

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE CHOLERA AT ST. PETERSBURG

ON Sunday the 26th of June, 1831, the cholera was first observed at St. Petersburg. Two English physicians, who had been sent to Russia by the English government to obtain information concerning the actual nature of the malady prevailing in Russia, namely Dr. Russell and Dr. Barry, arrived at St. Petersburg three days afterwards. Dr. Russell had been in India, and knew the symptoms of the Asiatic cholera, which, after a careful examination of the Russian disease, he declared the latter exactly to resemble. Dr. Barry was at Gibraltar during the prevalence of the yellow fever about two years since, and is a physician of much knowledge and experience; so that much advantage has been derived from the testimony and descriptions given by two such able witnesses.

Immediately after their arrival, they were allowed opportunities by Sir James Wylie, an English physician at the head of the medical department of the Russian army, to see eight cases in the military hospitals; of these, one ended fatally in seven hours, and another in sixteen hours after admission. They saw, in fact, every case that had yet occurred in St.

Petersburg, except the first, that patient having died early in the day of their arrival. Dr. Barry reports that when Dr. Russell saw these cases, he exclaimed, after the first glance, "this is the genuine disease;" and pointed out to them some remarkable features of it;—the cold tongue, like a piece of dead flesh; the tone of the voice, resembling the efforts of persons who had lost their voices; and the dim and sunken eye.

Dr. Barry, who had never seen the Indian cholera, but was very familiar with the diseases of almost every other climate, was much struck with the violent character of the malady, exhibited as it was in the young and strong men who were attacked, and who were grenadiers of the Emperor's guards. He could not help observing the leaden look and purple colour of the face, of the hands, and of the feet; the shrunken features, and the shrivelled fingers and toes. He remarked, too, the short, hurried, anxious respiration; the corpse-like appearance of the whole body, and the rending spasms of the limbs and belly. He describes the increasing restlessness of the miserable sufferers; their moaning, like the low whine of a dog poisoned with arsenic; their fruitless efforts to vomit, "resembling a deep, short, convulsive bark, in which air alone seemed to be violently expelled from the stomach:" and he notices the colourless and watery character of the evacuations which have already been mentioned in the description of the cholera of the East Indies and of Moscow.

The further experience of Drs. Russell and

Barry fully confirmed their first decision respecting the nature of the disease. Within six days after their arrival at St. Petersburg, they witnessed fifty-seven cases, out of upwards of two hundred and sixty which had then occurred. Finding that the malady was spreading rapidly, they determined to remain on the spot, instead of proceeding to Riga, which was their first intention. At that time, about the 5th of July, there was a solemn fast observed at St. Petersburg, and the streets were filled with processions and crowds of people; the churches also were filled all day long. These solemn fasts are commonly followed by much indulgence and intemperance, such as might with reason be expected to make the malady more violent.

On the 6th of July, between eighty and one hundred cases had taken place among the soldiers, and about four hundred among the rest of the population; and up to that time almost all the patients had been of the poorest classes: those amongst the classes enabled to live better were chiefly weak persons, or persons given to intemperance.

A temporary hospital was fitted up for the patients affected with cholera. On the first morning visit which Drs. Russell and Barry made to this hospital, there were only three patients: when they went to the hospital again in the evening of the same day there were no fewer than thirty-two; and all of the cases were very severe.

If the cholera should visit the city of London, it is to be hoped that the people will not show themselves to be so utterly without understand-

ing as some of the common people of St. Petersburg. They believed that the medical men of foreign countries, and all strangers, were employed by the enemies of Russia to poison the people! In consequence of this most absurd notion, Drs. Russell and Barry could not get permission to attend to any of the poor soldiers who were sick of cholera. They wished to learn what could be done by the best care and attention they could give; for so many people were sick at the same time that it was very difficult to obtain medical attendance for all of them. Every day such numbers of sick were brought to the hospitals that the medical men were employed from morning to night. Yet when Drs. Russell and Barry were desirous of giving help to those who wanted it, it was absolutely refused, because the people thought they meant to poison them!

The Emperor of Russia, seeing these things, exerted himself in a most praiseworthy manner to remove the ignorance which was the cause of them. He spoke to the people in the street, and explained to them that instead of looking with suspicion upon the medical men, they ought to be grateful to them, as to men who were risking their own lives to relieve the sufferings of the sick. Before this, the people had been so ferocious as to ill-treat several of the physicians, and one physician, a German, had been *killed* by the mob. But when the people became better informed, they began to beg for the assistance of those against whom they had been so violent before. They might, one would think, have got

rid of their foolish belief before, for fifteen hospital physicians were attacked with cholera in the first three weeks, and of these six had lost their lives. Up to that time (July 15), 5367 persons had been attacked with cholera at St. Petersburg, of whom more than 2500 had died.

In the description given of the cholera at St. Petersburg, there is so great a resemblance to that of the Indian cholera, and the cholera at Moscow, that it is unnecessary to repeat the particulars. The evacuations, both by vomiting and purging, were less profuse than in India, and recovery from the cold *blue* stage was more frequent; but there were the same spasms, thirst, restlessness, agony referred to the stomach and chest, and difficult breathing. When such a state had lasted even *four* hours, very few recovered. When any pulse could be felt at the wrist, however small, even like a small thread, there was some hope.

This cold or blue stage, after lasting for some hours, perhaps twelve or twenty-four, gave way to a stage of the disease in which the heat of the body returned, and the patient had all the symptoms of a fever,—just as we have seen was the case in India; and the fever was often as dangerous as the first attack of cholera had been. In Russia more people died in this second stage than in India.

Recoveries, as in India, were often rapid; and relapses, or returns of the disease, were not common, except in those employed about the hospitals.

The cholera had been expected at St. Peters-

burg, and preparations had been made against it, long before it arrived: but the experience of this and of several other cities has shown that the most careful preparation is seldom sufficient to secure any large place wholly from its visits, although much may be done to abolish causes which would make its severity greater and its visits longer. The precautions and restrictions adopted on the river Volga were, as usually happens, not strictly attended to; but temporary hospitals and receiving-houses were prepared, inspectors were appointed in every quarter of the city, and orders given that every case at all resembling the cholera should be immediately made known to the public authorities by the medical man who should happen to be called in.

Two cases of this kind occurred at length, and nearly at the same time. Both were in the same part of the city, on its eastern side, where the boats coming down the river from places already infected were stationed. One of the patients was a merchant, the other a painter and an habitual drunkard. They were both brought to the same receiving-house, and both declared to have the cholera. The merchant recovered; but the painter died. The third patient was an invalid soldier, employed as a watchman in the same neighbourhood; and he also died. The fourth case was that of a billiard-marker, who had a few days before arrived from Yaroslav, where the cholera was known to be prevailing when he came away.

These cases were observed about the end of June, when, after mild and agreeable weather,

the heat was considerable, with easterly winds. Although they could not all be distinctly traced to contagion, their appearance in one quarter of the town, and that quarter the nearest to the parts of the country where cholera was known to prevail, excited a natural suspicion of their arising from such a cause. But, as happens in all cases in which attempts are made to trace every case of a communicable disease to actual communication, facts which at first sight appear to be of a most opposite and contradictory nature were met with on every side.

In the *City Prison* of St. Petersburg the strictest regulations were enforced to prevent the admission of persons without a medical examination; rooms were set apart for cholera cases, if any should occur, and nurses and attendants appointed to wait upon them. A woman being ill, *not* of cholera, or anything resembling it, had been sent out for her health, even some weeks before the cholera had appeared in the city. She returned to the prison after the cholera *had* appeared in the city, and at the time of her return was suffering from diarrhœa. As she passed into the prison, she stopped and embraced her husband for a moment, who was also a prisoner. In a few hours afterwards, this woman was seized with cholera, and she died the same night. The next cases of cholera in the prison were those of three women in the same room with her: all the three died within three days after the first woman. After these women the next prisoner attacked was the husband of the first woman, who was confined in a dif-

ferent part of the prison. After him, others in the same room with *him* were attacked; and thus the disease went on, until twenty-seven persons were attacked, of whom fifteen died; and of all these twenty-seven there was only one to whom the communication of the disease from one of the rest could not be traced.

If instances of this kind stood alone, the question of contagion would soon be satisfactorily settled; but numerous instances are mentioned of persons having the cholera who had not had any communication with those previously affected; and in instances as numerous, persons have been fully exposed to communication with cholera patients without taking the disease. It must be repeated, that precisely the same kind of evidence may be collected concerning our common fevers; and for the same reason. Some take the disease from the air, some from communication with those already affected; but in both cases the persons who take the disease must be in some way prepared for the seeds of the malady, or what is called in medical language *predisposed* to receive it.

All the examples, both for and against contagion, seem to have been most diligently and fairly inquired into by Doctors Russell and Barry, and the conclusion they came to was, that from the progress of the cholera in the north of Europe; from its first appearance in the towns and villages of Russia having generally, if not always, taken place after the arrival of persons from infected places; and from the manner in which it broke out at St. Petersburg;

there was no other way of accounting for its so doing than by supposing that it had been brought by persons in the boats coming down the river from places on the river Volga, where the cholera already existed.

Several things rendered the people of St. Petersburg liable or predisposed to take the disease: such as the coarse and sour food of the common people; the long religious fasts, followed by excess in eating and drinking; the thick sheep-skin clothing of the peasants, worn even in summer; and the very heated apartments of all ranks, in which every cranny and crevice that might admit fresh air is carefully closed.

St. Petersburg is built partly upon islands at the mouth of the river Neva, and partly on the two sides of that river. Its situation is low, and although the city abounds in wide and handsome streets, they are generally damp.

The soil in the neighbourhood is poor and unproductive. Parts of the city are intersected by canals, some of which are muddy and offensive. During the prevalence of winds from the west or south-west, the waters of the Neva do not so readily flow into the Gulf of Finland as to prevent a great portion of the city from being inundated. The foundations of the newest buildings have been raised to avoid this inconvenience; but so lately as seven years since, in the month of November 1824, a dreadful occurrence of this kind took place. The whole city was inundated. As the waters gained upon the streets, the carriages hurried through them, with the water above the wheels, to the higher

spots of ground; and persons on foot were up to the middle in it; and soon, only a solitary horseman was seen now and then, who could with difficulty keep his horse's head above water. In a few days all the streets were full of water, and furniture of different kinds, bread and other provisions, empty boats, sentry-boxes, and timber, were seen floating upon it; and even wooden houses, the occupiers of which had been drowned in the flood. Coffins were washed out of the newly made graves, and dead bodies floated down the stream. The least eminence, the columns and pillars, and the trees, were crowded with persons who were only saved by boats. The wooden barracks in which a regiment of dragoons was quartered were swept away; and the poor soldiers, who had climbed upon the roof for safety, all lost their lives together. A lady was in a carriage with one of her children, and the carriage got into deep water: a cossack who was riding his horse through the stream saw her dangerous situation, and stopped close to the carriage: the lady begged him to save her child at all hazards; and the poor fellow, willing to do so, took it from the carriage window. In a few minutes his horse slipped and fell, and both the cossack and the child perished: the grief of the unhappy mother was but short, for in a few minutes afterwards her carriage, her horses, her servants, and herself, were all swept away by the resistless flood.

It was ascertained that not fewer than eight thousand persons lost their lives in this inundation; but its after consequences on the comfort

and health of the poorest of the inhabitants were hardly less deplorable. Many had lost all their little property; all the provisions in the city were damaged; and as the frost had set in very severely there was little hope of receiving any supply by sea. Famine, and all the evils which famine brings, were felt by the poor inhabitants, a great number of whom were left without even a hut to lie down in.

It was the desire of Peter the Great, who founded the city of St. Petersburg, and of whom an account is given in the 'Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties,' vol. ii. p. 22, that his new city should in every respect rival the finest cities of Europe; but its low situation, and the great severity of its climate, were obstacles which he either overlooked or could not overcome. Those who have attended to the weather there say that on an average of ten years there are not quite one hundred bright days in a year, that at least one hundred are rainy, and about seventy snowy, and ninety more unsettled and changeable. They have also frequent and violent storms. In their winter season they have most severe frost, but the air is dry and bracing, and the houses are kept extremely warm. The frost begins in October, and ends in April. When the frost quite disappears, the changes of the season of spring are brought about very rapidly, and the fields look green, and the trees put out their leaves even in a few days. Their summer is mild, but short, and variable; and the autumn, which in our English climate is so bright

and clear, and invigorating a season, is very gloomy and rainy at St. Petersburg; so rainy, indeed, that many of the streets become almost impassable.

The population of St. Petersburg is about 300,000. There are few or no manufactures carried on, but the majority of persons are occupied in business connected with the great trade of the country; from which other nations receive iron, hemp, flax, tallow, sail-cloth, cordage, hog's bristles, furs, tar, and other commodities. The poorer classes of the Russian peasants are warmly but coarsely clad in sheep-skin dresses: the dress of the poorer people of towns is rather more various; they wear a linen waistcoat, but no shirt; their feet and legs are wrapped in linen, and they wear boots, but no stockings: over all is worn a long coat, made full and thick about the chest and the waist; in winter they put on warm gloves, and a sheep-skin pelisse is worn instead of the coat. The women are less clothed, but do not stir out much; and neither the women nor the men pay sufficient attention to personal cleanliness; although the upper classes frequently use the bath. All classes, however, are fond of a hot vapour-bath, the stimulating effect of which upon the skin is such that they expose themselves freely to cold air, or even roll in the snow, after coming out of the bath, without inconvenience.

As regards the food of the Russians, that of the classes who can afford it does not differ greatly from that of the other northern coun-



tries of Europe. St. Petersburg is supplied with meat from various parts of the empire ; with veal from Archangel, eight hundred miles distant ; with mutton from Astrachan ; with beef from the province called the Ukraine ; and with pheasants from Hungary and Bohemia. The poor soil of the neighbourhood of the city makes it necessary for the citizens to receive provisions from a distance. In the winter season all the meat, poultry, and other eatables, are brought to market in a frozen state. There is a great market held for three days on the frozen Neva, in December, after the great fast, at which provisions are laid in by the whole city for three months. Many thousand raw carcasses of oxen, sheep, and pigs, with geese, poultry, &c., are exposed for sale ; and the larger animals are fixed upright in the snow. The poorer people live much upon a black and coarse bread made of rye or of barley ; and they are greatly addicted to the use of ardent spirits.

Neither in the town, nor in the habits of the people, do we find any cause in *itself* sufficient to account for the origin of the cholera. It appeared, as it has done in other places in its journey from the East, without any known cause. But, however introduced, whether upon the wings of the wind, or by the poor boatmen and traders on the Volga, it found a population prepared by many circumstances to receive it.

After remaining in the city about a month, the disorder began rapidly to decline ; and at length few new cases were observed. A recollection that this is about the period of its remaining in any one place may serve to prevent

hopeless dejection in the inhabitants of any town in which it appears : but it should on no account be forgotten, that in many cases the cholera has returned again and again to the hot and crowded cities of the East, and always with nearly the same malignity—a consideration which makes every precaution against it doubly necessary.