

#101. "An account of a Contagious Disorder, Called the Venom, Which has Prevailed Lately Among the Horned Cattle in Friesland. Communicated in a letter to Samuel Foart Simmons, MD."

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SECTION II.

ESSAYS AND OBSERVATIONS.

- I. *An Account of a contagious disorder, called the Venom, which has prevailed lately amongst the horned cattle in Friesland. Communicated in a letter to Samuel Foart Simmons, M. D., F. R. S. By Petrus Camper, M. D. F. R. S., honorary professor of physic, anatomy, and surgery at Amsterdam, fellow of the Royal College of physicians and Royal Society of Edinburgh, of the Imperial Academy of Petersburgh, and of the Royal Medical Society at Paris, &c.*

A GREAT number of black cattle of all ages have died suddenly in Friesland in the neighbourhood of Sneek and Ylst, without any previous

previous symptom but that of giving no milk a few hours before their death, as they continued to eat, drink and ruminate to the last. In general, however, the beasts affected with this disorder lived several days, and had very large tumours in the cellular membrane, about the head and neck, in the axilla, and sometimes, though rarely, in the groin. These tumours, which were often as large as a man's head, were very hard and elastic, with a dry horny skin at the part which was most prominent. In some, this swelling entirely disappeared, while in others the dry piece of skin separated and left a large ulcer, which healed slowly. Some were soon relieved; others required many days, and even weeks, before they were entirely cured, and many, as I have already observed, died suddenly, or after a relapse. The dung was in the greater number natural, but in some it was of a blackish colour, or at least darker than usual.

The city of Sneek is about twelve English miles from my seat, and I passed several days there in examining the disorder, and dissecting the cattle that died of it. This latter part of my inquiry, however, was not to be carried on without danger of being poisoned by the blood, flesh, and skin, &c. of the animal.

The disease has gotten the name of *venom*, or *venenum*, from this circumstance, that the people who handle the hide or the flesh, are often poisoned, as it were, in the hands, especially when they have any scratch or wound there to favour absorption, and sometimes without any such previous hurt. In a few hours an inflammation takes place, and, if not speedily prevented by scarifications and suitable remedies, terminates in a gangrene which sometimes spreads to the arm, and in some few instances has occasioned the death of the patient. It is worthy of observation however, that after the flesh of animals, who have died of this disease, has been boiled, the poor eat it without any bad consequence, but they carefully avoid the steam of the meat.

On the 6th of September last I opened a cow that had died the night before at Ylst, which is not far from Sneek. In my way I visited an old man whose hands were so much affected by the venom, that I was almost deterred from attempting the intended dissection. I used the precaution, however, of greasing my hands with pomatum, and by frequently washing them and renewing the ointment, I prevented the poisonous juices from acting, so that altho'

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I separated the viscera, &c. with my hands, I got not the least hurt.

The eyes, tongue, and throat of the cow were sound. The udders were without milk, but in other respects healthy, and there was nowhere any appearance of tumour. But on opening the abdomen we found the omentum entirely mortified, with a yellowish ichor within its cavity, and between the intestines were observed thick purulent coagulated membranes, similar to those appearances which are found in the human body, where death has been occasioned by an inflammation of the bowels.

Neither of the stomachs were affected, but the Duodenum, Jejunum, and Ileum were inflamed and mortified, as likewise the colon in some places. The gall bladder, which was uncommonly distended, being larger than even the urinary bladder of a cow usually is, was filled with air, and with a very thin bile. The uterus was a little inflamed with gangrenous spots. The calf had been dead some time, but the cow continued to give her ordinary portion of milk till the day before she died. The liver seemed to be pretty sound, but its lymphatics were visible and much enlarged. The spleen was in
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a gangrenous state, and there was emphysema between the duplicature of the peritoneum, where it forms the mesentery.

The lungs were in a natural state, but the glandulæ cordis and the thymus were much inflamed. The heart itself was in a good condition.

I examined several other beasts that were affected with the same disorder, which was evidently of the putrid kind. The pulse was quick and low, as it is in all putrid fevers, and I had reason to suspect that those died very suddenly, whose blood was much affected by the putrid matter, and on the contrary, that others soon recovered whose blood had a better disposition. The tumours were neither a good nor a bad sign, for many died and as many recovered with and without any such swelling. The peasants told me, that an old mare died of the venom, but upon opening her abdomen and thorax after death, I found nothing analagous to the disorder I have been describing.

The disease abated much towards the latter end of September, and the contagion is now totally over. I could find no account of this disease in books, till I consulted the famous

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Dr. Pallas's *Northern Magazine** (Vol. I. B. I. § 4, p. 113) in which Dr. Jos. James Lerche has given a description of a contagious disorder that made great havoc, after a hot dry summer in 1756, amongst the horned cattle in Livonia and Finland, and which spread even as far as Moscow. He informs us, that the cows were attacked with large tumours in the neck, breast, belly, and pudenda, and commonly died in two or three days. He adds, that horses and hogs were likewise susceptible of the contagion which generally carried them off in a day or two, and that it also proved fatal to a number of the human species; but upon inquiry he found that the latter died of a mortification of the hands, &c. occasioned by an absorption of the venom. A similar plague was observed in those countries in the year 1764.

I flatter myself the description I have given of this disease, though short, will be sufficient to give you an idea of its nature, and to enable you and your medical friends to compare it with the symptoms of the disorder which was observed lately in England: for I have reason to

* Nordische Beytrage.

believe that the latter was of the same species, and of course different from that described by Dr. Layard and others, which, by the bye, still prevails in this country. It may not be improper to add, that calves borne by cows that have passed through the latter distemper are inoculated * here with great success.

I am now growing old, but I have not lost my public spirit and zeal for useful improvements, so that I shall be very much obliged to you for any information you can furnish me with relative to the disorder I have mentioned to you. I am with the greatest respect and sincerity,

Dear Doctor,

Yours, &c.

Klein Lancum,
Oct. 21, 1783.

* See our 3d Volume, page 356.