ACCOUNT
OF
A SINGULAR AND FATAL DISEASE,
OCCURRING
IN SEVERAL PERSONS IN THE SAME HAMLET.

By MR. HENRY GERVIS,

SURGEON AT ASHBURTON.

COMMUNICATED

By DR. CURRY.

Read Jan. 15, 1811.

Monday, March 23, 1807.

I WAS requested this morning early to visit the son of a farmer Wilcox, aged nine years, residing at a village in Dartmoor, called Blackaton; the situation of which is high, and on a declivity, about eight miles from Ashburton. About four families live in the place, and their general health, for many years past, has been very good. The family, to which the patient belonged, consisted of fourteen persons, including servants, labourers, and children, all of whom dined together on the preceding day, and were *perfectly* well. At four in the afternoon

of that day, this little boy first complained of pain in his head, attended with slight rigors. He was immediately put to bed, and had some tea given to him. During the night the pain of his head increased, and some slight convulsive affections of the limbs were noticed. He had little thirst, and the heat of his skin was not greater than usual. Early in the morning a slight sickness supervened; and soon after he became totally insensible, and much inclined to sleep.

I saw him about ten o'clock in the morning, and found the pupils of his eyes fully dilated, with a weak pulse, not exceeding 80, a preternatural heat on the skin, his breathing free, tongue and teeth moist. On the strictest inquiry, I found that his health, previous to this attack, had been very good, and that his diet had been the same as that of the other branches of the family. As there evidently appeared a strong nervous affection, I suspected that water might have been the cause. His countenance was not flushed, but rather pale. I immediately gave him fifteen grains of ipecacuanha, which I had taken with me, and it fortunately excited vomiting in about half an hour; after which I gave him a laxative, which also succeeded, and then a mixture, with the *mist. camph. et liq. amm. vol.* A large blister was applied between the shoulders, and his feet and legs bathed with warm water. Late in the evening he was no better; but, in the course of the night, he ex-

pressed some fear on seeing a candle in the room ; and on being asked, if he did not also see his father, who was then near him, he replied, No.

On the Tuesday morning, about eight o'clock, a messenger came for me to see his elder sister, aged 16, whom I had seen the day before in perfect health, having sat up with her brother during the night. When I came to the house, on observing two young persons in great distress, it struck me that the boy was dead. On inquiry, however, I found that he was better, but that the girl was expiring. On entering her apartment, I remarked that the pupils of her eyes were fully dilated, and the tunica albuginea completely suffused with blood. Her pulse was not to be distinguished ; and in about five minutes she died. On her neck and breasts I discovered several very large and irregular purple spots. Her teeth were white and clean, and tongue moist. The mother informed me, that she had been attacked the preceding evening with cold shiverings, which were soon after succeeded by great heat in the skin, thirst and restlessness, acute pain in her head, and slight soreness in the throat. About five o'clock in the morning, sickness and vomiting came on, and soon after a total privation of sight and sense. They remarked nothing particular, either as to appearance or smell, in the discharges from her stomach or bowels ; nor was there during my stay, any offensive foetor, whatever.

On quitting her room, I went to see her brother, and found him considerably better. He was perfectly sensible, his pulse regular, but complaining of a violent pain in the right foot; on examining which, I observed the ball of the toe very much inflamed, as also the ankle and knee, accompanied with much pain on slight pressure. His leg was very much contracted. I directed the same medicines to be continued, and a fomentation for the leg, which totally removed the complaint in the course of a week, and he has since continued well.

The daughter was buried on the Thursday evening (the 20th) and attended by the father, who, as well as all those accompanying the corpse, never discovered the least disagreeable effluvia. On his return home, being about three miles from the church, he felt himself quite well, and very hungry; ate a meat supper, to which he was not generally accustomed, and went to bed about ten o'clock, free from complaint. Very soon after, he was attacked with a violent pain in one foot, which soon extended to the other, and from thence to the small of his back, below the region of the kidney, where it remained so acute, that he was obliged to be supported nearly in a sitting posture, not being able to lie down. I was sent for between two and three in the morning, and got there soon after four. His brother was supporting him behind, and his wife, in bed, assisting him also. His pulse was 100, and weak; his countenance remarkably pale;

tongue moist; the general surface of his body rather cold than otherwise : there was neither oppression at his breast nor difficulty of breathing, but a disposition to vomit, with some slight pain of the head. His legs were then free from pain, and unattended with any sort of external inflammation or soreness. I gave him a small dose of ipecacuanha, which very easily discharged the undigested part of his food, consisting of several portions of fat, &c. He vomited twice only, and felt soon after more at his ease. His feet and legs were bathed with warm water, as also his back ; and in two hours he was enabled to lie down. I then gave him a laxative, which produced its proper effect, and directed for him some bolusses, with the sal. amm. vol. & confect. aromat. At four in the afternoon, the pain left his back, and attacked his stomach, to which a blister was applied, and at eight he died, being sensible to the last moment ; and neither then, nor subsequently, did there appear any petechiæ, nor did there arise any putrid effluvia.

In this case the nervous system did not shew any particular affection, as his vision was perfect, and his intellect good ; and he was without the least inclination to sleep. I made every inquiry, both with regard to their diet, and culinary utensils ; and whether any of the water which passes near some tin-mines had been used, but could discover nothing that could lead even to a conjecture as to the cause of these attacks.

The remaining part of the family continued well until the 29th of April, when I was desired to see another son, who arose in perfect health at six in the morning, attended the workmen in marking some cattle, and began to complain of a slight soreness of his throat and pain in his head, at eight o'clock, which induced him to return; had some tea given to him; and lay down on the bed, with his clothes on. At twelve his mother, not finding him better, put him into bed, and gave him some more tea. From this time till four, no sensible alteration appeared. He had slight shiverings, but the heat of his skin was not greater than common. At four o'clock he grew sick, and vomited, and immediately after became insensible to every thing. At a quarter past eight o'clock I saw him. His pulse could not be distinguished; not even the pulsation of his heart. The pupils of his eyes very much dilated, but the tunica albuginea not inflamed: teeth and tongue moist, respiration free, and no disagreeable effluvia whatever. I endeavoured in vain to make him swallow a tea-spoonful of wine, and he expired in about ten minutes.

On Saturday, the 9th of May, I was requested to see a brother's apprentice, about eleven years of age, who resides in the same village, and who was attacked about eight o'clock the preceding evening, with slight rigors, sore throat, pain of the head (not violent) and stiffness in his limbs. He was immediately put to bed, and ap-

peared very much inclined to sleep. He had some slight flushes in his face, and much heat in his skin, but did not complain of thirst. The pediluvium was used, and warm diluents frequently given to him. At four in the morning he became sick, and retched much. Having a small dose of ipecacuanha in the house, they gave it to him; and soon after I was sent for, but he died before I arrived. By the information I obtained from the widow Wilcox, who attended him from the first moment of his attack, I found that many large irregular purple spots had appeared in his neck and breast, about an hour before he expired; and that not only his alvine discharges, but his breath, had a very offensive smell. From the moment the vomiting came on, he became totally insensible; the eyes full and open, though not red; his extremities were cold; the fingers, and the lower parts of each eye, black; nose cold, and face very red. This boy had never seen either of the other diseased persons, having refused going near them.

I directed the houses to be thoroughly white-washed, all the bedding to be well aired, the floors of the rooms to be well washed with vinegar, and the apartments to be properly fumigated with nitric acid gas. In no other family or village, either in the parish of Widdecombe, or elsewhere in this neighbourhood, has any thing of the kind occurred. The last who died, had the strongest marks of putrescence about him, and a good deal of this

also appeared on the daughter, who was the second person attacked. The two first died within twenty-four hours from the attack, and the two last within thirteen hours. The unhappy termination of the complaint indicates strong contagion, the origin of which I am totally at a loss to conceive. The vomiting, in neither case, preceded the affection of the head, but always the privation of sense. From the patient's dying in the first stage of disease, no time was allowed for the operation of any medicine. In the house, where the attack first commenced, there are now eleven in the family, and all well ; in the other about five or six, as yet, free from complaint.

HENRY GERVIS.

May 13, 1810.