

THE SIGNATURE OF THE CHRISTMAS ROSE (HELLEBORUS NIGER)

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I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

For many decades now, and perhaps even longer, *Helleborus niger*, the Christmas rose, has been a plant almost forgotten by medicine. It is mentioned only rarely, and the following statement by Hugo Schulz, made almost 40 years ago, is still valid: "The use of hellebore preparations in therapy is today of no significance. Attempts to use helleborin instead of digitalis were soon given up again. The same applies to the use of tincture of hellebore as an aperient, an emmenagogue, and also to relieve the symptoms accompanying hydrops. The homœopathic school uses a tincture of the black hellebore in cases of hydrops due to kidney disorders, in meningitis, meningitis cerebrospinalis, and compensatory disorders. One gets the impression, however, that even in this school *Helleborus* is not used very extensively."

A cursory look at the literature produces only meagre results. We find indications that the root of the Christmas rose contains a glycoside which shows effects similar to those of digitalis. In a survey of "The Ranunculaceæ in Homœopathy", Dewenter mentions *Helleborus*, and describes its relation to renal pathology. Most of his work is based on statements by Voisin. In Stiegele's *Homöopathische Arzneimittellehre*, the Christmas rose is not even mentioned. It looks as though it really is almost forgotten.

This is all the more remarkable as it was extraordinarily lauded and appreciated by Paracelsus and Hahnemann, too, has often concerned himself with this plant. Paracelsus says: "Its root can drive away four diseases: epilepsy, podagra, stroke, and dropsy. In the case of a stroke, it discharges the materia peccans and brings back life into the paralysed limb. In epilepsy, young persons should take a quarter ounce boiled in milk, older people the same in wine. They should drink of this three times daily. With podagra, the patient should be purged every day for three days before the attack; the same as with stroke. After that, the root

seeks out the cause of the disease. . . . The hellebore clears away the water. . . . The balsam of the hellebore is not only a laxativum, but also a conservativum." Of the leaves of the hellebore he says: "This remedy helped to prolonged life and radiant health, and was taken regularly after the 60th year. The humores-doctors have caused the herb to be disdained, for they do not heed the natural mysteries . . ." Paracelsus continues for many pages to talk of the "strength and action" of the Christmas rose.

Matthioli, too, and other herbals of the late Middle Ages discuss this plant in detail.

Hahnemann's habilitation paper: "De Helleborismo Veterum" which was published in 1812, only deals with the Christmas rose indirectly. *Helleborus niger*, though several times proved homeopathically, is used only rarely, Emil Schlegel tries to regain a new understanding for the black hellebore, and sums up his thoughts as follows: "How then can we get a picture of the protective strength of *Helleborus* as a remedy? No doubt it has a kind of diminished toxic effect. The remedy directs its attacks or stimuli at all regions of the body, and thus evokes the response of the organism. It organizes, so to speak, in later age the home guards of self-defence, and its energies correspond more to the faint disorders of the ageing organism than to the stormy attacks of the affections and inflammations typical of the time of youth. A slowing down, a wearing out of the functions is characteristic of *Helleborus* . . ."

Such observations, however, remain far too general, and do not come closer to the essential being of the plant; they hardly reach the sphere from where it can again become an active remedy. Here lies the reason why we have almost forgotten the Christmas rose as a medicinal plant. We no longer know when and how to use it, for we have lost its signature. We have lost the key, and cannot open the door which leads to the "strength and action" of the hellebore. We should therefore again set out and search for this key.

II. THE SPECIAL FEATURES OF HELLEBORUS NIGER

The special characteristic of the Christmas rose is seen in its peculiar mode of life. It is not a herb which takes part in the

annual rhythm of dying and becoming; on the contrary, it tries to create a rhythm of its own which is expressed by the fact that it blooms in winter. From Christmas to Easter is the time when it unfolds its flowers.

That, however, is not the only sign of its peculiar existence. In other ways, too, it does not submit to the rhythm of the year as fully as most other plants do. It usually takes from five to seven years before it flowers at all; then, however, it shows its hidden strength and opens the beautiful white flower bells, delicately painted with a variety of subtle colours. Like sleigh-bells, they herald the winter and try, despite frost and snow, to outlast it. After fertilization, which usually occurs by self-pollination, the flowers do not wither away, but turn green and thus reveal their true nature; they were not really petals, but sepals. That which corresponds to the petals are the nectaries at the bottom of the corolla.

The flower develops from short, thick, fleshy stems which bear the high leaves, and arise out of a circle of green ground-leaves. The latter stem from a vigorous black (niger!) rhizome which in fact is a subterranean stem and anchors itself to the soil with many root fibres.

The development and completion of the leaves in a single plant takes many years; they gradually increase in size and at the same time divide more and more into separate fingers. Only when this process of development is completed do the flowers open. Inside each flower are not only the nectaries full of honey, but also a profusion of almost a hundred stamens which are arranged around a central group of 7 to 10 pistils. A delicate scent rises from this floral being.

Anyone able to watch a large number of Christmas roses through the years cannot fail to observe the strange individuality of each plant. One of the great authorities on the Christmas rose, Mr. Hublow, of Constance, has shown me the photographs of many of his Christmas roses, to demonstrate their peculiar difference in colour, form, and growth. It is almost as if every one of the 70 varieties grown by him clearly emphasized its "personality". This goes as far as the place of the flower, the serration of the leaf, the colour of the stem. In this way the Christmas rose not

only shows a kind of individualistic tendency towards the rhythm of the year, but also tries to be a "self" among the members of its own species.

Its colour, too, is rather individual, compared with other plants. The whiteness of the flower is like a wax tablet on which appear the delicate shades of the bright red of dawn which may change into a deep rose colour. These hues look as if they were painted on from outside, and not created out of the plant. The stems of the leaves and flowers, too, may show shades of red, and thus contrast with dark green of the old leaves.

Is not it as though this flower has disengaged itself from all the rhythms of the earth and the order of living of the plant world? Has not it to some extent withdrawn from the sphere of life, and thus acquired the same colour which is due only to man? The tendency to give away that which is a general habit and to be instead something individual and special is at work in this plant.

Perhaps this is why the ancients regarded it as a remedy which prolongs life, and the philosophers drank an infusion of Helleborus before they commenced the work of intensive meditation; they tried to withdraw their head from the general ocean of thought, so that they could develop their individual faculties of thinking.

This habitat to Helleborus is as individual as its properties; it is "a typical indicator for limestone in South and West Europe", says Madaus. Its distribution, however, may be called almost bizarre. For not everywhere where there is limestone can it be found. It grows mainly on stony slopes and in mountain forests. "Its general distribution extends over the northern and southern chalk ranges of the eastern Alps (eastwards to Lower Austria and Croatia, westwards to the Tessin, and north-eastwards to the Tyrol), over the Apennine, Serbia, and the Carpathian mountains." On the map published by Madaus, which also shows the French Alps, the capricious character of this lebensraum is clearly indicated.

The Christmas rose, therefore, is a plant which in many of its properties reveals a definite tendency to be individualistic, and thus emphatically points to its special character. This becomes

even more striking if we enquire into its place in the order of plants, and consider its closer relatives.

III. THE FAMILY OF RANUNCULACEÆ

The Christmas rose belongs to the Ranunculaceæ. It is therefore a member of a clearly defined plant family which Francé characterizes in such a way that he exclaims: "Ranunculi, what a familiar image! Who does not know them, the anemones, buttercups, larkspurs, the handsome monkshood species, Christmas roses, the luxuriant peony! They all belong here and exhibit the extraordinary variety of forms existing in this group." And Pelikan gives in his book a particularly vivid description of the type. He says: "... the Ranunculaceæ are thus above all plants of spring, of the temperate region, of bright, damp, open landscapes, of meadows, commons, the edge of the forest, and alpine pastures. Some venture into the water, others climb high up into the world of light in the mountains, as long as there is no lack of moisture; they take up their abode on brooks, around springs, on pastures watered by melting glaciers. They avoid the greater heat of a region, or the hot time of the year, and withdraw into the woods, the forest glades, perhaps even climb upwards there like lianas; they do not grow into trees."

This gives us a first but comprehensive picture of the Ranunculaceæ. Indeed, they do not grow into trees! Because they try to evade any hardening and induration. For that reason the transition from leaf to flower is a gradual one; leaf can be flower, and flower leaf; just as in the Christmas rose the petals are nectaries and the sepals are flowers and turn green later on. "There can be no better characteristic than to describe the Ranunculaceæ as a leafy type," says Grohmann. "The Ranunculaceæ are the artists of leaf-metamorphosis; the leaf permeates the flower..."

The Ranunculaceæ thus become the true preachers of Goethe's concept of metamorphosis, providing they are observed properly. And it is not only that they do not grow into trees; the formation of their fruit and roots, too, is never as outspoken and apparent as in other plant families. They exhaust their vitality so fully in the region of leaves and flowers that there is not enough strength

left for the uppermost and the lowest regions: that of the fruit, and that of the root. "Ranunculaceæ are outstanding in their beauty in the sphere of their flowers. Among them we find many ornamental plants, like for instance the peony, Christmas rose, columbine, larkspur, monkshood, anemones, adonis, and others. The fruits, on the other hand, play no role whatsoever... By far the most Ranunculaceæ exhaust themselves, so to speak, in their beautiful flowers, so that there is nothing left for the formation of fruits."

That middle region of the plant, therefore, which is engaged mainly in the development of leaf and flower, is particularly emphasized in the Ranunculaceæ; it is a family characteristic belonging to the whole group.

In addition there is another, very special characteristic which the careful observer cannot miss and which Pelikan also pays special attention to. He tries to show "how, according to the forces of the seasons of the year, the type develops into the various Ranunculaceæ species, and thus reveals itself in many different plants. The dance begins with *Eranthis hiemalis*, the winter aconite, the crocus among the Ranunculaceæ..." Then follow the marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*), and the globe flower (*Trollius europæus*) which together with a great number of anemones come with the arrival of spring. Among them is also the wind flower (*Pulsatilla*), with all its varieties.

A little later come the ranunculi, scattered in many different places and regions. On rocks and mountain pastures, at mountain brooks and on highlying meadows; they can be found right down into Asia.

In the late spring and early summer the columbines (*Aquilegia*) appear, accompanied or followed by the peony (*Paeonia officinalis*), and when summer comes, the meadow rue (*Thalictrum*) appears, and the tall larkspur (*Delphinium*) in many forms and colours. At the time when the unfolding powers of summer reach their height, the monkshood (*Aconitum napellus*) arrives in its blue strength and dignity.

As summer draws to a close, the flowers of the clematis appear. This is a family spread very widely over the earth, the

only one among the Ranunculaceæ which allows its branches to grow slightly lignified; this is where autumn comes.

This short and somewhat cursory summary gives a picture of the distribution of the Ranunculaceæ through the seasons. And now at last the Christmas rose, too, finds its place. It is the first one, which has rushed ahead of its brothers and sisters of the family of Ranunculaceæ in the course of the cycle of the year. Its later varieties, which flower in February and March, already link up with the winter aconite and pheasant's eye (*Adonis vernalis*); and the liverwort (*Anemone hepatica*), too, appears, and many other spring anemones.

Everywhere where the snow melts and spring sets in the Ranunculaceæ begin to flower. Here is the place of the Christmas rose within this plant family. It has ventured one step too far and run ahead even of early spring, and therefore fallen into the arms of winter. It has remained faithful to the snow. It became the leader of its plant family in the course of the seasonal cycle of the year.

IV. HELLEBORUS NIGER AND ACONITUM NAPELLUS

If one tries to survey the whole variety of forms of the Ranunculaceæ through the course of the year, it is a trend of growth and development like a great panorama which unfolds more and more distinctly. This path begins with the Christmas rose and reaches its highest point with the monkshood.

Even the forms of these two plants reveal their polarity. The comparatively small, compact, leathery hard leaves and wax-like flowers of the pale Christmas rose stand opposite to the tall, upright monkshood, glorying in the abundance of its blue flowers. It can grow to a height of 4 ft. to 5 ft. Its root is a dark, big tuber, and from it rises a strong, upright stem which at the top unfolds in a thick cluster of flowers. Tall, upright and strong, this plant appears at the peak of the summer, in the high mountains of Europe.

The flowers of the monkshood are no longer radially symmetrical like those of the spring Ranunculaceæ (anemones, *Aquilegia*, *Paeonia*, etc.), but the isobilateral. They have given up the radiant form of the flower and submitted to a higher form of

organization. This form of symmetry already reminds one of the form of the animals. The higher invertebrates as well as all vertebrates have the bilateral symmetry as their fundamental morphological concept.

Figuratively speaking, the flowers of the monkshood reach, as it were, into the sphere of animal life and the very strong toxicity of the plant probably is connected with this fact. From the root right up into the flowers it contains the aconitine alkaloids. High up in the mountains, in the fullest glory of summer, lives the monkshood, emphasizing its own strength almost too forcefully.

Compared with this majestic plant, the Christmas rose looks poor and pale. Yet in its wintry hide-out it becomes the image of cosmic forces; the beautiful hue of its colours reveals it.

Thus *Helleborus* and *Aconitum* stand opposite each other. The one has advanced too far into the time of winter and has therefore remained small and earthbound. The other has ventured too high up, has boldly reached the summery heights, and could only maintain its individuality by being permeated with toxic substances. Both plants are pioneers of the family of the Ranunculaceæ.

The polarity shown here is particularly evident in the homœopathic modalities. The same contrasts appear which on the one hand can be seen and deciphered in the outer form of the two plants, and on the other hand experienced and established in the drug provings.

Kent describes the two remedies in his usual dramatic way. Of *Helleborus*, he says: "In all the complaints of *Helleborus* stupefaction occurs in greater or less degree. Sometimes it is a complete stupor, sometimes a partial stupor, but it is always stupefaction and sluggishness . . . There is a peculiar kind of imbecility or stupefaction of the body and mind. The extreme state is unconsciousness. Complete unconsciousness in connection with cerebral congestion, or meningitis, or inflammation of the brain, with stupefaction. Even early in the disease *Hellebore* lacks the wildness and acute delirium found in *Stramonium* and *Belladonna*. It is passive . . . The *Hellebore* case will linger for weeks and sometimes months in this state of stupefaction, gradually emaciating. He lies upon the back with the limbs drawn up; he

looks pale and sickly. When questioned he answers slowly . . . The muscles will not act; they will not obey the will. It is a sort of paralytic state . . . The patient appears semi-idiotic."

How different sounds the same author's description of *Aconitum*! "*Aconite* is a short-acting remedy. It is a violent poison . . . Like a great storm, it comes and sweeps over and passes away . . . Strong, robust people, rugged children, hearty infants become sick . . . caught out with thin clothing, or remaining out in the cold, dry air of mid-winter, they come down even before night with violent symptoms . . . The patient seems to be threatened with a sudden and violent death, but recovery is quick . . . It has the lung and brain complaints of mid-winter, and the bowel inflammations and stomach disorders of mid-summer . . . The patient feels the violence of his sickness, for he is under a great state of nervous irritation, nervous excitement. Fear is depicted upon his countenance, and the heart's action is so overwhelming the first thing he thinks of is that he must die . . . When we see this intense fear, this awful anxiety, great restlessness, the violence and the suddenness of these attacks, we have a case, perhaps, that is dying from the poison of *Aconite*, or one who needs *Aconite*."

Here we have indeed two polar processes opposed to each other: the stupefaction, sluggishness, and slowness of the *Helleborus*-patient, and the suddenness, restlessness, and fear, even agony of death of the *Aconitum*-patient. Mirrored in these two modalities one can see the earth-bound, slowly developing, pale Christmas rose, and the upright monkshood as it appears when the force of summer is at its highest. Observation of the gestalt, and the way in which the plant appears in its environment, is almost enough to decipher and explain the symptoms.

These are not such simple associations as "*cold air*" and "*hot summer*" (*Aconitum*), but the inner individuality of the plant which reveals itself in its form, but also in its provings. The signature cannot be deciphered by playful comparisons, but by experiencing the inner gestalt and outer gestures of a plant.

V. THE DRUG PICTURE

Now that we have come to see the contrast between *Aconitum* and *Helleborus*, let us try to study the homœopathic materia

medica to discover the general and the special directions in the action of the Christmas rose. That, however, is not an easy undertaking, for there are many weeds which try to overgrow the real properties of the remedy.

Allen, after listing a number of rather confusing single symptoms, concludes as follows: "A low type of fever, with great apathy, offensive breath, feeble pulse, opium-like stupor, coldness and cold sweat." This again shows clearly the picture already described by Kent.

Nash is very outspoken in his description. He says of *Helleborus*: "We know its usefulness in the advanced stage of severe diseases of the brain, such as meningitis, or any other where exudation is imminent or already present." He then gives a more detailed account of the clinical picture which is similar to the one given by Allen, and points to a most important symptom: the severe decrease of the diuresis. "Urine scanty or retained altogether, sometimes coffee-ground-like sediment." And he adds: "These symptoms indicate a hopeless state and the patient will soon die in a coma or with convulsions unless the right remedy is found." Finally, the author also indicates that *Helleborus* is "an excellent remedy for dropsy after scarlet fever".

These two descriptions give us a first picture of the line of action. Too much liquor is produced in the central nervous system, whilst the kidney almost completely ceases to yield urine. The fluid organism floods the head, and withdraws from the kidneys.

In Clarke's *Dictionary*, *Helleborus* is discussed fully, and there, too, we find the lines of action just mentioned. He also quotes Hahnemann, who said: "I conclude from various observations that one of the first effects of *Black Hellebore* is a kind of stupor, a dullness of the sensorium commune, a condition where, with sight unimpaired, nothing is seen very fully, and the patient does not pay any attention to anything . . ." Clarke indicates meningitic conditions; he, too, mentions hydrocephalus and the scanty flow of urine.

Finally Stauffer begins his description with the following words: "Brain and kidney remedy; impending collapse of the brain or heart. Vitality ebbing away fast, with cold sweat on the

forehead. Muscular cramps, followed by weakness and general paralysis."

Here we meet already mixed together the symptoms of acute as well as chronic poisoning. As in most drug pictures, they are disturbingly thrown together and this obscures the actual picture of the drug action.

Muscular cramps and general paralysis, like many other symptoms, occur with the acute poisoning with helleborin or helleborein.

The chronic poisoning obtained with the drug proving, however, clearly indicates the dislocation of the fluid organism from the lower to the upper parts of the body, as we described it above. If this occurs too strongly, exudative meningo-encephalitic conditions arise which blur the sensorium induce stupor, and inhibit the initiative. In this state the symptoms occur which Stauffer describes:

"Occipital headache, with sensation of numbness, heavy as wood.

Head is burrowed into the pillow and thrown to and fro.

Eyes turned upwards, pupils wide, without reaction.

Chewing with wrinkled forehead, cold sweat on forehead.

Automatic movements of limbs, continuous movement of one arm or leg, whilst the other limbs lie as if paralysed."

There is, however, another aspect in the displacement of the fluid organism, for there may also arise a hydrops with pleural exudation, ascites, and anasarca. Stauffer mentions in connection with this an acute nephritis, accompanied by uræmia, and he also points to eclampsia.

This description opens up a first insight into the "strength and action" of the Christmas rose. Will it be possible to understand anew the signature which has revealed itself to us?

VI. THE SIGNATURE

The active substances contained in *Helleborus niger* are above all two glycosides: helleborin and helleborein. Simonis reports: "The poisoning in man appears in a variety of symptoms: salivation, nausea, repeated vomiting, difficulties in swallowing, gastric and abdominal pains, diarrhœa, also with blood, pain in the calves.

pallor of the skin, vertigo, tinnitus, photophobia, darkness before the eyes, blindness. Later delirium, sobbing, cramps, weak and infrequent pulse, dyspnoea, somnolence, and death with convulsions."

Here we have the combined picture of symptoms due to partly acute and partly subacute poisoning. Outstanding is again the clouding of the sensorium. From the data available it appears that helleborin is less toxic than helleborein. . . . The former acts more strongly on the sensorium, the latter on the gastro-intestinal tract. But, however, attack the whole of the muscular system, including the heart. These are not confirmed findings, but the probable lines of action.

It does show that the acute poisoning, too, acts on the fluid organism and profoundly disturbs its balance. The results are the signs and symptoms of vomiting and diarrhoea, the weakness of the muscular system, and finally the complete collapse of the circulation.

In the case of chronic poisoning it is a more specific disturbance which affects those parts of the fluid organism which are connected with the production of the liquor and urine. Paracelsus, in the essay of Helleborus, says the following: "It is well-known that a fountain springs in man from which water flows to such measure that those who have never seen it will not be able to believe it." Is it possible still to get the meaning of such a statement? We remember that Paracelsus connected the curative strength of the Christmas rose with four types of diseases: epilepsy, podagra, stroke, and dropsy. And speaking of dropsy, he writes the sentence we have just quoted. He even adds a peculiar annotation: "It is as if Moses had struck the liver with a rod and nothing but water would run from it all the time (perhaps it cannot be in any other way than that God, like Moses, strikes with a rod)."

No water flows from the liver; but where in the organism does a liquid as clear as water flow all the time? Could it not be that Paracelsus meant the everlasting fountain of liquor production? That continuous process of production everywhere where the choroid plexus projects into the ventricles of the brain? Isn't this the place where the remedial power of the Christmas rose acts? The site at which in a never-ending stream the thousands of drop-

lets, that "water", flow which revive the decaying forces of the central nervous system? .

The Christmas rose has its abode in deep winter's time. When the world of nature has died down and the forces of life have withdrawn into the depth of the earth; when the globe has inhaled deeply and almost turned into a crystal, then the time of the Christmas rose has come. Like with a magic wand it strikes at the wintry rock of the earth and draws from it that trace of vital water on which it can maintain itself.

The verdant forces of life are at work only in its leaves; these grow throughout the year, and take part in the whole life of the earth. But in winter the miracle happens that suddenly flowers appear, through snow and cold, contrary to the rhythms of life. Here the process reveals itself which otherwise occurs only inside the ventricles of the brain: that out of the flowing blood, quietly, working drop by drop, a liquid arises which is as clear as water. The liquor is like the flower of the blood. The same process which inside the head gives rise to the production of liquor also creates outside the flower of the Christmas rose during winter time. The stream of vitality which runs through all the Ranunculaceæ here is transformed into the purest flower; in a similar way the blood stream turns into the liquor cerebrospinalis. In both places a simillium arises, in two different forms which harmoniously ring together.

Like the Christmas rose, the liquor may sometimes be delicately tinged with red; if a hæmorrhage occurs in the central nervous system its clearness is clouded.

At this point, we should remember the important investigations made by v. Monakow which were all too soon forgotten. He was able to prove that in severe mental disorders, especially in schizophrenia, pathological, mostly sclerotic changes are found in the plexus chorioideus. This indication might provide an explanation for the repeated mention in the literature of cases of mental disorder cured by *Helleborus niger*.

Thus the indications for the use of *Helleborus* mentioned by Paracelsus begin to regain some meaning. For epilepsy, stroke, and dropsy are closely connected with the formation of liquor. Gout,

however, is still a complete riddle to our understanding and therefore Paracelsus' statement remains obscure.

With these results we achieved to sketch a preliminary picture of the life and action of the Christmas rose. We recognized it as the pioneer among the Ranunculaceæ who penetrated into the region of the deepset winter. This makes it a polar opposite to its relative, the monkshood, which has chosen summer as its lebensraum.

All the Ranunculaceæ which are medicinal plants act on the water metabolism. They permeate the fluid organism because they in themselves have a strong relation to the fluid element. Where the snow melts, the brooks flow, and on the damp edges of woods, by and near to the swamps is their habitat.

But just as the liquor separates from the whole water metabolism of the body, and achieves a special place, so does the Christmas rose separate itself from its brothers and sisters and become a hermit of the winter time. Both, liquor and Helleborus, produce the same living gesture; they separate from the rest and stand apart.

Perhaps it will be possible, from the renewed understanding of this strange flower, that it will be thought of more often in medicine and again used more frequently.

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