

THE DUELS OF PHYSICIANS



THE MODERN duel can be traced to the judicial combats (ordeals, *Gottesgerichte*) which were common in the middle ages in all Germanic countries, and though this institution gradually died out at the dawn of modern times, the duel survived in all European countries, especially among the nobility, army officers, soldiers and students, who were supposed to be subject to a special code of honor. The general custom of bearing arms at all times doubtless contributed to its perpetuation. Certain set rules were gradually adopted for fighting a duel. The challenged party was given the right to select the kind of arms to be used. A second attended each party to insure fair play and a physician was usually present to attend to the wounded. A peculiar custom in connection with the duels of former centuries is mentioned by John Bell in his "Principles of Surgery." He says on p. 28, "The cure of wounds by sucking was called the secret dressing; it was chiefly used in the army; the drummers of the regiment were the suckers; and the common soldiers submitted to this cure secretly, in order to conceal their quarrels from their officers and from the priests. The practice of duelling had proceeded to such lengths in France, that even the common soldiers settled their drunken quarrels with the sword. When a party went out to the wood, the drummer of the regiment, or some good experienced sucker, went along with them. The duel ended the moment that one of the combatants received a wound; the sucker immediately applied himself to suck the wound, and continued sucking and discharging the blood till the wound ceased to bleed, and then, the wound being clean, he applied a piece of chewed paper upon the mouth of it, tied up the limb with a tight bandage and the patient walked home."

Duels among physicians must not have been rare in those days. The medical profession was not organized as it is in our times. There were no medical societies to speak of. Each physician was a competitor of his fellow practitioners, stood upon a pedestal with his own pet medical theory, quarrels and personal enmities were quite common, and though these battles were usually fought out in pamphlets and medical journals, cases are on record, where the two opponents had recourse to arms to settle their differences. A remarkable combat of this kind took place in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1750, of which the title-page reproduced herewith is an historic memento.

In 1750 Dr. John Williams in Kingston, published a small pamphlet entitled: *An Essay on the Bilious or Yellow Fever of Jamaica*.^{*} The essay is now of little interest and only shows how in those days the medical profession was groping in the dark, but the little pamphlet gave rise to a controversy which ended in a tragedy rarely found in the annals of medicine.

Among the physicians of Kingston was at that time a Dr. Parker Bennet, a high spirited man, who had shortly before come from England and had settled in Jamaica. He must have aroused the enmity of Dr. Williams, for the latter spoke in the introduction to his essay of "a newcomer whose head is filled with theory and darling hypotheses." Dr. Bennet, a bold and fearless man, at once took up the cudgels and published "An Enquiry Into the Late Essays on the Bilious Fever" with the motto: *Risum teneatis amici!* In a stinging sarcastic style, he criticizes Dr. Williams's essay, yet always carefully observing the forms and the language of a gentleman. He defends the "newcomer, the man who has been at the university, who has attended the nasty lectures of Morgagni, Albinus or Monroe." As a reply to this critic Dr. Williams wrote a satirical epistle in verse addressed not to his enemy but to a friend. In it he ridiculed Dr. Bennet's Enquiry and even went so far as to attack his professional skill:

"Unhappy Norton fell beneath his skill:
The first essay he made, alas! to kill!"

Dr. Bennet parried this attack by publishing "A Prose Epistle to a Poetic Epistle Writer," and remembering the strategic principle that the best defense is an attack he threatens to make public divers shady actions and flagrant failures in the professional career of his opponent. Dr. Williams thereupon published his last letter taking for its motto the words of the psalmist: "The mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped." It was a violent personal attack and resulted in the final tragedy. Dr. Bennet challenged his enemy and the challenge was accepted. The following account of the duel has been transmitted to us:

The morning after Dr. Bennet went armed with his sword and

^{*}This essay, together with an account of the controversy and the duel, was republished in London in 1752. A copy of this London edition is in the Library of the Surgeon-General's Library at Washington.

a brace of pistols to Dr. Williams's door very early, and knocked him up; Williams saw from his window who it was, and what he had to expect; upon which he loaded his pistols with goose, or swan shot; and slinging his drawn sword by a ribband upon his wrist, came down, and opening the door, just sufficient to admit his hand with a pistol, poured a shot full into poor Bennet's breast, who had delivered his own arms to his boy, whilst he called Williams out; which when he had done, he continued to pursue Bennet, reeling to his boy, and wounded him with the other pistol in his knee. Bennet by this time had gained his sword only, which was fastened so strongly in the scabbard, that with all his endeavors he could not draw it. When Williams had fired his second pistol, Bennet turned upon him, thanked God he had power to be revenged, and whilst he endeavored to release his imprisoned weapon, begged of God to invigorate him a few moments; but Williams then gave him a mortal thrust under his right arm, which pierced the lungs on both sides; having done this he was turning to run for it, but that moment Bennet drew his sword, and made a pass at Williams, which entering under the right clavicle or collar bone, pierced the internal jugular vein, and finished its course in the shoulder blade, breaking off at the place of entrance; however, Williams run about ten or fifteen yards and then fell, suffocated with his blood, and never spake more. The unfortunate Bennet survived him about four hours, and then expired, in the most agonizing pains imaginable.

Another noteworthy duel was fought in Lexington, Ky., in the early part of the last century between Dr. Benjamin W. Dudley and Dr. W. H. Richardson. Dr. Dudley had studied medicine in Paris and London and was a leader in the medical profession in the West. He was the founder of the medical school of Transylvania University. Dr. Dudley had a most violent temper and when aroused could not control himself. One day Dr. Richardson, a scholarly gentleman, ventured to oppose his views to those of Dr. Dudley. The latter at once flew into a rage and threatened to shoot his opponent's d—d head off. A duel followed. Both combatants shot at once. Dr. Dudley was not hit, but the ball struck Dr. Richardson in the leg severing the femoral artery.

His adversary at once went to his rescue by ligating the artery. They shook hands and remained friends ever afterwards.*

In 1830 two Philadelphia physicians fought a duel, which was not less furious and with the same fatal results to both sides as the Jamaica duel. Dr. Pepper gives the following account of this duel: "First exchange at eight paces, no one hurt; second, Smith's right arm was broken; third, Jeffries was hit in the right thigh; fourth, at six feet, fatal to both, Smith immediately, and Jeffries a few hours later, remarking when he heard that his adversary had been killed, 'Then I die contented.' ***

In 1820 Dr. John Moorhead, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, came to this country and settled in Cincinnati. There he met Dr. Daniel Drake, Professor at the Medical College of Ohio. The two men became enemies from the start. A controversy carried on in a local paper with great violence, ended in personal insults. One day the two men met on the river front, and a sarcastic remark of Dr. Moorhead's made in an undertone, brought on a rough and tumble fight between them, in which the clumsy Dr. Moorhead came out second best. With blackened eyes

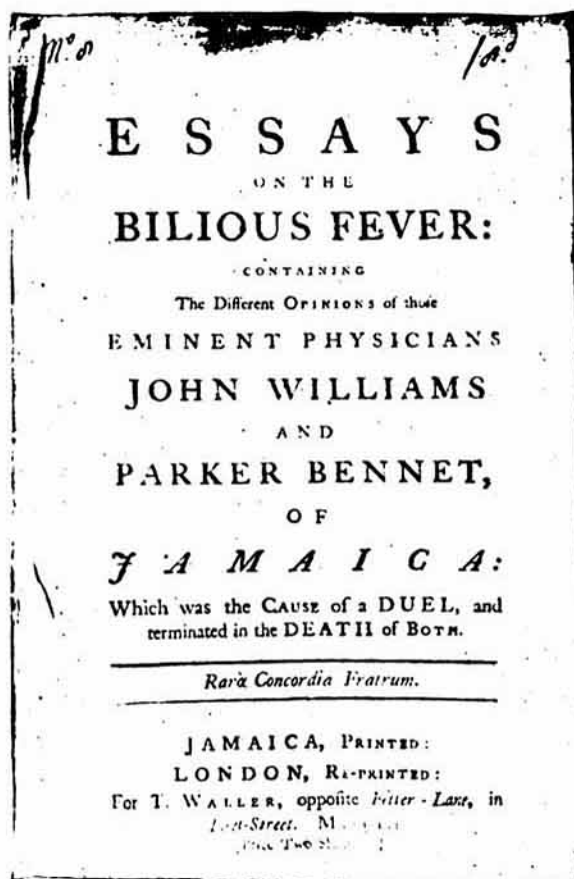
and a gashing scalp wound he was carried from the battlefield. Moorhead then challenged his antagonist to fight a duel with pistols, "like gentlemen," but Dr. Drake "did not see things that way" and politely declined the challenge.†

Another duel between physicians was fought near Paris, France, in 1898. Dr. Charcot, son of the fa-

*O. Juettner. *Johns Hopkins Hosp. Bull.*, Balt., 1915, XXVI, p. 107.

**O. Juettner, "Daniel Drake and His Followers." 80, *Cincinnati*, 1909, p. 61.

†W. Pepper. *Med. Libr. and Hist. Journ.*, Brooklyn, 1907, V, p. 283.



Old and Rare Book Plate.

«The Medical Pickwick»

mous neurologist, had an altercation with Dr. Lagelouze, that led to a duel, which, however, was a tame affair. It was a pistol duel. At the fifth round Dr. Charcot was wounded in the thumb of his right hand and the attending

physicians decided that the honor of both sides had been vindicated and made an end to the duel.*

**Chron. méd.*, Paris, 1898, p. 423.

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