons, who first described them, ought wholly to be rejected; for *Champaca* and *Hinna* seem to me not only more elegant, but far properer, designations of an *Indian* and an *Arabian* plant, than *Michelia* and *Lawsonia*; nor can I see without pain, that the great *Swedish* botanist considered it as *the supreme and only reward of labour* in this part of natural history, to preserve a name by hanging it on a blossom, and that he declared this mode of promoting and adorning botany, worthy of being *continued with holy reverence*, though so high an honour, he says, *ought to be conferred with chaste reserve, and not prostituted for the purpose of conciliating the good will, or eternizing the memory, of any but his chosen followers; no, not even of saints*: his list of *an hundred and fifty* such names clearly shows, that his excellent works are the true basis of his just celebrity, which would have been feebly supported by the stalk of the *Linnaea*. From what proper name the *Plantain* is called *Musa*, I do not know; but it seems to be the *Dutch* pronunciation of the *Arabick* word for that vegetable, and ought not, therefore, to have appeared in his list, though, in my opinion, it is the only rational name in the muster-roll. As to the

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system of LINNÆUS, it is the system of Nature, subordinate indeed to the beautiful arrangement of *natural orders*, of which he has given a rough sketch, and which may hereafter, perhaps, be completed: but the distribution of vegetables into *classes*, according to the number, length, and position of the stamens and pistils, and of those *classes* into *kinds* and *species*, according to certain marks of discrimination, will ever be found the clearest and most convenient of methods, and should therefore be studiously observed in the work, which I now suggest; but I must be forgiven, if I propose to reject the *Linnean* appellations of the twenty-four *classes*, because, although they appear to be *Greek*, (and, if they really were so, that alone might be thought a sufficient objection) yet in truth they are not *Greek*, nor even formed by analogy to the language of *Grecians*; for *Polygamos*, *Monandros*, and the rest of that form, are both masculine and feminine; *Polyandria*, in the abstract, never occurs, and *Polyandrion* means a publick cemetery; *diæcia* and *diæcus* are not found in books of authority; nor, if they were, would they be derived from *dis*, but from *dia*, which would include the *triæcia*; let me add, that the *twelfth* and *thirteenth* classes are ill distinguished by their appellations, independently of other exceptions to them, since

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the real distinction between them consists not so much in the *number* of their stamens, as in the *place*, where they are inserted; and that the *fourteenth* and *fifteenth* are not more accurately discriminated by two words formed in defiance of grammatical analogy, since there are but *two* powers, or two *diversities of length*, in each of those classes. *Calycopolyandros* might, perhaps, not inaccurately denote a flower of the *twelfth* class; but such a compound would still favour of barbarism or pedantry; and the best way to amend such a system of words is to efface it, and supply its place by a more simple nomenclature, which may easily be found. Numerals may be used for the *eleven* first classes, the former of two numbers being always appropriated to the *stamens*, and the latter, to the *pistils*: short phrases, as, *on the calyx* or *calice*, *in the receptacle*, *two long*, *four long*, *from one base*, *from two*, or *many*, *bases*, *with anthers connected*, *on the pistils*, *in two flowers*, *in two distinct plants*, *mixed*, *concealed*, or the like, will answer every purpose of discrimination; but I do not offer this as a perfect substitute for the words, which I condemn. The allegory of *sexes* and *nuptials*, even if it were complete, ought, I think, to be discarded, as unbecoming the gravity of men, who, while they search for truth, have no busi-

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nefs to inflame their imaginations; and, while they profess to give descriptions, have nothing to do with metaphors: few passages in *Aloisia*, the most impudent book ever composed by man, are more wantonly indecent than the hundred-forty-sixth number of the *Botanical Philosophy*, and the broad comment of its grave author, who *dares*, like OCTAVIUS in his epigram, *to speak with Roman simplicity*; nor can the *Linnean* description of the *Arum*, and many other plants, be read in *English* without exciting ideas, which the occasion does not require. Hence it is, that no well-born and well-educated woman can be advised to amuse herself with botany, as it is now explained, though a more elegant and delightful study, or one more likely to assist and embellish other female accomplishments, could not possibly be recommended.

When the *Sanscrit* names of the *Indian* plants have been correctly written in a large paper-book, one page being appropriated to each, the fresh plants themselves, procured in their respective seasons, must be concisely, but accurately, *classed* and *described*; after which their several *uses* in medicine, diet, or manufactures, may be collected, with the assistance of *Hindu* physicians, from the medical books in *Sanscrit*,

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and their accounts either disproved or established by repeated experiments, as fast as they can be made with exactness.

By way of example, I annex the descriptions of five *Indian* plants, but am unable, at this season, to re-examine them, and wholly despair of leisure to exhibit others, of which I have collected the names, and most of which I have seen in blossom.

I. MUCHUCUNDA.

Twenty, from One Bafe.

Cal. Five-parted, thick; leaflets, oblong.

Cor. Five petals, oblong.

Stam. From twelve to fifteen, rather long, fertile; five shorter, sterile. In some flowers, the *unprolifick* stamens, longer.

Pist. *Style* cylindrick.

Peric. A capsule, with five cells, many-seeded.

Seeds: Roundish, compressed, winged.

Leaves: Of many different shapes.

Uses: The quality, refrigerant.

One flower, steeped a whole night in a glass of water, forms a cooling mucilage of use in virulent gonorrhœas. The *Muchucunda*, called also *Pichuca*, is exquisitely fragrant: its calyx

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is covered with an odoriferous dust ; and the dried flowers in fine powder, taken like snuff, are said, in a *Sanſcrit* book, almoſt inſtanta-
neouſly to remove a nervous head-ach.

Note. This plant differs a little from the *Pentapetes* of LINNÆUS,

II. BILVA OR MA'LU'RA,

Many on the Receptacle, and One.

Cal. Four, or five, cleft, beneath.

Cor. Four, or five, petals ; moſtly reflex.

Stam. Forty, to forty-eight, filaments ; anthers, moſtly erect.

Piſt. *Germ.* roundiſh ; *Style,* ſmooth, ſhort ; *Stigma,* clubbed.

Peric. A ſpheroidal berry, very large ; many-seeded.

Seeds : Toward the ſurface, ovate, in a pellucid mucus.

Leaves : Ternate ; common petiole, long ; leaflets, ſubovate ; obtuſely notched, with ſhort petioles ; ſome almoſt lanced.

Stem : Armed with ſharp thorns.

Uſes : The fruit nutritious, warm, ca-thartick ; in taſte, delicious ; in fragrance, ex-quifite : its aperient and deterſive quality, and its efficacy in removing habitual coſtivenesſ,

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have been proved by constant experience. The mucus of the seed is, for some purposes, a very good cement.

Note. This fruit is called *Srip' bala*, because it sprang, say the *Indian* poets, from the milk of *Sri*, the goddess of abundance, who bestowed it on mankind at the request of *ISWARA*, whence he alone wears a chaplet of *Bilva* flowers; to him only the *Hindus* offer them; and, when they see any of them fallen on the ground, they take them up with reverence, and carry them to his temple. From the first blossom of this plant, that I could inspect, I had imagined, that it belonged to the same class with the *Durio*, because the filaments appeared to be distributed in five sets; but in all, that I have since examined, they are perfectly distinct.

III. SRINGA'TACA:

Four and One.

Cal. Four cleft, with a long peduncle, above.

Cor. Four petals.

Stam. Anthers, kidney-shaped.

Pist. *Germ.* roundish; *Style*, long as the filaments; *Stigma*, clubbed.

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Seed: A *Nut* with four opposite angles (two of them *sharp* thorns) formed by the *Calyx*.

Leaves: Those, which float on the water, are rhomboïdal; the two upper sides unequally notched, the two lower, right lines. Their petioles, buoyed up by spindle-shaped spongy substances, not bladders.

Root: Knotty, like coral.

Uses: The fresh kernel, in sweetness and delicacy, equals that of the filberd. A mucus, secreted by minute glands, covers the wet leaves, which are considered as cooling.

Note. It seems to be the floating *Trapa* of LINNÆUS.

IV. PU TI CARAJA.

Ten and one.

Cal. Five-cleft.

Cor. Five equal petals.

Peric. A thorny legumen; two seeds.

Leaves: Oval, pinnated.

Stem: Armed.

Uses: The seeds are very bitter, and, perhaps, tonick; since one of them, bruised and given in two doses, will, as the *Hindus* assert, cure an intermittent fever.