A SKETCH
OF THE
MEDICAL HISTORY
OF THE
FIRST BATTALION
OF THE
FIRST REGIMENT OF FOOT GUARDS,
DURING THE WINTER OF 1812-13.

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SURGEON TO THAT BATTALION.

Read April 30, 1816.

I HAVE long hesitated in presenting the following sketch of the Medical History of the Battalion to which I belong, being doubtful whether the facts I am about to relate, would prove sufficiently interesting to warrant my taking up so much of the Society's time ; but though I cannot flatter myself that the information I have to give, is either very new or important in a medical point of view, I am not without hope that the detail of our misfortunes may afford some instruction to those especially who are engaged in the medical department of the army, and perhaps tend in some degree to illustrate the

history of those fatal diseases, fever and dysentery, which without any exaggeration may be said to be infinitely more destructive to an army than the sword of the enemy. In giving these details, it will be necessary to mix with them a good deal of what cannot strictly be called medical matter, for as these complaints, and indeed almost all the diseases of the soldier abroad, are materially affected by and dependent upon the nature of the particular service in which he is engaged, the most minute and accurate medical history would be defective, unless these circumstances were taken into due consideration; and would certainly be productive of no practical advantage to those who at any future time might be placed in similar situations.

The first battalion of the first regiment of foot guards, embarked for Spain on the 14th of September, 1812, and consisted at that time of 1,499 men, including non-commissioned officers; and perhaps without exception, both in point of appearance and health, this battalion may be said to have quitted England in as complete a state as any regiment that ever left its shores; yet for the severe service in which (with the interval of a few weeks only) it was afterwards engaged, its composition may be said to have been thoroughly, though unavoidably, defective, more than one half of the battalion consisting of men who had volunteered from the militia in the spring and summer of the

same year, or of recruits who had never been on service ; and the remaining 600 taken from among those men of the battalion who had been in Walcheren ; and as far as could be done, selected from those who had suffered least from the marsh fever that committed so much havoc in that unfortunate army.

It is unnecessary now, I believe, to insist upon the unfitness of men just received from the militia for the duties of field service. Accustomed to full living, warm clothing and comfortable quarters, and knowing nothing of the difficulties of actual service, such men are predisposed to disease in no common degree ; and to this may be added the unfortunate lot that awaited this battalion upon joining the army at Duenas on the 25th of October, after marching 300 miles through Galicia and Leon, arriving at the commencement of the retreat from Burgos, which they were not at all prepared to expect. Those who witnessed the depression produced by that untoward event, will not hesitate to pronounce it to have operated as a powerful moral cause, that tended to hasten the evil that ensued.

During the march to Duenas, which commenced from Corunna on the 30th of September, the battalion had preserved its health wonderfully, and we arrived at the above-named place (Duenas) with only 58 sick of all descriptions, and this in-

cluding some cases of the venereal disease, that made their appearance on the road. One man only died on the route, though the weather during part of this time was dreadful, and we were enveloped in snow as early as the 14th of October, in crossing the Gallician mountains. From Duenas our retreat was continued with intervals of some days to the neighbourhood of Salamanca, during which the men were exposed to a very hot sun throughout the day, and lying on the ground at night with only the protection of their blankets, the nights being extremely cold and attended with a very heavy dew. And now it was that disease began to shew itself seriously, at first chiefly in pulmonic affections, and some few cases of acute dysentery, the latter of which, by the time we reached Villares (near Salamanca), became the prevailing disease. It was here we lost our first man, and from this place, and previously to our reaching it, we sent 160 men to the general hospitals. Very little medical assistance could be rendered to the patients under these circumstances, and as the army was continuing its retreat, they had to travel to the hospital stations, either on mules or in carts, occasionally exposed to very severe weather ; but these were evils inseparable from our situations at that time. After remaining one week in cantonments at Villares, the movements of the enemy once more obliged us to retire, and in four days of severe marching, dreadful weather and much privation, we reached the frontiers of Portugal, where we were again can-

toned in the miserable village of Carpio for ten days, and then by easy marches, unmolested by the enemy, reached Vizeu on the 7th of December. From Carpio, and on the march from Salamanca, 205 cases were sent to the general hospitals; these were chiefly dysenteries, and will tend to shew the rapid increase of sickness in the short space of one fortnight. Another circumstance must here be mentioned as materially contributing to the many that were operating as causes of disease. This battalion, on commencing the march from Corunna, had received its pay to the 24th of September, whereas that of the rest of the army had been slowly and gradually getting into arrears, so that when we joined them in October, we found that they were subsisted only to the 24th of July. Hence it is evident that even if the issues of money could have been made with the greatest punctuality, that three months must elapse before we could become entitled to receive our pay for the month of October; but as from the difficulties necessarily attending our situation, the payments could be made only every five or sometimes every six weeks, the period of time that elapsed before our October pay became due, was even much greater than that which I have mentioned. The soldiers so situated, with nothing but their mere rations to subsist upon, notwithstanding every exertion made to prevent it, too frequently disposed of many articles of their clothing, and even their blankets, to purchase other provisions, and thus it was that the majority of them

reached Vizeu in a state of miserable deprivation, dirty in their persons, worn down with fatigue, wasted most strikingly in flesh, and depressed in spirits. To make the climax complete, the weather for the first fortnight after our arrival at Vizeu was so incessantly rainy, as in a great measure to preclude those frequent inspections and parades, so necessary to rouse the attention of the soldier, and promote cleanliness at such a time. The men were quartered by threes and fours in the houses of individuals throughout the town, and I did not discover that fever was at all prevalent among the inhabitants previously to our arrival. The situation of Vizeu is open and healthy, and it had proved remarkably so a few winters before, when the second brigade of guards was quartered there, and, as I am informed, scarcely lost a man during that period.

I have already mentioned that from the 25th of October to the 7th of December, somewhat above 360 men had been sent to the various hospital stations; but this was trifling in comparison with what followed. Our daily admissions at Vizeu being from 15 to 20 upon an average, we were obliged to open four regimental hospitals in succession, in which for the first six weeks we accommodated all the cases that occurred; but as the evil continued to extend itself, we were afterwards obliged not only to continue to admit as many as possible into our own hospitals, but also to transfer

421 cases to the general hospitals established in the town. The general result of our admissions during our stay at Vizeu from the 7th of December, 1812, to the 3rd of March, 1813, was 1018 men admitted in the regimental hospitals, of whom 221 died, being rather more than one in five of the above-mentioned 421 transferred; the proportion of deaths I have no means of ascertaining, but I believe I may say it was not materially different from that which occurred among ourselves.

I am now arrived at the most distressing and difficult period of my relation, for whilst I attempt to give a faithful account of the mode of attack, and the usual progress of the disease, I must at the same time confess how vain were all our endeavours to arrest its progress, and how powerless, in most instances, were all our remedies to bring it to a favourable termination. The patients usually came to the hospital complaining of chilliness, languor and depression, both of strength and spirits; the countenance wan and melancholy, the pulse small, frequent and tremulous, and the surface of the body unusually cold to the touch; giddiness of the head was a frequent complaint, and a deep and constant sighing was an universal symptom; yet there were none of the common attendants of the first attack of fever, no violent headache, nausea or thirst, no accession of heat, or marked rigors in the first instance. I have seen numbers of men brought to the hospital so attacked die in

24 or 36 hours after their admission without a prominent symptom, insensible to every kind of stimulus, and never having any accession of heat, or increased action of the vascular system, from the moment of the attack to the hour of their death. In many men of very robust habit, the disease assumed more of the common forms of fever, and very soon put on the typhoid character, with parched tongue, low muttering delirium, and terminating in some instances in a suffusion of bile over the whole surface of the body. In all there was a great disposition to relaxation of the bowels; in some instances the restraint rendered necessary by the delirious state of the patients, such as fastening down the hands, produced a speedy mortification of those parts pressed upon by the ligatures; and another and by no means uncommon circumstance was gangrene of the toes and feet, which the patient often forgot to mention, unless inquiries were made upon the subject. In numerous instances dysentery was either conjoined with the original disease, or preceded it; but it too often happened that a sudden and spontaneous diarrhoea carried off the patient rapidly, even when apparently becoming convalescent; and in no instance where purging to any extent occurred do I remember to have seen a man recover. I am sorry to be obliged to confess that I know of no class of remedies, or particular plan of treatment, by which this disease was materially affected. Oppressed by the numbers continually thrown upon our hands, and limited as are

the means of the medical establishment of any regiment to meet such an emergency, our first endeavours were applied to afford our patients good warm lodging, dry clothing, and as frequent changes of linen as possible, taking care at the same time to prevent their being crowded; the fumigation of nitrous acid was also employed frequently in all the wards. The cases that presented themselves to us in the first weeks of our residence at Vizeu were completely those of exhaustion, and our practice was to give volatile alkali with bark, aromatics and spices with wine frequently, but not in great quantities at a time, paying attention to the state of the bowels, or any other symptom that might occur. Many cases so treated recovered, but their convalescence was tedious in the extreme, and relapses were frequent and too often fatal.

In no instance, while at Vizeu, did I feel myself justified in taking away blood, or using the cold affusion; though great benefit was afterwards derived from the latter remedy, when the disease assumed a different character, which it did previously to our reaching Oporto in the month of April.

This was the most aggravated form in which fever shewed itself; but afterwards the true typhus became more prevalent, and spread to the ward serjeants, to the orderlies, and indeed to most of those who had much communication with the sick, so that eleven hospital serjeants were taken ill in

succession, two of whom died, as well as several of the orderlies. The mortality in these instances, however, bore but a trifling proportion to that which occurred from the complaint I have mentioned above, in which death took place so speedily, and the constitution appeared so entirely broken down, that no interval of time was allowed for the operation of medicine.

The condition of the battalion and a consideration of its preceding situation and circumstances, led us to apply ourselves at once to the root of the evil ; as the affording those not yet attacked better food, and renewing the clothing to such as were but scantily supplied, might either prevent their being attacked at all, or so invigorated the system as to enable it to overcome the disease if it did assail them. Our success in these endeavours, and the striking fact of the total exemption of every officer (except one) from fever, and indeed of every officer's servant, who from their situations were not only less exposed to fatigue, but better fed, sufficiently proved, if indeed such proof were necessary, that we were not mistaken in our conjectures as to the origin of the complaint. Still more striking was the exemption of almost all those men who, as mechanics, or by labour, were enabled to earn money sufficient to procure them necessaries independent of their rations : and upon this was founded the judicious arrangement of distributing to each man a small pro-

portion of money daily, in order to procure a breakfast, or other diet unconnected with his daily allowance. I must farther observe of the officer whom I have before stated to have suffered from fever, that his was a case of typhus mitior, from which he gradually recovered: and it ought not to be forgotten, that as he was the only officer taken ill of fever, so he also was the only one who partook entirely of the fatigues of the men, by marching on foot with them from their first landing at Corunna, until he was taken ill in Portugal.

The second period of my melancholy history may be taken up from the time that the battalion removed from Vizeu in the first week of March to their arrival at Oporto on the 3rd of April, a period of about four weeks. We had been twelve weeks resident at Vizeu, and had entered that place with nearly 1100 men; we marched out with 358 only; 221 having died in our own hospitals, a much greater number at the various hospital stations, and the remainder being left sick in the general and convalescent hospitals of the town. The return of one company which was the most unhealthy, will exemplify what I have said above very strikingly: this company consisted of 119 men upon our arrival at Vizeu; of these only 12 escaped the attack of fever, and quitted the place with us; seven of the twelve were officer's batmen, and two had worked as regimental tailors.

Fever still followed us in our new cantonments though its character was entirely changed; it now commenced its attack with the common symptoms of synochus, with headache, nausea, shivering, succeeded by intense heat; and after well emptying the primæ viæ, the cold affusion was generally employed. Of 48 cases so treated every one recovered perfectly, and in by far the greater number of instances the fever yielded to one affusion; in some few cases it was repeated as often as three or four times, when the accession of heat seemed to require it. While stationed in these villages the result of our admissions was 89 cases of fever, 14 of whom died, being rather less than one in six; but these were chiefly relapsed cases, and upon our removal to Oporto 48 additional ones were transferred to the general hospital. Our march to Oporto was performed by very deliberate and easy stages, so as rather to benefit than fatigue the men, who evidently gained ground in health every day: indeed the order that sent us to Oporto may justly be hailed as the commencement of our healthy era, for from the day of our arrival there until the 29th of June, nearly three months, although 229 cases of all kinds were admitted into our hospital, not one death occurred, notwithstanding we had been joined by many convalescents, and though both among these as well as among the remnant of the battalion that arrived with us, relapses were very frequent. But so different was the condition of the battalion become, that we performed the

march from Oporto to the Pyrenees with the loss of only one man by apoplexy, and left only eight sick upon any part of the route; a distance of certainly not less than 500 miles. There was a considerable difference in the proportion of sickness that took place between the old soldiers and those who had been received from the militia, of which the annexed return will however afford but an imperfect notion, inasmuch as it was drawn up in the month of January, and consequently before the disease had run its course; but the result as far as it does extend, was this; of 610 old soldiers, 198 were taken ill and 48 died; of 487 militia-men, 203 were attacked with fever, and 51 died.

On the subject of dysentery I have very little to say, but in the later periods of the Peninsular war, I have had occasion to practise and approve of the plan of treatment recommended by Dr. Somers, and mentioned by Sir James Macgrigor in his interesting paper, inserted in the last volume of this Society's memoirs. But in that period of time to which my history is confined, dysentery seldom occurred as a distinct affection: it was conjoined too frequently with the most aggravated form of fever, and in no instance did I feel myself warranted to use the lancet. I have only one more observation to offer, which is this: without entering into the arguments upon the much contested subject of contagion, this was the second time that it fell to my lot to witness the ravages of fever en-

suing on service of extreme rigour and privation. And as far as I can collect from others or from my own experience, a fever of the typhoid character is the usual consequence, and always makes its appearance in a greater or less degree, at the termination of such campaigns as I have attempted to describe. How far this may countervail the opinion that is held by some of its being always the result of a specific contagion, I do not take upon myself to decide.