CHAP. II.

GENERAL VIEW OF THE OPERATIONS OF MEDICINES, AND OF THEIR CLASSIFICATION FOUNDED ON THESE OPERATIONS.

THE advantages of an arrangement of the articles of the Materia Medica, founded on their medicinal operations, I have stated under the preceding observations; and in endeavouring to exhibit this branch of medicine, strictly as a science, it is that undoubtedly which ought to be followed. The difficulty of constructing such an arrangement, has at the same time always been experienced. No subject is involved in greater obscurity, than what relates to the action of substances on the living system. Their effects are not always easily appreciated with accuracy, especially in a state of disease, and our knowledge of the laws of their action is extremely imperfect. When we attempt, therefore, to class them according to these actions, we can scarcely form an arrangement strictly just and systematic, but are forced to admit of some deviations, and to be guided not unfrequently by imperfect analogies.

The difficulty of constructing a classification of medicines from their operations, will be apparent from the

failure even of Cullen, when he attempted the execution of this task; for there can now be little hesitation in affirming, that the one he has given rests on principles nearly altogether false. The following table represents this classification:

MEDICAMENTA AGUNT IN

- Solida.
  - Simplicia.
    - *Astringentia.*
    - *Tonica.*
    - *Emollientia.*
    - *Erodentia.*
  - Viva.
    - *Stimulantia.*
    - *Sedantia.*
      - *Narcotica.*
      - *Refrigerantia.*
    - *Antispasmodica.*
- Fluida.
  - Immutantia.
    - Fluiditatem.
      - *Attenuantia.*
      - *Inspissantia.*
    - Misturam.
      - Acrimoniam corrigentia.
        - In genere.
          - *Demulcentia.*
        - In specie.
          - *Antacida.*
          - *Antalkalina.*
          - *Antiseptica.*
  - Evacuantia.
    - *Errhina.*
    - *Sialogoga.*
    - *Expectorantia.*
    - *Emetica.*
    - *Cathartica.*
    - *Diuretica.*
    - *Diaphoretica.*
    - *Menagoga.*

Now, without examining it minutely, it may be remarked, that the basis of this classification, the assumption that some medicines act exclusively on the solids, others on the fluids of the body, is incorrect; for, with the exception of two or three classes, the action of the whole is on the living solids. Thus, emetics, cathartics, diuretics, diaphoretics, emmenagogues, expectorants, sialogogues and errhines produce their effects, unquestionably by no operation on the fluids which they evacuate, but by exciting a particular organ to action. The distinction is equally nugatory in the greater number of cases between the action of medicines on the simple solids and on the living solids. It cannot be doubted, but that tonics produce their effects in removing debility, not as the hypothesis of Cullen assumes, by any action on the inanimate fibre of the body, giving it density or tone, but by their operation on the vital powers of the system. Nor can the effects of astringents be ascribed entirely to their corrugating quality.

In this arrangement too, are placed classes of medicines which have probably no real existence, the action ascribed to them being merely hypothetical. We may be allowed to question the existence of attenuants and inspissants,—medicines which render the fluids of the body more thin, or which produce the opposite effect. Nor is there any reason to believe in the reality of antiseptics. The process of putrefaction probably never takes place in the living body; and if it did, we know of

no medicines by which it could be retarded or counteracted.

In the system of Brown, which succeeded that of Cullen, more just views were given of the relations of external agents to the living system, and of the laws regulating their action. The operations of medicines, however, are even in this system imperfectly explained, principally, perhaps, from its author having surveyed all the parts of his subject with those views of generalization which nearly preclude all minute distinctions. Medicines he supposed to operate merely as other external agents, by exciting to action either the general system, or the particular organs on which they operate; and to differ from each other in little more than in the degree in which they exert this stimulating power. They have, farther than this, no specific properties, but are adapted to the removal of morbid affections, merely by producing excitement, partial or general, with certain degrees of rapidity or force.

This proposition is far from being just, at least in an unlimited sense. Medicines, and even external agents, in general unquestionably differ, not only in degree, but in kind of action. Every substance applied to the organs of sense, gives a different sensation, not referrible to the mere force of the impression, but which must be attributed to some essential varieties in the modes of action of the agents themselves. Every organ is excited to its usual or healthy action only by its appropriate stimulant. It is the same with regard to medicines, or diffe-

rences in the kind of action they exert are not less conspicuous. Opium and mercury both excite the actions of the system, and so farther agree in their general operation. But the ultimate effects they produce are extremely dissimilar, nor from either of them can we, by any variation of dose, or mode of administration, obtain those which usually result from the action of the other. All the important articles nearly of the Materia Medica, might be brought forward as similar examples, and as proving, that they are not to be regarded simply as stimulants varying in strength, but that their action is modified by peculiar powers they exert.

Still the principles of this system approach to the truth, and appear most conformable to the laws which regulate the animal economy, and, with some modifications, they may perhaps be applied so as to afford a more satisfactory view of the operations of medicines, and foundations for arranging them under different classes.

If we attend to the general operation of medicines, we find, that it is that of exciting to action, either the general system or particular organs. This is the primary effect; and to express the agency of the substance producing it, the term of stimulant operation may be employed. And, according to the kind and degree of this stimulant operation, different effects will be produced, the discrimination of which may afford several important distinctions.

Thus, of those stimulants which act on the general system, the operation is extremely different with regard to diffusibility and permanence. Some are highly diffu-

sible in their action, or, soon after they have been received into the stomach, they produce increased vigour, which is immediately conspicuous in the force of the circulation, the nervous system, or the different functions of the body; while, with regard to others, the same general effect is produced more slowly, and is scarcely perceptible but from their repeated or continued administration. Those which are diffusible are at the same time generally transient in their operation; while those which produce excitement more slowly, are generally more permanent. And by both diversities of action, it is obvious their operation must be productive of very different effects: the high excitement produced by the one is generally immediately followed by proportional languor; the gradual excitement from the other, being reduced more slowly, they occasion no such sudden changes, but are fitted to produce more lasting effects. These varieties of action serve, accordingly, to explain the differences in the power of some of our most important medicines, and they afford the distinction of two principal classes, Narcotics and Tonics; the one, so far as their action is understood, being apparently stimulants, diffusible and transient, the others slow and permanent.

Another important difference among stimulants, is derived from the action of some being general with regard to the system, while that of others is more peculiarly directed to particular organs. The effect with regard to either is not easily explained; but the fact is certain, that some substances, as soon as they are received into the

stomach, not only produce on it a stimulant effect, but extend this to the general system; while there are others which, without any very evident action on the stomach, and still less without any general action, excite particular organs: some, for example, stimulating the intestinal canal, others exciting the action of the secreting vessels of the kidneys, and others operating on the exhalant vessels of the skin. These, which are given as examples, afford the distinctions of cathartics, diuretics, and diaphoretics, and there are other classes founded on similar local operations. With this local action, many substances exert, at the same time, more or less of a general operation, by which the individuals of a class become capable of producing peculiar effects, and many of them, by peculiarity of administration, act specifically on more than one part of the system, by which their effects are still more diversified.

When medicines are thus determined to particular parts, they are either directly conveyed, by being received into the blood, or their action is communicated indirectly from the stomach, by the medium of the nervous system; and in both ways important local effects are often produced.

Thus, there are many substances which appear to be capable of being so far assimilated with the food, as to enter into the composition of the chyle, and are received into the circulating mass. Being brought, in the course of the circulation, to particular organs, they often excite in them peculiar actions. Mercury affords an ex-

ample of this. It enters the circulation, and, when accumulated to a sufficient extent, generally acts on the salivary glands. It is on secreting organs that these local effects are usually produced, and frequently the substance is separated with the secreted fluid, so as to be brought to act on the secreting vessels in a concentrated state. Such is the case with the alkaline salts, or with nitre, which are secreted by the vessels of the kidneys, stimulate them at the same time to action, and are capable of being detected in the secreted fluid by chemical tests.

But the most general mode in which the operation of medicines taken into the stomach is extended, either to the system in general, or to any particular part, is by the medium of nervous communication. An impression is made on the fibres of the stomach by the substance received into it, and however difficult it may be to conceive the mode in which this can be communicated by the nerves to distant parts, the fact is undoubted, and established by the plainest evidence. It is evident from the effects of these substances being produced in a shorter time after they have been received into the stomach, than they could be were they to act by being absorbed with the chyle into the circulating mass. The stimulus of wine or of opium received into the stomach will instantly remove lassitude, and increase the vigour of the circulation, or of muscular exertion. Digitalis given to sufficient extent will very speedily reduce, to a great degree, the frequency of the pulse; or a large dose of cinchona, given half an hour before the expected recurrence

of the paroxysm of an intermittent, will prevent its attack. It has also been proved by experiment, that this communication of action from the stomach to other parts, in a number of cases, does not take place where the brain and spinal marrow have been destroyed, though the heart and vascular system have been preserved uninjured.

From this susceptibility of impression, and of communicating action to other parts, the stomach becomes an organ of the first importance, since, independent of its being the vehicle by which substances are conveyed into the blood, it is that by means of which medicines are brought to act on the system by the medium of the nerves. It sometimes happens, however, that a similar extension of action may take place from other parts; and hence effects may be obtained from medicines, by applying them to the surface of the body, similar to those which they produce when they have been received into the stomach. Sometimes the effect is conveyed by nervous communication, and sometimes the substance applied is absorbed by the lymphatics, and enters the blood. Examples of the first are to be found in many narcotics. Opium, applied to the skin, either in the solid form, or in that of tincture, often relieves pain, and removes spasmodic affections, either general or local. Tobacco applied to the region of the stomach excites vomiting; and garlic applied to the feet acts as a powerful stimulant, and raises the strength of the pulse. Examples of the second mode of operation are still more frequent. Friction on the surface is a common method of introduc-

ing mercury into the system. By the same means oxide of arsenic, tartrate of antimony, and various other active substances, may be introduced; a solution of them in water being rubbed on the palms of the hand; and in certain circumstances this is preferable to their administration by the stomach.

These are examples of the various relations which medicines bear to the living system. We are unquestionably altogether unable to assign a cause for these peculiar properties, to ascertain why the action of some should be extended to the system in general, or why that of others should be determined to particular parts, either where substances enter the blood, or where they act by the medium of the nerves. But from the possession of such properties, it is evident, that their powers as medicines must be more diversified than if they were merely general stimulants, varying in the degree of their stimulating power; and farther, that distinctions are thus afforded for establishing a variety of classes.

Another cause remains to be pointed out, by which the actions of medicines are diversified. Besides acting as stimulants, they often occasion changes, either mechanical or chemical, in the state of the fluids, or of the simple solids, and these changes are productive of medicinal effects.

This operation of medicines was formerly supposed to be much more extensive than it really is. Theorists, uninformed of the laws of animal life, were not sufficiently aware of the important fact, that the actions of medicines

on the living body are governed by laws different from those which regulate the actions exerted between the masses or particles of inanimate matter. Hence we find in their speculations constant attempts to trace the causes of diseases to changes merely mechanical or chemical, to plethora or obstruction, to laxity or rigidity, to the abundance of acid or of alkali, or to the presence of other specific acrimonies still less defined. Their explanations of the operations of medicines were of course founded on these notions, and hence the distinctions of inspissants, attenuants, antacids, antalkalies, antiseptics, and several others with which their Materia Medica was loaded.

These errors are now nearly exploded. We have learned to consider the living system as endowed with peculiar properties and modes of action, incapable of being explained on mere mechanical or chemical principles; and to regard external powers acting upon it as producing changes conformable to these peculiar properties of life. Yet still we can sometimes refer a salutary change, effected in the system, or in particular organs, to changes mechanical or chemical in the solids or fluids. Thus, symptoms arising from irritation may be removed by lubricating the irritated surface: acid in the stomach may be corrected by the exhibition of alkalies or absorbent earths; and urinary concretions may be dissolved, or at least their increase may be prevented, by the use of alkaline remedies. These properties of certain medicines are not perhaps highly important; but still they demand

attention, and they afford sufficient distinctions for the formation of several classes.

In conformity to these views, the classification of the articles of the Materia Medica, founded on their medicinal operations, may be established. It is only necessary to observe, principally to obviate hasty criticism, that in classifications founded on this principle, perfect precision is not to be expected. The science of medicine is still in so imperfect a state, particularly in what regards the relations of external agents to the living system, that both in arranging the classes, and associating the substances which we place under each, we must frequently rest satisfied with remote analogies, which will not always bear a strict examination. This is an imperfection at present unavoidable; it must either be submitted to, or such modes of classification must be altogether rejected; and the question therefore ultimately is, not whether these arrangements are unobjectionable, but whether the advantages belonging to them are not such as to justify their adoption even with all their imperfections.

Under the first division of the arrangement I propose, may be placed those substances which exert a general stimulant operation on the system. Of these there are two subdivisions, the Diffusible and the Permanent; the former including the class of Narcotics, with which may be associated, as not very remote in their operation, the

class of Antispasmodics; the latter comprising two classes, Tonics and Astringents. Through these there is a gradual transition from the most highly diffusible stimulant to those most slow and durable in their action.

A second division comprehends Local Stimulants,—those the action of which is determined to particular parts of the system. Such are the classes of Emetics, Cathartics, Emmenagogues, Diuretics, Diaphoretics, Expectorants, and Sialogogues; with which may be associated the classes of Errhines, and of Epispastics, founded on direct local application.

The remaining classes include substances which do not operate according to laws peculiar to the living system. To one division may be referred, those, the effects of which depend on the chemical changes they produce in the fluids or solids: the classes which may be established on this principle are Refrigerants, Antacids, Lithontriptics, and Escharotics. To another division belong those, the operation of which is purely mechanical,—Anthelmintics, Demulcents, Diluents, and Emollients.

Under these classes may be comprehended all those substances which are capable of producing salutary changes in the human system, and which are used as remedies. A view of this classification is exhibited in the following table.

TABLE OF CLASSIFICATION.

A. General Stimulants.	a. Diffusible.	Narcotics.
		Antispasmodics.
	b. Permanent.	Tonics.
		Astringents.
B. Local Stimulants.		Emetics.
		Cathartics.
		Emmenagogues.
		Diuretics.
		Diaphoretics.
		Expectorants.
		Sialogogues.
		Errhines.
		Epispastics.
C. Chemical Remedies.		Refrigerants.
		Antacids.
		Lithontriptics.
		Escharotics.
D. Mechanical Remedies.		Anthelmintics.
		Demulcents.
		Diluents.
		Emollients.

From this arrangement, some classes are excluded that have usually found a place in others; but these have either appeared to me not essentially different from those that are admitted, or to have been founded on false or hypothetical distinctions.

There is no great advantage in extending the arrangement into systematic subdivisions of the classes. The substances under each may follow each other according to their natural affinities, their chemical relations, or analogies in medicinal power less important than those which form the basis of the class itself; and in the different classes one of these methods will frequently be found better adapted to any purpose of utility than the others. That which gives the most natural arrangement may therefore always be followed.