

THE PLAGUE.

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It is the common opinion, that there is a close analogy between typhus and the plague : and as the first has been accounted, by most modern writers, an asthenic disorder, so the last has been deemed of a similar but more severe character. The prevalence of this opinion has brought depletion into disrepute among European physicians, and has introduced an undecided and merely palliative treatment in the plague. An attentive comparison of the most authentic histories of this complaint, with the phenomena of typhus, has certainly convinced me, that a close analogy actually does exist between the two maladies ; and having endeavoured to demonstrate, from personal experience, the fallacy of the scholastic notions as to the nature of typhus, I shall now, from the observations of the best authorities, attempt to show, that the plague is not a disease of real debility, but one of excitement and of congestion.

Different authors have arranged the appearances of the plague in different ways, according to the peculiarity of their pathological views, or to the extent of their information. Most of the French writers on the subject have specified five varieties, Dr. Russel has extended them to six, and Chenot, even to seven ; but, as some of those varieties are distinguished by unimportant and even common symptoms, the more generally adopted arrangement shall be preferred here.

which only admits of three species of the plague. Upon the whole, one of the best and briefest descriptions of this disease is contained in an excellent paper, published by Dr. now Sir Brooke, Faulkner, in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*; and as it has been drawn from an extensive observation, during the late appearances of that complaint in the island of Malta, it shall be selected as a sort of text to the few comments about to be offered.

I. "That in which, at the first attack, the energy of the brain and nervous system is greatly impaired, indicated by coma, slow, drawling, or interrupted utterance. In this description of the disease, the tongue is white, but little loaded with sordes, and usually clean, more or less towards the centre and extremity; the anxiety is great; cast of countenance pale; stomach extremely irritable, and the strength much impaired. Rigors and pain in the lower part of the back are among the early precursors of the other symptoms. This was observed to be the most fatal species of the plague, and prevailed chiefly at the commencement of the late disasters. Those who were thus affected sometimes died in the course of a few hours, and with petechiæ."

II. "The next species I would describe is, that in which the state of the brain is the very reverse of what takes place in the former, the symptoms generally denoting a high degree of excitement: the pain of the head is intense; thirst frequently considerable, though sometimes wanting; countenance flushed, and utterance hurried. The attack is ushered in by the same rigors and pain of back as in the foregoing. Epistaxis not unfrequently occurs in this class of the disorder. The glandular swellings come out very tardily, and, after appearing, recede again without any remission of the general symptoms. Carbuncles arise over different parts of the body or extremities, which are rapidly disposed to gangrenous inflammation. The delirium continues extremely high and uninterrupted, and the patient perishes in the course of two or three days. Sometimes he lingers so far as the seventh, yet rarely beyond this period, without some signs of amendment. Of this second description, the examples have

been very numerous, and were nearly as fatal as the preceding. In the countenances of some, just previous to the accession of the more violent symptoms, there is an appearance of despair and horror which baffles all description, and can never well be mistaken by those who have seen it once."

III. "The third species which I would enumerate, is nearly akin to the last, only the symptoms are much milder, and the brain comparatively little affected. The buboes and other tumours go on more readily and kindly to suppuration, and by a prompt and early employment of remedies, to assist the salutary operation of nature, the patient has a tolerable chance of surviving. Cases of this class are often so mild, that persons have been known to walk about in seeming good health, and without any evident inconvenience from the buboes."*

The above classification of Sir Brooke Faulkner is the more satisfactory, because it accords in the main points with that of Lange, Orreus, and other experienced observers, in whose writings the fullest confirmation of its correctness may be found. The first species in particular has been distinctly marked by Hodges and De Mertens; and the plague which raged at Florence, in 1348, was evidently of that sort, for Boccaccio mentions, that the patients died on the third day, without any degree of fever. Dr. Russel has given a most admirable history of this most dreadful species, in what he terms his first class, while the second species is comprehended under his three following classes, and the third species under his fifth class.† But more strikingly to show the excellency of this arrangement, it is only necessary to transcribe Sydenham's concise description of the plague, in which the three species are very clearly characterized. "The plague (says this illustrious physician) usually begins with chillness

* See Vol. X. page 143, 144, of the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*.

† See from page 97, to page 111, of a *Treatise of the Plague*. By Patrick Russel, M. D. F. R. S. Formerly Physician to the British Factory, at Aleppo. London: printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson. 1791.

and shivering, like the fit of an intermittent; soon after, a violent vomiting, a painful oppression at the breast, and a *burning fever*, accompanied with its common symptoms succeed, and continue till the disease proves mortal, or the kindly eruption of a bubo, or parotis, discharges the morbid matter, and cures the patient. Sometimes the disease, though rarely, is not preceded by any perceptible fever, and proves suddenly mortal; the purple spots, which denote immediate death, coming out, even whilst the persons are abroad about their business. But it is worth observing, that this hardly ever happens but in the beginning of a very fatal plague, and never in its decline, or in those years wherein it is not epidemic. Again, sometimes swellings appear, without having been preceded either by a fever, or any other considerable symptom: but I conceive that some slight and obscure shivering always precedes the seizure: now such as are attacked in *this favourable manner*, may safely follow their business, as if they were in health, and need not observe any particular way of living.* If any further evidence were wanted to prove the propriety of distinguishing the plague into the three species above mentioned, it might be adduced from an elegant little tract of Dr. Pearson, to which the reader is particularly referred, relative to this part of the subject.†

After what has been said, it may not be improper to draw a short parallel between this complaint and the typhus fever. The first species of the plague, as described above, has obviously a strong resemblance to the congestive, the second to the inflammatory, and the third to the simple typhus; and I apprehend, there can be little doubt that the first species is connected with visceral congestion, the second with visceral inflammation, and the third either with an evident, though

* See page 77, 78, of the Entire Works of Dr. Thomas Sydenham, newly made into English from the Originals. By John Swan, M. D. London: printed for E. Cave, 1753.

† See from p. 5, to p. 13, of a Brief Description of the Plague, &c. By Richard Pearson, M. D. London: printed for Thomas Underwood, 1813.

moderate excitement of the circulation, or with so slight a degree of fever, as to be hardly observable. The congestive nature of the first species is distinctly denoted by the want of regular and universal re-action; the tendency to coma; the paleness of the countenance; the irritability of the stomach; the overwhelming oppression of the whole system; and the low and quick, or nearly natural state of the pulse, noticed by Dr. Russel and others, though omitted in the description given by Sir Brooke Faulkner. The inflammatory nature of the second species is clearly indicated by the excessively great excitement: the intense pain of the head; the high and uninterrupted delirium; the appearance of carbuncles with a rapidly gangrenous tendency; and those sensations of inward burnings, which have been mentioned by Dr. Russel and many authors beside, and which are the well-known attendants of visceral inflammations. The generally simple character of the third species is too evident to require comment: it often appears to be a milder disease than even the least complicated form of typhus, but sometimes verges upon, and even passes into, the inflammatory species.

Proceeding from the symptoms, we shall find that the internal lesions, which the plague produces, also tend to confirm us in the opinion, that it is inflammatory or congestive in its worst forms. Procopius informs us, that on opening the bodies of those who died of the plague, which raged in the reign of Justinian, a great carbuncle was found within *—language which implies, that the patients had died of inflammation in some of the viscera. In those who perished at Marseilles, within the first two days of the attack, the French physicians discovered by dissection, that some of the viscera were in a state of mortification; † and Dr. Mead, in tracing a parallel betwixt the small-pox and the plague, attempts to prove by positive evidence, that death in both is usually caus-

* The History of Physic. By J. Friend, M. D. The fourth Edition. London: printed for M. Cooper, 1750. Vide p. 148.

† Observations et Reflexions touchant la Nature, &c. de la Peste de Marseilles, pag. 47, et suiv.

ed by mortification of those parts.* Larrey declares, that he has opened the bodies of many persons who died of the plague, and generally found the same appearances: namely, the omentum, stomach, and intestines gangrenous in some places; the liver in a state of congestion; the gall bladder filled with black fetid bile, and the pericardium with a bloody fluid.† Dr. Pearson has given references to several writers to show, that, in patients who died of this disorder, proofs of inflammation and gangrene have been found in the brain and its investing membranes, in the lungs, and in the stomach, as well as in the intestines—facts surely tending to corroborate the opinion here maintained. But by way of lessening the force of those examinations Dr. Pearson affirms, that what he calls *pestilential* is very different from *simple* inflammation, not being accompanied by a hard pulse, nor by an exudation of coagulable lymph, but rapidly terminating in gangrene; circumstances, he thinks, which should be well considered by those who might be led by the term inflammation to resort to the lancet.‡ But admitting, for the sake of argument, that the supposed *pestilential* inflammation is neither accompanied by a hard pulse, nor by an exudation of coagulable lymph, and that it terminates rapidly in gangrene; still it does not legitimately follow, that it is very different from *simple* inflammation, concerning which similar assertions may be justly made. As an example in point, *simple* inflammation of the intestines is frequently neither accompanied by a hard pulse, nor by an exudation of coagulable lymph, but terminates rapidly in gangrene. Dr. Pearson has, therefore, failed to prove, that *pestilential* differs from *simple* inflammation, the attributes which he has ascribed to the former, being common to the latter. Besides, contrary to the assumption of this ingenious author, it is well known that the plague is attended, in the first stage of its inflammatory forms, with

* The medical Works of Dr. Richard Mead. Vol. II. page 92. Edinburgh; printed for Alexander Donaldson, 1763.

† See page 55, 56, of Memoirs of Military Surgery. By D. J. Larrey. Abridged and translated from the French, by John Waller.

‡ See page 18, 19, of Dr. Pearson's Brief Description of the Plague.

a hard and strong pulse; and a sufficient number of morbid dissections have not yet been made, to authorize us to state, as a general fact, that the visceral inflammations in the plague are unaccompanied by an exudation of coagulable lymph.

Apparently as an illustration of the peculiarity of *pestilential* inflammation, Dr. Pearson notices, that Lange relates a case of the plague, in which the liver and lungs were so completely gangrened as to crumble between the fingers. But this proves nothing specific in the inflammation, for a similar state of the viscera has been witnessed after the termination of other and essentially different fevers, which had been attended with extreme inflammation or congestion, as may be particularly seen in the works of Dr. Robert Jackson. An instance of *simple* abdominal inflammation occurred in my practice some years ago, which ended mortally in less than twenty-four hours; and, on dissection, the coats both of the stomach and intestines were ruptured, in some parts, by the slightest touch. The very propriety, therefore, of the epithet *pestilential* may be questioned, as applied to those inflammations of the viscera, which take place in the plague; in fact, like the occult qualities of the ancients, it expresses nothing precise or definite, and like them, also, is calculated to satisfy us with the appearance, instead of the reality of knowledge. Indeed, if its use were once sanctioned in medical literature, we might, by a party of expression, call inflammations of the viscera, typhous, rubeolous, remittent, and the like, according to the nature of the fever with which they happened to be connected. Buboes and carbuncles generally attend the plague, as rashes the measles and the scarlet fever; and though each local affection may be pathognomonic of a specific malady, yet the visceral inflammation, which may arise in each of those maladies, is not, therefore, to be deemed peculiar and specific;—because it is denoted in all of them by the same or similar symptoms, produces the same or similar consequences, exhibits the same or similar appearances after its termination, and would probably therefore be remediable by the same or similar means.*

* If these transitory pages should ever be honoured by the perusal of Dr.