

CHOLERA IN DUMFRIES 1832

CHOLERA APPEARS IN THE COUNTRY - PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES TAKEN IN DUMFRIES-ITS BAD SANITARY CONDITION-ENTRANCE OF CHOLERA INTO THE TOWN-ITS SPREAD AND FATAL RESULTS- STATISTICS OF CASES AND DEATHS.

BEFORE the close of the protracted agitation to which the reader's attention has just been turned, the fearful malady, cholera morbus, began to excite alarm throughout the country. It had long scourged India. In 1831 it appeared in the northwest of Europe, and after committing sad ravages there, crossed over in some Hamburg vessels to Sunderland, first startling that town with its presence on the 26th of the following October. Next spring many places far separate from each other were visited by the fell disease, and the towns that had hitherto escaped awaited their turn in gloom and terror. Dumfries for the two preceding years had been more than usually healthy; but as soon as the warning note was sounded from Sunderland, steps were taken to improve its sanitary condition, which was admittedly defective. A vigorous Board of Health was constituted on the 15th of March, 1832, [The Board (constituted by a Privy Council order) consisted of the following gentlemen:-Provost Corson; Bailie Robert Armstrong; Bailie James Swan; Mr. George Montgomery, dean of guild; Mr. James Thomson, deacon-convener; the Rev. Robert Wallace; Dr. William Maxwell; Mr. Archibald Blacklock, surgeon; Mr. James M'Lauchlan, surgeon; ex-Provost M'Kie; ex-Provost Fraser; Mr. John Commelin, agent for the British Linen Company; Mr. John M'Diarmid; Mr. Robert Threshie of Barnbarroch; and Mr. James Broom, town clerk.] and under its directing agency, supplemented by private effort, the houses of the humbler classes were cleansed with hot lime; and, what was of more moment, perhaps, supplies of nourishing soup and other food were served out to many of their inmates during the winter season. After much had been done to put the old tenements of the closes, in which hundreds of families dwelt, in better order, and effect other improvements, the town was still in a very unsatisfactory state. The scavenging was deficient; the drainage merely nominal; and, worst of all, the water supply was limited and impure.

With the exception of what was furnished by a few wells and private pumps, all the water used for domestic purposes was carried by hand or carted in barrels from the Nith by four old men, who doled it out in tin pitchers or cans, from door to door, at the rate of five capfuls a penny. The river, when swelled by heavy rains, which was often the case, became thick with mud; and it was constantly exposed to a more noxious pollution, caused by the refuse poured into it from the town. The quality of the water did not improve by being borne about in barrels of suspicious aspect; and often, indeed, the liquid drawn from them during summer acquired a taste-me-not repulsiveness by the presence of innumerable little objects, pleasant to no one save an enthusiast in entomology. Besides, the water, whether bad or indifferent, was often not to be had for love or money by the families who depended on the barrels. Sometimes these intermitting fountains stopped running altogether. At such periods, portions of the town experienced a water-dearth, and obtained a faint inkling, at least, of one leading phase in Oriental life. When the Burgh was originally built, the houses were massed in closes together, that they might be more easily defended against a foreign enemy; and when cholera came, as come it did, these places of defence were its chief objects of attack. The town, in fact, as a whole, when looked upon from a sanitary point of view, lay open and exposed to the visitation. A neighbouring city, Carlisle, had a passing call from the disease in July. Coming nearer and nearer, it entered the little village of Tongland Bridge, where it left two victims; and after lingering some weeks about the district, doing little harm, but gathering increased power and venom, the fell destroyer burst upon Dumfries.

The first sufferer was a respectable elderly widow, named Paterson, residing in English Street, who was seized on the 15th of September, and died on the following day. [The second case occurred on the 16th, and the third on the 17th September, in a house of three stories directly opposite to Mary

Paterson's house. The names of the sufferers were William Bell and John Paton; who, being advanced in years, both rapidly sank and died. There were some miserable lodgings, for the reception of vagrants from all parts of the kingdom, adjoining Mary Paterson's house; and such was the anxiety of her neighbours to witness and relieve her sufferings, that two gentlemen, and a town's officer, had to stand at her door till within an hour of her death, to prevent them harassing both her and her medical attendants; one of whom, Mr. M'Cracken, shortly afterwards fell a victim to the disease.--Note by DR. BLACKLOCK.] A man in good circumstances, also advanced in life, who resided in an opposite house, hearing of what had occurred, became much alarmed, took ill, and was a corpse before twenty hours elapsed. These were the first prey of the pestilence. For about a week afterwards, it seemed to be but dallying with its work, at the rate of only one death per day: a heavy mortality in a population of ten thousand, yet not very alarming, every thing considered. "Can this really be cholera?" many asked; and some concluded that it was a mere British imitation of the Asiatic disease; others, that it was the real disorder, but of a mild type, and that the town was going to get off with a very slight attack. From the 15th of September till the 24th, inclusive, there were seventeen cases, nine of which were fatal; but when, on the 25th, fourteen new cases and nine deaths were announced, all the people felt that the veritable plague was in their midst, and were filled with fear and trembling.

This was in Rood-fair week, when the great annual horse market is held, and the Trades' processions and rejoicings used to take place. No pageantry in this the closing week of September, 1832, save dismal processions, coming so thick that they jostle each other as they hurry onward to the tomb; no revelry, but numerous incidents that might well have figured in Holbein's fantastic picture, "The Dance of Death." September 26th, nine new cases, and five deaths; 27th, thirty-seven new cases, and five deaths; 28th, sixty-eight new cases, and nineteen deaths! The plague is now holding high carnival! May God, in His great mercy, take pity on the poor town, and stay the ravages of the destroyer! But it has, as it were, little more than begun its fatal mission, and speeds on through all parts of Dumfries and the neighbouring burgh of Maxwelltown, sparing no age, smiting rich and poor alike, and prostrating the strong nearly as much as the feeble. At first the humbler classes suffered most severely: eventually it mattered little whether people sojourned in narrow, noisome courts, or in spacious squares-in the vilest rookeries of the Vennel, or in the stately mansions of Buccleuch Street: all places were freely visited, and no respect of persons was paid.

What rendered the cholera more appalling, was the circumstance that every one believed it to be both infectious and contagious. It was supposed that an affected individual distilled a poisonous influence all around him; that there was death in his touch; and that the virus of the malady lurked in every article of his dress. He was counted like a leper of the old Levitical dispensation, and, alas! too often treated as such; and when the cases began to multiply, the town was looked upon as a magazine of disease-a place devoted to the plague, which no man dared to enter, and from which many hastened in panic-fear, only, however, in some instances, to fall cholerastricken in their flight. Moreover, the disease was very little, if at all, amenable to medical treatment. It was a mysterious epidemic, which "walked in darkness," defying all the science and devotedness of the faculty.

"The salutary art

Was mute; and, startled at the new disease,
In fearful whispers hopeless omens gave.
To heaven, with suppliant rites, they sent their prayers:
Heaven heard them not. Of every hope deprived,
Fatigued with vain resources, and subdued
With woes resistless, and enfeebling fear,
Passive they sunk beneath the weighty blow.
Nothing but lamentable sounds was heard,

Nor aught was seen save ghastly views of death.
Infectious horror ran from face to face,
And pale despair. 'Twas all the business then
To tend the sick, and in their turns to die.
In heaps they fell: and oft one bed, they say,
The sickening, dying, and the dead contained." [Armstrong's Art of Preserving Health, book iii.]

In addition to the resident medical gentlemen, five practitioners were brought from Edinburgh, and two from Castle Douglas, by the Board of Health. The whole of them, we believe, performed their duty faithfully; and, sad to tell, two of the native surgeons, Mr. William M'Cracken and Mr. John M`Ghie, martyrs to their professional zeal, caught the malady and died. No cases were admitted into the Infirmary—a most unwise resolution to that effect having been adopted by a majority of its governors; and the poorer class of patients, instead of being laid in the well-furnished, well-ventilated, spacious wards of that institution, were crowded into a hospital made out of an old granary, at the foot of English Street. Here they had little chance of recovering; and their close contact with each other tended to intensify the disease—though the truth is, that there was nearly as great a proportion of deaths among rich persons attacked, and treated in their own houses, as among the poor, one case in every two of both classes having usually a fatal result. The civil authorities of the town, the clergymen, and the influential inhabitants generally, soon rose above the terror which at first seized upon men of all ranks, and co-operated zealously and courageously with the medical practitioners in their efforts to stay the course of the disease.

Direct resistance to it was found to be of little service; but a plan for withdrawing out of the way those who were peculiarly exposed to an attack, was adopted with success. When the head of a poor family was laid low, and the arrows of the pestilence were flying right and left in his homestead, its remaining members were conveyed to rooms in the Academy prepared for their reception, and there comfortably boarded and otherwise cared for. The doors of the High School were closed when the disease became epidemic; and they were reopened early in October for heart work rather than head work, that an asylum might be afforded to widows and orphans hurrying away from their ravaged homes and the presence of the destroying pest. By the middle of the month this house of refuge numbered a hundred and twenty inmates, chiefly fatherless children, whose varied wants of mind and body were supplied by a band of "ministering angels;" and it is gratifying to record that the well-aired lodgings, nourishing food, and warm clothing given to the poor refugees, kept them in health and strength when the localities they had fled from were still haunted by the destroyer. Good food and comfortable clothing were rightly considered as a species of defensive armour, which sometimes turned away the poisoned shaft when medicine would have been of no avail. A soup kitchen was opened on a liberal scale; and that in itself, there is every reason to suppose, foreclosed many all attack. Great quantities of tar and pitch were burned in the lanes and streets, making the prevailing gloom more lurid. This was for the purpose of disinfecting the atmosphere; but the dusky vapour thus sent into it was of no service as compared with the savoury smoke from the generous broth doled out liberally to every applicant. To meet the great expense incurred, a rate was imposed by the Board of Health; a large fund was raised by voluntary subscription; and many towns, both in England and Scotland, showed their sympathy for Dumfries-cholera-stricken more than any town in proportion to its size - by handsome pecuniary contributions for its relief.

Having said this much regarding the means taken to cope with the disease, we must now trace its further progress. Any and every effort to stay its course or propitiate its fury seem, for a while at least, utterly fruitless. September 29th. - The awful visitor is still making fearful havoc: new cases, fifty-two; deaths, thirteen. September 30th.-Worse and worse: no fewer than seventy-three new names are registered, and fourteen deaths occur. October 1st. - Fifty-six new cases, and twenty-

three deaths. October 2nd.-Deadliest day of all - "Be thou for ever blotted from the calendar!" The new cases are fifty-five; the deaths, forty-four. We dare not pause to reflect upon the scenes of horror which these figures suggest-scenes such as the Burgh never witnessed before, though often desolated by the fiend of war; unless when, in 1623, it was scourged by both plague and famine, which, during the spring and summer, destroyed at least five hundred of the inhabitants. "The bare recollection of them," says the Courier, at the time of the crisis, "is enough to quail the stoutest heart; what, then, must have been the dreadful reality? Hearses plying in every street; patients seized, and in imminent danger, faster than the bearers were able to remove them, or mourners to accompany them to their long home; the gravedigger's spade in constant requisition; the strong man stricken down in his pride; the feeble snatched in a few hours from a sick-bed to the tomb; the hospital emptied, and as quickly filled again; for several days scarcely a single recovery; the faculty fatigued beyond endurance, compelled to ride the shortest distances, and yet unable to answer the incessant calls of suffering humanity; at other times seriously affected themselves, until relieved by the promptitude and skill of their brethren; shops for general business shut at noonday; publicans warned to close their stores at dusk, that the vicious might be hampered in their evil propensities; every vehicle employed in removing family after family to the country; the public schools dismissed; St. Michael's vacated from the dread of cholera graves, and Divine service performed in the Courthouse; trade suspended, workshops depopulated, and industrious traders gathered into knots, discussing the fearful extent of the pestilence; many requiring medical aid, and paralyzed from the force of terror alone; every countenance shaded with grief, and a whole community the picture of despair."

October 3rd, when the disease reached its culminating stage, was market-day; but when death was mercilessly titheing the town, no business toll was levied at the bridge. Out of nearly sixty carriers, only one made his appearance. No butter, eggs, or poultry were offered for sale. Not a solitary bullock was seen on the Sands, though two thousand cattle at least would have been there under ordinary circumstances. Next day (October 4th) brought little abatement of the epidemic; for though the deaths fell to twenty-seven, sixty-two new cases were announced. The report on October 5th was thirty-two new cases, and only eleven deaths; and people began to breathe with some degree of freedom. The weather, too, underwent an auspicious change. During the first ten days of the visitation, the sky wore a peculiar aspect; and when the suffering Burgh was viewed from the surrounding heights, a dense mass of cloud appeared hovering over it, which spectators, with no great stretch of fancy, compared to a vast funeral pall. The pressure of the atmosphere was felt to be unusually heavy, though that was partly attributable, no doubt, to the circumstance that the nervous system of those who breathed it had lost its wonted tone through the operation of grief and terror. On the 30th of September, after heavy rain on the preceding day, the sky became comparatively bright. The dull, close season returned, however, and continued till the 4th of October, when copious showers fell, followed by a smart frost next morning, with its welcome accompaniment, a light, healthy, bracing atmosphere. Though this improvement in the weather was short-lived, it exercised a cheering- influence: the buoyant air combined with the lightening calendar to bring gleams of hope to many a despairing heart-ay, and health to the pulse of many a wasted frame. Then the more sanguine portion of the inhabitants flattered themselves with the idea that the epidemic would decline as rapidly as it had been developed : but, on the 6th, thirty-six new cases and seventeen deaths were reported, as if it had obtained a new lease of power; and before the cycle of the disease was finished, October had run its course.

As showing the march of the disease for the following fortnight, we quote from a diary published in one of the local newspapers. October 7th (Sabbath).-" To-day the weather was wet and stormy; the thermometer still lower, and the rain occasionally mixed with hail." New cases, thirty-one; deaths, four. 8th. - "Another showery and stormy day." New cases, thirty-five; deaths, twenty-one. 9th.-"The town still unprecedentedly dull and deserted; many shops remaining closed at noonday." New cases,

fourteen; deaths, fourteen. 10th. - "Although this is market-day, the town is nearly as dull as it was last week. Only two or three carriers have arrived, and these from a considerable distance, such as Newcastle, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. Some of the hucksters have procured a small supply of butter, but the price is advanced twenty-five per cent. The Sands is minus a single bullock, and some of the jobbers are anxious that the magistrates should transfer the market to the nine-mile toll-bar. To this advice the authorities demur, and have intimated a hope that in the course of a week or two the panic will die away, and matters proceed in their ordinary course." New cases, sixteen; deaths, fourteen. 11th. -"The weather dreadful, and contributing, among many other causes, to depress the animal spirits." New cases, fifteen; deaths, eight. 12th." To-day, the weather is better; comparatively few hearses have been seen; in certain wards, scarcely a new case has occurred; and the whole faculty have evidently profited by one or more nights of sound repose." New cases, thirteen ; deaths, eleven. 13th.-" The weather to-day was delightful; the medical report, the most cheering that has yet been issued. Nine new cases; six deaths." 14th.-" There has been one case of cholera in the Infirmary, and eight in the Poorhouse. The under jailor and his wife died of cholera some time ago. The head jailor was next attacked, and had hardly recovered when his sister-in-law fell a victim. Some of the prisoners have also been seized." New cases, twenty; deaths, five. 15th." The weather is still close, gloomy, and moist. New cases, twenty; deaths, eleven." 16th.-" The weather was rather unpromising in the morning, and `heavily in clouds brought on the day;' but it improved in the course of the forenoon, and enabled many to brace their nerves, and breathe a purer atmosphere, by strolling a few miles into the country. The medical report was exceedingly cheering, and had an excellent effect on the spirits of the people." New cases, four; deaths, eight. 17th. - "Another cheering report; one or two lots of cattle on the Sands; goodly lots in motion for the markets of the South; a considerable number of maidens in the egg and butter market; friends long amissing showing face at last, and the town altogether ten per cent. better than it has been for the last three weeks. The weather good; the air bracing, and free from moisture; and every thing tending to restore us to, not frighten us from, our propriety." New cases, three; deaths, three. 18th.-" The medical report still excellent, and several of the stranger practitioners about to leave us. To-day the soup-kitchen was opened under excellent management." New cases, four; deaths, four. 19th." Report to-day not quite so favourable : eight new cases, three deaths, and twenty-eight recoveries. The recoveries, however, are a cheering circumstance; and we begin to indulge the hope that we will ere long be enabled to announce a clean bill of health. The weather continues delightful, is verging to what it should be during winter, and the remark has become nearly as current as a password, that Dumfries will soon be itself again."

And so, happily, it was, before many more weeks elapsed. For some time one or two fatal cases per day were reported; and on the 30th of October it was announced, for the first time during the visitation, that not a single death had occurred. The fell destroyer still tarried in the town and suburbs, as if loath to leave a locality where he had acquired such a hecatomb of victims; but about the middle of November, after a two months' reign of terror, the fiat of an interposing Providence stayed his terrible hand, and, like the overmastered fiend in Bunyan's dream, he "spread forth his dragon's wings, and sped him away." "Few can figure to themselves the pleasure we at length feel," says the Courier of the 13th of November, "in announcing that the doors of the cholera hospital have been closed, and that its only occasional inmate is a supernumerary nurse, whose instructions are to keep the pest-house ventilated and free from damp-a precaution which has been adopted in other quarters. During the past week-that is, from Monday the 5th till Monday the 12th current-the new cases were reduced to five, and the deaths to two; the recoveries within the same period were seven; and yesterday the patients under treatment were so low as five-most, if not all, of whom are expected to recover."

The entire number of persons attacked by cholera in Dumfries, as officially reported, was 837; of whom 380 were males, and 457 were females. The deaths reported were 421: 187 males, and 234

females. It was ascertained, however, from the number of coffins made, and the sexton's accounts, that the real deaths exceeded the reputed ones; [Pamphlet on Cholera Morbus. D. Halliday, Dumfries.] and the probability is, we think, that the mortality was not less than 550. Of the fatal cases, 68 occurred in the cholera hospital. Maxwelltown, population considered, suffered about as severely as the sister Burgh; the cases there having been 237, and the deaths 127. A large proportion of those who died in Dumfries were buried in a plot of St. Michael's churchyard set apart for the purpose. Here gangs of gravediggers were busy for weeks together piling the coffined dead tier above tier, and before the pit was finally covered over, it had received at least 350 bodies within its dark embrace. The Cholera Mound, as this vast charnel-house is popularly called, lies along the west side of the burial ground; and a neat cenotaph tells the fate of those who sleep below, and of their fellow-sufferers, in the following words:

In this Cemetery,
and chiefly within this enclosure,
lie the mortal remains
of more than 420 inhabitants of Dumfries,
who were suddenly swept away
by the memorable invasion of
Asiatic cholera,
A.D. MDCCCXXXII.
That terrific Pestilence
entered the town on 15th September,
and remained till 27th November;
during which period it seized
at least 900 individuals,
of whom 44 died in one day,
and no more than 415 were reported
as recovered.
That the benefit of this
solemn warning
might not be lost to posterity,
this Monument
was erected, from collections made in
several churches in this town.

Ps. xc.-Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest,
Return, ye children of men. Thou carriest them away
as with a flood.
Mat. xxv. 13.-Watch therefore; for ye know neither
the day nor the hour.