

AN INSTANCE
OF
DEATH from ONANISM.

BY DR. WILLIAM TULLY,
Corresponding Member of the Society.

Read the 26th of July, 1817.

E. B. aged sixteen, of active habits, of bodily size rather less than medium, and as it respects strength of constitution less vigorous than most youths of his age, complained the 3d of October, 1812, of indisposition.

For some weeks previous to this, his friends had observed, that his countenance was becoming pale and unhealthy; that universal emaciation was stealing upon him, and that he constantly manifested unusual peevishness. His appetite during this period, was not observably augmented or impaired, except for liquids. This thirst, for some time, had been uniform and considerable.

As the changes, however, in the state of his health, had been from day to day hardly appreciable, and as he made no complaints of illness, little attention had been paid to these circumstances. About the 20th of September, an occasion

presented, and he was observed to manifest an extraordinary relish and craving for new cider. From thenceforth, he sought every opportunity of indulging this appetite, almost without limit; and made use of stratagems to obtain the gratification of his desires, to which he had previously been a stranger. His desire for food, from this period, diminished; and though tolerably active in his customary employments, yet a rapid diminution of strength was observed. About the 1st of October, an unusual secretion of urine, and an almost incessant disposition to empty the bladder, was perceived. On the 3d, as mentioned above, he first complained of indisposition, and on the morning of the 4th, first had medical advice.

At this time, the symptoms of his case were as follow: viz. Extreme emaciation, but not so much diminution of strength, as to prevent walking about; complexion very pale; expression of the eyes, and whole countenance haggard and wild, though no mental derangement could be perceived; no appetite for food; great thirst; skin dry and cool; tongue dry, and covered with a reddish brown crust; pulse about 130 beats in a minute very small, and receding under slight pressure; indescribable, dull, distressing sensations about the precordia, and in the back; shortness of breath, frequent micturition, and copious discharges of urine, which was limpid and colourless. The preceding night had been passed in a very sleepless and restless manner.

At this time, it was ascertained, that he had been in the habitual nocturnal practice of onanism for about six months, frequently repeating it five or six times in a night.

On being questioned, whether he had not been sensible of the pernicious effect of this baneful practice, it was found, that for some time previous, he had experienced unpleasant and distressing sensations, as an immediate consequence of every orgasm ; but so much was he under the dominion of this deadly habit, as to be unable to resist its influence, notwithstanding his conviction of its fatal consequences.

In short, it was judged, that his whole malady was the ultimate result of this practice.

Its primary effects, seemed to have been derangement of the digestive organs ; and the secondary ones, the symptoms above detailed.

Draughts of impure diluted acetic acid, and the alkali soda, in an effervescing state, were prescribed, with a view of obtaining the exhilarating effects of disengaged carbonic acid in the stomach.

Wine and camphorated tincture of opium, were likewise directed, together with bark of officinal cinchona, and nutritious broths. As an external application, frictions with vinegar of Spanish flies, were made use of.

At 4 o'clock, P. M. he was again visited. He was still walking about the house ; pulse 140, and weaker, with evident and considerable diminution of muscular strength ; incipient delirium, and gen-

eral aggravation of the morning symptoms. At this time, the solution of acetate of ammonia was substituted for that of soda; the camphorated tincture of opium continued; and the wine, and powder of bark increased.

At 7, he was found upon the bed; symptoms still farther aggravated; great restlessness and distress; in a state approaching to coma; involuntary and copious discharge of urine; frequent, and incoherent exclamations of terror and agony; voice hollow; respiration short, and laborious.

To the abovementioned treatment, was added warm alkaline bath, wrapping in flannel, and the internal use of nitric acid.

At about ten, he became completely comatose, and at about two, next morning, expired.

REMARKS.

The ill effects of the practice, which apparently gave rise to the preceding case, have been questioned by John Hunter, in his Treatise on the Venereal; but with due deference to his exalted reputation, I must say, that his argument of its universality, and the little apparent evidence against it, in my opinion, apply equally well to intemperance in the use of distilled spirits.

That popular treatises upon it, tend rather to increase than diminish the evil, I readily admit; but as a physician, I am firmly convinced, that many a vigorous constitution, which though it does not sink under it, yet receives such a shock by

it, as is frequently followed by premature old age, and a host of infirmities. Proofs upon a subject of this nature cannot be had, but the highest degree of probability is attainable, from an occasional case, like the one now detailed. Ought not such considerations then, to influence parents to keep their children in situations unfavourable to the acquisition of such habits, or the practice of them, when unfortunately contracted? This is perhaps all that can be done, and I am sensible, that in many cases, such precautions, can be of little avail.

In the mean time, perhaps, some pathological improvement may be made from the subject. It has been the commonly received opinion, that the part of the system first affected by Onanism, is the brain, and its production through the spina dorsi; but I have long been convinced, that the stomach is first peculiarly deranged, and these other parts in consequence. In this case, paleness, emaciation, and an unusual appetite for liquids, were the first observable symptoms. Speedily, however, further depravity of appetite, is manifest, and this of such a nature, as to be followed with a certain degree of diabetes. Still such symptoms continue, as we should expect would result from an affection of the stomach. Extreme emaciation, tongue covered with a reddish brown crust and dry, anorexia, thirst, &c. without derangement, fever, or such diminution of strength, as to prevent walking about—all mark a

primary affection of the stomach. But the brain and nerves, as we should expect, are soon drawn into consent, and distress about the precordia, and in the back and head, with incipient delirium, soon supervenes, and the patient at last expires in a comatose state.

In the instance now in question, it was desirable to make trial of phosphorus, as recommended by European practitioners ; but in the retirement of a country place, none could be obtained. Tincture of Spanish flies, exhibited internally, might have been of service ; but just at that time, none was at hand. It is not at all likely, that either this article or the other, would have saved the patient ; but a circumstance of this kind will not justify any relaxation in our exertions. It is highly desirable, that the efficacy of phosphorus, in the cure of diseases should be further tested, and the results made public ; and in case its value should be equal to what we have been led to expect, that it should be in the hands of physicians more generally, about the country.