

An account of the epidemic catarrhal fever, commonly called the influenza, as it appeared at Bath, in the months of May and June, 1782 / by W. Falconer, M. D. F. R. S.

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An Account of the Influenza
at Bath in 1782

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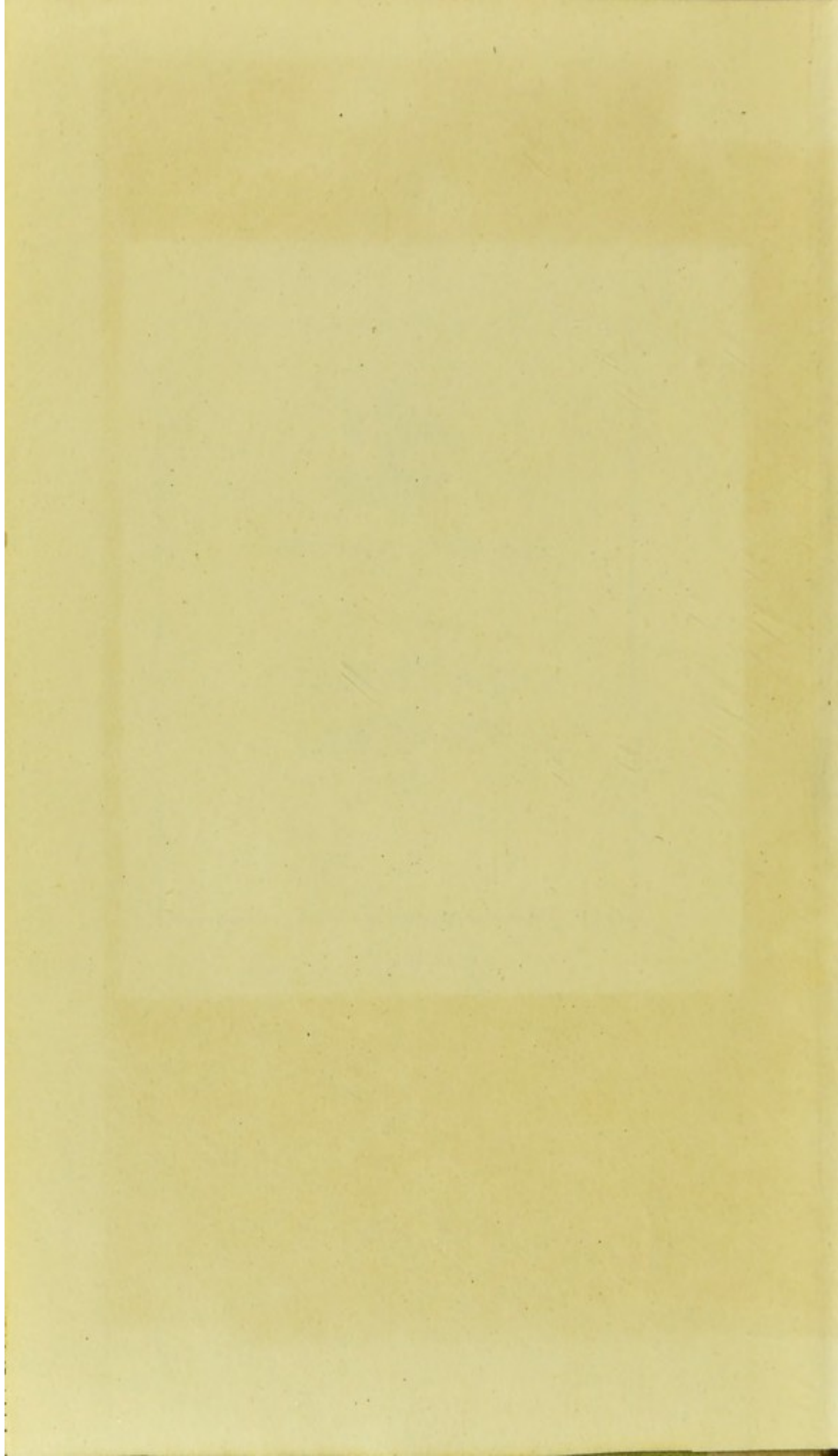
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EPIDEMIC CATARRHAL FEVER,

COMMONLY CALLED

THE INFLUENZA,

AS IT APPEARED AT BATH,

IN THE MONTHS OF

M A Y A N D J U N E, 1782.

By W. FALCONER, M. D. F. R. S.

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ON THE
EPIDEMIC CATARRHAL FEVER,
COMMONLY CALLED
THE INFLUENZA.

THE epidemic catarrhal Fever that has prevailed so lately in London, and spread over most parts of the kingdom, under the name of the *Influenza*, generally begins with a slight shivering, which is succeeded by heat and alternate returns of short duration of a cold and hot fit, which often continue in this alternate repetition several hours. This is attended with a sense of stuffing in the head and nose, and a discharge of a clear acrid saline fluid from the nose, and often from the eyes; also attended with frequent and troublesome sneezing. As the disorder proceeds, the head becomes pained, and frequently vertiginous,

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and the seat of the pain is generally in the fore part of the head, especially between the eyes. The defluxion is often so acrid, as to excoriate the inside of the nose and throat, which is affected with a sense of foreness, that extends from the mouth to the stomach, but is seldom so great as to create much, if any, difficulty in swallowing. The pain of the nose, from the acrimony of the defluxion, is in many people very troublesome; in most giving the sensation of a burning heat, and in some, that of extreme cold, as if ice or snow were applied to the part.

No external foreness, or swelling of the glands took place; nor any internal ulceration of the fauces, in any cases that fell under my observation. The pulse is in general very quick, even to 140 or 150 in a minute, especially in robust constitutions; and where the fever ran so high, some degree of delirium generally prevailed during the night, but mostly abated towards morning, and did not appear in the day time. The heat upon the skin is various in degree

gree in different persons, and by no means apparently proportioned to the other symptoms of fever, being in some very great, but in others scarce exceeding what was natural.

The tongue is in most people, who have the complaint rather severely, covered with a white crust, resembling cream recently poured over it, but nevertheless moist. The thirst is moderate, nor is any ill taste in the mouth a usual symptom. The eyes sometimes rather inflamed, and blood-shot, especially in the lower part of the orbit, and which was most distinguishable when the lower eye-lid was turned down; this was attended with some but no great pain in the part affected.

The body in general regular in point of stools; the urine mostly plentiful, with a reddish white sediment, sometimes pretty considerable,

A cough in general attends this complaint from the beginning, which is in some instances slight, in others very teasing

and troublesome, but scarcely ever attended with pain in the side, or considerable interruption of breathing.

A sickness at the stomach was an attendant symptom with some, but not generally present. Those whose stomach and digestion had been before weakened by disease or irregularity of life, were most subject hereto; and in these the retchings to vomit were sometimes very violent and alarming.

A greater loss of strength seemed to attend this Fever than is usual in complaints of apparently equal violence, and length of duration; but this temporary debility is soon repaired on the cessation of the symptoms of the original complaint.

Such was, I believe, the general appearance of this epidemical disorder; but it was subject to considerable variation in different people.

In some, the cough and catarrh were the first symptoms; in others, the shivering and
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heat ; in some, the rigor was very strong ; in others, scarce perceivable ; nor did the subsequent disease correspond in mildness or severity to the slowness or violence of the first symptoms of its approach.

In several, the vertigo, cough, and catarrh, came on very suddenly ; in others their access was very gradual ; as it went off, a tendency to sweating was observable, I believe, in all, which seemed very favourable, and tended to remove the disease : In some a red eruption came on, perhaps caused by the sweating, towards the decline of the complaint, especially about the joints and palms of the hands ; but this soon went off, without any bad symptoms.

In some the appetite was but little impaired, in others it was quite destroyed.

It was peculiarly observable of this complaint, that they who were recovering from it were extremely liable to relapses, from any imprudent exposure to cold ; in which case, all the symptoms recurred much in the same

same manner as at first, and sometimes with additional violence.

This disorder attacked all persons indiscriminately, from the highest rank to the lowest; valetudinary persons seemed equally liable to it with people in robust health, but not more so; all ages were affected, from children in the cradle to extreme old age, and the male and female sexes equally. It seldom proved fatal, except to some very old persons, who died as it were suffocated with the catarrh; and unless some very rash or obviously improper methods had been pursued; such as sudden exposure to cold, violent evacuations, &c.

The nature of this complaint is undoubtedly inflammatory, attended with a determination to the mucous membrane lining the nose and fauces, which is indeed the proper seat of the complaint; and to the irritation of which, most of the more troublesome symptoms are owing. The sore throat, and sense of excoriation through the whole of the gullet down to the stomach,
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are probably caused by the acrimony of this secreted fluid, which distilling upon the parts irritates them by its caustic saline nature.

The same cause produces the head-ach, and from the proximity of the brain to the parts affected, the tendency to vertigo and delirium.

The present epidemic appears to bear a great resemblance to the fore throat which prevailed so generally about four years ago through the midland counties; and was so accurately described by Dr. Withering, of Birmingham, under the name of *Scarlatina anginosa*. The feat of both appeared to be the same, tho' the extent of the Influenza was more contracted than the other, being the pituitary or Schneiderian membrane. The symptoms likewise are very similar: Lassitude and dejection of spirits, alternate heats and chills, head-ach, raw soreness of the throat, furred tongue, and great heat of the skin, are common to both of the disorders, in their usual course. The redness of
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the skin, which is so general an attendant on the scarlatina anginosa, is not indeed an usual symptom of the present Influenza; but it has nevertheless sometimes appeared, and something of this kind is mentioned as an attendant upon the complaint by other writers.*

The discharge of purulent matter from the ears, so common in the scarlatina anginosa, has been also remarked as a symptom of this disorder. § But though both these disorders are nearly of the same nature, as being both of them inflammatory, and also catarrhus affections of the pituitary or mucous membrane; yet the difference of the parts affected, and perhaps some specific difference in the nature of the complaint, too obscure for us to describe with accuracy, causes a great variation in the symptoms.

* Cullen's Practice of Physic, Sect. 1899.

Huxham de aere & morb. Epidemic, 1733. Mens. Februar.

Hoffman, vol. ii. p. 47.

§ Huxh. ut supra. I myself saw a remarkable instance of this symptom occurring in the influenza.

It is somewhat remarkable, although the mucous membrane of the nose and fauces be the seat of both complaints, that the cough and catarrh should be inconsiderable in the scarlet fever and sore throat, and the most distinguishing symptom in the other. It is suggested by Dr. Withering, (p. 60, 70,) that the contagion of the scarlet fever is a poison of the sedative and debilitating kind. Perhaps the contagion, by which the epidemic catarrh is propagated, may be more of a stimulant and inflammatory nature, and that the less degree of danger in the latter may be owing to some difference of this kind in the nature of the infection.

It has been doubted by some, if the epidemic catarrh be a contagious disorder, or propagated from one person to another in the course of infection, or whether it be owing to any general cause, (as a particular disposition in the air) affecting several persons at once, which is the proper meaning of the word epidemical. But I believe there is the greatest reason to believe it to be infectious,

fectious, or communicated by contagious effluvia, though it may have been originally generated by some disposition in the air or temperature.

It has seldom appeared without spreading through most parts of the world, and has been more rapidly, as well as more universally diffeminated, than any other complaint with which we are acquainted. But still, there has always been a perceivable interval in its progress from one country to another, and it has never appeared at once in all parts, as we might have expected, had it been produced in each individual by any generally operating cause.

The reason of its rapid progress may be, I think, attributed to the nature of the disease, and the manner of its being received.

It is probably taken in by respiration, and as its nature is to affect the mucous membrane of the nose and mouth, to which it is first applied, its effects are there first shewn; and moreover, the contagion having
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but a short distance to pass, before it meets with the parts adapted for it to operate upon, it is less likely to be altered in its nature, as might happen, were its influence exerted upon the stomach, which might be protected from its effects by the substances it contained.

This may probably be the cause why the catarrh, and obstruction of the natural discharge from the head, are the first symptoms in most people; and also, why the attacks are in many people so sudden and almost instantaneous.

The immediate cause of this complaint I have before mentioned to be an inflammatory affection, owing to a contagious stimulus affecting the pituitary, or schneiderian membrane, all which it presently pervades, passing from thence down the gullet to the stomach, and producing there the sense of soreness and rawness related in the above account of the progress of the disorder; and down the windpipe to the lungs, producing almost an incessant tickling and trouble-

troublesome cough: From thence it is often extended to the brain itself, causing there a degree of inflammatory irritation; the consequence of which is vertigo and delirium. The more general or remote cause is, however, I apprehend, to be traced to the constitution of the air, or to the qualities of the atmosphere.

We are told by Sydenham, that in 1675,* the weather that had continued unusually warm until towards the end of October, then suddenly changing to damp and cold, caused a complaint, similar to that which prevails at present in this country, to make its appearance.

The same disorder recurred in November 1679,§ after a long course of moist weather in the autumnal season.

In the years 1729, 1730,‡ a similar course of weather was succeeded by this disorder.

* Sect. v. cap. 5.

§ Epistol. resp. Roberto Brady.

‡ Hoffman, vol. ii. p. 109.

Morgague de Sed. & Caus. Morb. xiii. 4.

In 1733, Huxham tells us, that previous to the coming on of the influeuza, the weather had been very wet and cold; and a similar course of weather was observed previous to its appearance in the years 1737, and 1743.*

The late season, it is well known, resembled very strongly those above described, previous to the coming on of the influenza.

The months of December, January, and February, were remarkably mild, scarce any frosts intervening; but at the beginning of March, a smart frost set in, which continued about fourteen days, which was succeeded by cold stormy weather, attended with snow, which fell very deep in the beginning of April: The remainder of that month was very wet, raw, and inclement for the season. About the middle of May, at which time the weather was little altered for the better, the epidemic catarrh first made its

* Huxham de Aere & Morbis Epidemicis, part. i. 1733, Mens. Februar. 1737, Mens. Novembr. part. ii. 1743, Mens. Aprilis.

appearance here, though it had before been seen in London, and prior to that in Germany and the Low Countries. The month of May, and part of June having been very stormy and cold, the influenza continued through the former month, and until the middle of June, when more favourable weather coming on, the symptoms have rather abated.

It is difficult to assign any probable reason, why such seasons, as have been above described, should produce such a disorder as that here under consideration; but it has been always observed, that cold and moist weather succeeding to warm was subject to bring on catarrhus disorders.*

The stoppage of perspiration, which is remarkably obstructed by such weather, is the cause generally assigned,§ and is probably the true one, and what would account

* Hippocr. Aph. iii. Sect. aph. 12.

Van Swieten's Comm. vol. 4. p. 317.

Huxh. de Aere, &c. part i. pag. 138.

§ Sanctör. Aphor. sect. i. aph. 67.

for the appearance of the complaint as an epidemical disease, but by no means explains how it becomes contagious: As however it is by such circumstances rendered more violent, it is possible, that like other febrile complaints, it may acquire a contagious malignancy as its force is increased.

From the accounts I have seen of this disorder at former periods, I am inclined to think, that its late appearance was in a milder form than it has been generally seen, though it was diffused equally wide.

Sydenham mentions that which appeared in 1675, as attended with considerable danger, and accompanied with pleuritic symptoms.

Huxham describes that in 1733, as generally attended with vertigo and delirium, and in many, with abscesses in the ears, and imposthumes of the throat; which I believe seldom made their appearance during the late epidemic.

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That in 1737 was much worse than that in 1733; but then, that in 1743 seemed to come pretty nearly to the standard of the present one.

That which happened in the year 1762, seems to have been more severe than either of the two following, viz. That which took place in the year 1775, or the late one.

With respect to the method of cure, it is highly probable, that as the cause of the disorder originated from obstructed perspiration, the restoration of it must be the primary object: Nor has this been found less consonant to experience than to theory. Perspiration appears to be the method pointed out by nature herself to relieve the disorder, as there is always a propensity to sweat on the abatement of the complaint:* Hence those means that tend to produce this discharge, in a mild easy manner, are here of the greatest service;

* Huxham de Aere, &c. 1733, Mens. Feb. 1737, Mens. Nov. 1743, Mensis Aprilis.

such as, lying in bed, moderate artificial warmth, as by fires, bed-cloaths, &c. and above all, the frequent sipping of thin diluting liquors moderately warm, on which the cure principally depended. I did not find that there was much cause for any remarkable preference to be given to any of these, provided they were not heating in themselves, by containing spirituous liquors, or other stimulating ingredients; warm lemonade, infusions of herbs, and even water gruel, seemed all to answer equally well.

But tho' spirituous liquors were improper to be mixed with the drink at the beginning of the complaint, yet a moderate mixture of wine, as the symptoms began to abate, was not only necessary to support the strength, but seemed also to render the liquor more diaphoretic. With the same intention, antimonial medicines, as Tartar Emetic, James's Powder, and the Antimonial Wine, were made trial of, and answered the purpose very well, and best if given in

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very small doses, which seemed to act only in promoting the perspiratory discharge.

Emetics were likewise administered, and, when given near the accession of the disorder, seemed in some instances, one of which fell under my own observation, to throw off the complaint altogether; but in other instances, although they seemed to produce great immediate benefit, yet in a few hours the symptoms returned as violently as before, and were only to be relieved by the usual remedy, which is perspiration.

It is however, I think, highly probable, that if at any future time this disorder should appear in a more threatening form, emetics would prove very efficacious remedies in relieving the head, by promoting an equable circulation, abating the catarrh, and promoting perspiration.

Bleeding was likewise tried, I believe pretty frequently; but from what I could collect from my own observations, or those of others, not with the good effects that
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from the degree of heat and quickness of pulse might have been expected. If the symptoms were very urgent, one bleeding seemed to give some relief, but repeated often, it apparently did harm, by weakening the patient and interrupting the perspiration.

Indeed, it was generally found, notwithstanding the apparent vehemence of the symptoms, that if nature was suffered to proceed without interruption from evacuator remedies, and only supplied with thin diluent liquors, and mild diaphoretics; that the symptoms which at first appeared so threatening, would subside of themselves on the breaking out of the sweat, and, by its continuance in a mild way for some time, be entirely removed.

Purging when carried beyond the mere relief of costiveness, seemed to me of still less use than bleeding: It appeared to interrupt the perspiratory discharge, to aggravate the cough, and to increase the fever. The greatest heat and acceleration of pulse, I

had an opportunity of observing in any person, was in one who had been bled the same morning, and taken a moderate dose only of purging physic. The pulse in this instance was 156 in a minute, yet this by sweating, by means of warm diluent liquors, was reduced in 12 hours to 88, and in 24 to 76, in the same space of time.

The state of debility, which always succeeds the paroxysm of fever, seemed to come on so rapidly in this disorder, that sudden evacuant remedies in general were found too weakening, as coinciding too much with the nature of the complaint in its latter stage.

Blisters were also, I believe, frequently tried, and where the pain in the head was considerable, sometimes as I found with good effect; but I could not perceive that they were of any service in abating either the catarrh or the cough; and in several instances, the soreness and irritation they occasion, aggravated the irritability of the system,

system, which, from the acrid stimulus of the catarrh, was already but too great.

I had conceived hopes, that the inhalation of the steam of warm liquors, by its immediate application to the membranes of the throat and nose, which are in reality the seat of the disease, might have been of great service; but I found myself disappointed in this expectation. I tried it at first with one part vinegar to three of water, but found this to excite a cough and irritation. I afterwards tried warm water alone, but did not find that either the catarrh or cough were relieved by it, and the latter rather seemed to be aggravated.

Opiates however, moderately administered, were of the greatest service in abating some of the most troublesome symptoms of the disorder, particularly the cough and catarrh, and abating that restlessness which during the prevalence of the fever was particularly disagreeable and uneasy. They were also of the greatest service in promoting

ting a gentle expectoration, by thickening the mucus of the glands of the nose and fauces, and encouraging at the same time a gentle perspiration.

The mode of treatment above recommended is such as has been advised formerly by the most eminent writers on this complaint.

Sydenham* indeed, discourages the use of sudorifics, but it is plain he meant the stimulating opiates; such as the Mithridate and Venice Treacle, which in his time, went under that description; and not the mild diluent sudorifics, which were here found to be serviceable, and which he himself recommends.

Hoffman§ mentions the perspiratory discharge as preferable to all the others, and advises the use of infusions of mild plants, as of liquorice root, elder flowers, fennel, and poppy seeds, for that purpose.

* Sect. v. cap. 5.

Epist. resp. ad Dr. Brady.

§ Sect. i. cap. 6.

The Edinburgh Medical Essays also remark, that those afflicted with this disease soon did well, if the sweat was not discouraged by any other evacuation.*

Huxham also, whose opinion from the very accurate account he has given of this complaint, is particularly to be regarded; speaks of sweats procured by means of mild diluting warm liquors,§ as especially necessary to the cure of this disorder; and without which, it scarcely ever terminated happily. In his account of the same complaint, at a posterior period,† he remarks the good effects of a mild warm equable sweat, which he says was the most favourable of any evacuation whatsoever. At a period still later,|| he recommends thin diluting liquors to be taken largely, in order to promote “this
“ most useful of any of the evacuations.”

* Edinb. Med. Ess. vol. ii. art. 2.

§ 1733, Mens. Feb. de Aere, &c.

† 1737, Mens. Decemb.

|| 1743, Mens. April.

Mild diluent drinks warmed, are also advised by Dr. Cullen,* in this disorder for the promoting of perspiration; which, when not very violent, he relies on as the principal remedy.

Emetics are recommended by Huxham,† in cases where the stomach is oppressed by nausea, or where vomiting spontaneously comes on; but otherwise, he does not seem to recommend it; and in the account of this complaint in the years 1737 and 1743, he is totally silent upon that head.

With respect to bleeding, Sydenham, tho' he allows the propriety of it to abate the pleuritic symptoms which accompanied the Influenza in his time; yet still remarks that no more blood ought to be taken than will suffice for the purpose above-mentioned, and condemns copious and repeated evacuations of this kind.§

* Practice of Physic, Sect. 1001.

† De Aere, 1733, Mens. Feb.

§ Sect. v. cap. v.

Huxham also, though he approves of moderate bleeding, remarks, that this disorder will not bear the repetition of it,† as is proper in the true pleurisy and peripneumony; as such evacuation tended to obstruct perspiration, and to increase the acrimony of the catarrhal discharge.

Sydenham recommends gentle purgatives, but seems rather diffident concerning their use, and cautions against their being long continued.†

But Hoffman is against their being exhibited even in the beginning of the disease.||

And Huxham§ seems to go no farther than to keep the body gently open; and observes, that violent purgatives are productive of the worst symptoms.

† Huxh. de Aere, 1737, Mens. Dec. 1743, Mens. April.

† Sect. v. cap. 5.

|| Sect. i. cap. 6.

§ Huxh. de Aere, ut supra.

Blifters were used in this complaint by Sydenham and Huxham; but I imagine, that it appeared at that time in a more inflammatory form than lately.

Opiates were found by Huxham of the greatest service in this disorder, in allaying the cough, catarrh, and other troublesome symptoms. He used the liquid preparations, as the Tincture Thebaica, the Elixir Paregoric, and the Syrup e Meconio, much in the same manner as they have been, I believe, lately tried.

No preventatives, as far as I could find, were of any efficacy in preventing this disorder. The Acetum Prophylacticum, commonly called Thieves Vinegar, Camphorated Spirits, Aromatic distilled Waters, and Tobacco, were all I know tried with this intent, but without any effect whatsoever.

F I N I S.

