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ART. XXVI.—ON THE TIME REQUIRED TO PRODUCE DEATH BY A FATAL DOSE OF MEDICINAL HYDROCYANIC ACID.

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My attention has been attracted to this subject in consequence of a fatal case having occurred in my practice lately. A *resumé* of the history of some of the more remarkable instances of fatal, and nearly fatal cases on record, will be necessary to elucidate the interest attached to this point. In the case of the seven Paris epileptics (1228), where a very concentrated acid was used (the half-ounce potion contained 18½ grs. pure acid), some lingered as long as twelve minutes before life was entirely extinct; but the first who swallowed it was dead in three minutes. The first time that the life of a prisoner depended upon a solution of the question under consideration, occurred at the Lancaster Assizes, held in April, 1829, when Freeman, an apothecary's apprentice, was arraigned for the murder of Judith Burwell, his master's servant. She was pregnant by him, and was found one morning dead in her bed. An ounce phial containing three drachms of prussic acid, corked, and wrapt in paper, was found alongside of her. The body was in a composed position, the arms folded over the trunk, and the bedclothes drawn smoothly up to the chin. Had the deceased time to perform all these actions after drinking the poison out the narrow-necked phial? Messrs Macaulay, Paget, and others, in consequence of experiments performed on the lower animals, decided in the negative. Dr Christison, in the first edition of his work on Poisons, said that his experiments accorded with theirs; but, in the second, that it was probable that prussic acid frequently took a longer time to act than was generally supposed, and that the probability in this case was that it had done so, and that it had been taken voluntarily by the deceased, because the prisoner had to pass through the room in which his master and mistress slept, to gain access to the girl's room, and must have opened and shut three doors without noise. My opinion is, that she took it voluntarily to produce abortion, for which she had made preparations the night before, and that, if Freeman had anything to do with it, he provided her, for his own purposes, with the poison, telling her that it

would cause miscarriage. Mrs. Latten died in twelve minutes from taking a drachm and a half of medicinal acid. In Dr. Geoghegan's case, the patient took two drachms of prussic acid (Dub. Pharm.), and experienced no effect for *two minutes*. He subsequently fell into violent convulsions, and was saved by applying sesquicarbonate of ammonia to the nostrils. In the July number of the London Medical Gazette, is quoted Mr. Godfrey's case of "a man 44 years of age, who, after taking half an ounce of Scheele's acid, walked ten paces to the head of the stairs, descended the steps, seventeen in number, and then proceeded, rather quickly, to a druggist's shop, forty-five paces distant, where he had procured the acid, entering the shop in his usual slow and easy manner, and asking for 'more of that prussic acid,' before he became evidently affected by the poison which he had swallowed. In this instance, at least *five minutes* must have elapsed, from the time of swallowing the poison, before death took place." This case is quoted as introductory to the report of a coroner's inquest, which took place at Worcester on the body of Mr Benjamin Shepherd. The substance is as follows:—Mr S. went into Mr. Stringer's (druggist) shop, and purchased ʒij "prussic acid, Scheele's strength, and, asking if any one was in the back room, and, being answered in the negative, walked in there, saying to the druggist, "I want a word with you." Stringer followed him within *two minutes*, and found him sitting on the sofa, and the phial of prussic acid empty on the table before him. Stringer said, "Good God, Shepherd, you have not been taking that?" Deceased replied, smiling, "No, no, it is all right—take no notice—give me your hand old fellow." Witness went up to him and the deceased added, "God bless you—its all right—take no notice." Witness went for Mr. Griffith, surgeon, but, not finding him, returned with Mr. Pierpoint, who, with witness, tried to administer *ammonia as an antidote* to the prussic acid, and a futile attempt was made to produce vomiting. The stomach pump was sent for, but arrived after death had taken place. Before leaving this case, I must comment upon the means employed to save Mr. Shepherd. Mr. Pierpoint and Mr Stringer should have known that, by administering ammonia, they would have formed the hydrocyanate of ammonia, nearly, if not quite, as ener-