A MEMOIR

OF

Dr. BENJAMIN W. DUDLEY:

BY

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The announcement of the death of Dr. B. W. Dudley, though from his great age and increasing infirmities an event not unexpected, will be read with feelings of sadness by every American physician; and educated surgeons in every country will feel, when they read it, that a great light of the profession has gone out. The oldest by many years of all the eminent medical men of the West and South, for a long time the unrivaled surgeon of the Mississippi Valley, one of the founders of the earliest of all our western schools of medicine, he was the last remaining link between the present generation of physicians and that which has passed away with him. If he leaves behind him any superior in the profession of our country, it is certain that no one of all our surgeons has occupied a larger space in the public eye. He achieved indeed a great reputation. He was equally distinguished as a surgeon and as a teacher of surgery. His life and character were in many respects remarkable, and furnish materials for a memoir of extraordinary interest. It would be a pleasure to write a history of his professional career; and one, no doubt, will be written in due time worthy of his fame and services. In the limited space that can be afforded by a journal like this, nothing more can be attempted than a brief notice of the more prominent events and labors of his life.

Dr. Benjamin Winslow Dudley was born of respectable and pious parents in Spottsylvania county, Virginia, on the 12th of April, 1785. His father, Mr. Ambrose Dudley, long known as a leading Baptist minister in Kentucky, and whose memory is still affectionately cherished in the churches where he labored, removed to the neighborhood of Lexington, into what was then called the county of Kentucky, when he was a year old. In that neighborhood his long life was passed. He grew up with the beautiful city which was his pride, and of which he was always a favorite son. The opportunities for acquiring an education in Kentucky when he was growing up were very limited, and it is not known that he enjoyed any which his own immediate neighborhood could not furnish. If he studied any language but his own at school, it must have been superficially, for he made no pretensions to any knowledge of either the Greek or Latin; and the perfect command of the French which he is known to have possessed he acquired later in life, and principally when he was abroad. He was probably not a student. His turn of mind was not literary. But his education was not neglected, and the training which he received was in studies which fitted him well for a life of action. No doubt in subsequent life he often felt painfully the want of those classical attainments which in the public mind are always associated with a professional education, and he was sometimes embarrassed in the society of scholars. But if he missed the grace of a thorough education, he was saved from the temptation to which scholars are exposed of wasting upon vain studies those powers which he devoted with so much success to matters of practice. He had not to regret at the end of his life, with the learned Grotius, that he had consumed it in levities and strenuous inanities.

Medicine being the profession to which his taste inclined him, he was placed by his father, when very young, under the tuition of Dr. Frederick Ridgely, an eminent physician at that time and for many years after in a large practice in

Lexington. In the office of this excellent instructor he was not only taught the elements of medicine, but had constant opportunities of becoming acquainted with disease at the bedside. Dr. Dudley always spoke with warmth and esteem of his scholarly and urbane preceptor, as a physician whose high culture of mind and elevated moral tone reflected dignity upon his profession.

In the fall of 1804 he went to Philadelphia to attend medical lectures. He met in the University of Pennsylvania, among the students of that winter, John Esten Cooke, Daniel Drake, and William H. Richardson—names destined afterward to be associated so often and so closely with his. The coincidence is interesting. Two of these students, like himself, were from the backwoods, and felt as he did the disadvantages of a deficient education. Richardson had been reared in his own immediate neighborhood, and had not made himself even an English scholar. Drake by great assiduity had already supplied many of the deficiences of his early tuition, but knew no language except his own mother-tongue. All became distinguished, and two of the three who were with him in that class rose to an eminence hardly exceeded by his own. At different times all subsequently were associated with him as colleagues, and two sustained to him, at a later period, the relation of strenuous competitors in rival medical schools. But whether working harmoniously together in the same institution, or striving to build up rival schools, all were engaged in shaping the profession of medicine in the frontier states, and will always hold a place among the most useful and honored of its pioneers.

In the interval between the lectures, from April to October, Dr. Dudley engaged in practice with Dr. Fishback, a distinguished physician of Lexington. At the close of his second course in the University of Pennsylvania he took the degree of M. D., near the end of March, 1806—just two weeks before he was twenty-one years old. Then returning to Lexington,

which had now become a town of note, and was indeed the literary and commercial emporium of the West, he became again a candidate for practice. But he seems not to have entered heartily into the business. He was not satisfied with his professional attainments. His ambition was fired by his associations in Philadelphia. He was resolved to qualify himself for the highest position in his profession. And this, he thought, could only be done by studying in the hospitals and under the great teachers of Europe. His energies were all directed to the accomplishment of this end; and with the view of acquiring the requisite means he added some commercial business to the practice of physic. On some adventure connected with trade he went to New Orleans in a flatboat about the year 1810. There he bought a cargo of flour, with which some time in that year he sailed to Gibraltar. Disposing of his cargo advantageously at that point and at Lisbon, he made his way through Spain to Paris.

He remained nearly four years in Europe, and the larger portion of that time was spent in the French capital. Its vast hospitals and dissecting-rooms afforded the facilities he was in quest of. His mind craved a knowledge of facts; and though the fame of the great surgeons of London and Paris had inflamed his ambition, it was things he had gone abroad to see and learn. Diseases in their varied phenomena and aspects, operations on the living subject, the minute structure of the human body—these were the objects of his study. Paris furnished them in amplest measure, and on the most liberal terms; and it was in Paris undoubtedly that he gained that perfect knowledge of anatomy and that familiarity with surgical operations which laid the foundation of his success as a surgeon. But though acquiring most of the knowledge which availed him in future years through the institutions of Paris, it was for the surgeons of London that he habitually expressed the highest admiration, Baron Larrey perhaps excepted. They certainly of all his teachers had the largest

share in shaping his opinions and molding his professional character. In manners he came home a Frenchman, but in medical doctrine and practice he was thoroughly English. It was impossible that he should not admire the great military surgeon of France, and be captivated by the recital of his wonderful experience. The memoirs of this extraordinary man furnished him indeed with numberless incidents with which he afterward added to the dramatic interest of his own surgical lectures. But it was Abernethy who impressed him as the leading surgeon of Europe. Sir Astley Cooper was his *beau ideal* of an operator, but Abernethy he always quoted as the highest authority on all points relating to surgery, as at once the observant student of nature, the profound thinker, and the sound medical philosopher.

The years embraced in Dr. Dudley's stay in Europe belong to one of the most eventful periods in the history of France—a period as favorable as could be for the study of that branch of his profession to which he was specially devoting himself. How wisely he improved those fine opportunities is best attested by the perfect mastery of his profession which he afterward exhibited in all the emergencies of practice.

It was while pursuing his studies in Paris that Napoleon set on foot his gigantic Russian campaign. Having made the acquaintance of Caulaincourt, the Emperor's trusted minister, he was admitted to the chamber of deputies on the occasion of Napoleon's appearing before that body at the close of his disastrous expedition. The writer has often heard him describe the scene as the most impressive that he had ever witnessed. The Emperor's address was brief—"The grand army of the empire is annihilated." These were the terrible words with which he commenced it.

In the summer of 1814 he returned to his old home at Lexington. He returned with high aspirations, and with a consciousness of superiority given by his advantages. There was now no longer any hesitation in his movements or

diversion of his mind from medicine by foreign pursuits. His profession had become the engrossing object of his thoughts, and from that time on until age made it necessary for him to relax his labors, he applied himself to it with undeviating fidelity. I am sure I have never known a physician who made himself more a slave to his profession. He had no holidays. He sought no recreation: no sports interested him. If his friends prevailed on him to quit the city on a trip of pleasure, he returned to his business rather wearied than refreshed by the excursion. His thoughts, he has been heard to say, were always on the cases he had left behind, and not on the objects or the amusements around him.

Such devotion had not long to wait for its reward. But, apart from this faithful application to business, there were other circumstances which rendered the time of his return peculiarly auspicious to his success. Great as were the western states at that day, and growing, as they were, daily greater, they were still without a surgeon of note, and without a medical school. Students of medicine had then to cross the mountains, or practice without a diploma, or the knowledge derived from attendance on lectures. Dr. Dudley soon gave assurance of his ability to meet both of these public wants. With his consummate knowledge of anatomy, and the skill he had attained in the use of the knife, he was not long acquiring a national reputation as a surgeon; and when, a short time after his return, the project of a school of medicine began to be agitated, public opinion pointed at once to him as its head. Added to these influences, which gave him early distinction, another circumstance favored his immediate introduction into practice. He found a disease presenting some strange features prevailing in the country when he reached home. Traces of the typhoid pneumonia which had just swept across the continent were to be seen everywhere in Kentucky. The fatal epidemic had given place to a bilious fever, characterized, like the plague, by a tendency to local affections. Abscesses

formed among the muscles of the body, legs, and arms, and were so intractable that limbs were sometimes amputated to get rid of the evil. Arriving in the midst of so alarming an epidemic, Dr. Dudley was not long without calls. His attention while abroad had been specially directed to the bandage as an agent, among other things, for controlling ulcers of the extremities. It at once occurred to him that this appliance was adapted to the treatment of the burrowing abscesses with which he was continually meeting. The efficiency of the bandage, now recognized by every surgeon, was at that time not fully understood. Dr. Dudley's success with it in these cases was striking, and from its novelty, as well as its efficacy, his practice drew upon him general attention.

In 1817, three years after his return to Lexington, the Board of Trustees of Transylvania University determined to create a medical department in that institution, then the leading college in the West. Dr. Dudley was made professor of anatomy and surgery, and two of his fellow-students of 1805 were associated with him — Dr. Drake in the chair of materia medica, and Dr. Richardson in that of obstetrics. Dr. James Overton was elected professor of theory and practice of medicine, and to Rev. James Blythe, D. D., was assigned the chair of chemistry. A small class of medical students encouraged the enterprise, and at the close of the session one of the number, W. L. Sutton, afterward a distinguished physician of Kentucky, was admitted to the doctorate. The beginning was regarded as favorable, but before the winter was over misunderstandings occurred among the members of the faculty, and the feuds resulted in its disruption. Drake went back to Cincinnati to inaugurate measures for establishing a medical school in that rising city, and Overton, disgusted with medical politics, removed to Nashville. Bitter animosities, some sharp pamphleteering, and a duel between Dr. Dudley and Dr. Richardson ensued, in which the latter received a

pistol-shot in the thigh. No attempt was made that year to carry on the department, but the year following a new faculty was organized, with Dr. Dudley in his former chair, and Dr. Richardson and Dr. Blythe again as two of his colleagues. To these were added Dr. Charles Caldwell and Dr. Samuel Brown, the former in the institutes of medicine, the latter in theory and practice, and both widely known to the profession.

It should be remarked, as a fact creditable to Dr. Dudley, that in the reconstruction of the faculty he made no objections to serving with a gentleman with whom a little while before he had had a hostile meeting; and that a few years later he united with his colleagues in an invitation to Dr. Drake to return to the school, though that gentleman in a public controversy with him had written much that it was not easy to forgive. The fact shows that he was both magnanimous and wise. He was able to rise superior to the prejudices which personal bickerings engender, and gave his voice for the men who had the greatest fitness for the places, regardless of their social relations to him.

Dr. Dudley had in the faculty as now constituted some colleagues who were worthy of him. Caldwell and Brown, gifted and learned, ripe in their powers, of the most imposing presence, and already known to fame, were just the men to coöperate with him in his enterprise. Caldwell especially had the qualities of mind and temper to render the infant school the most important services. To his varied learning and uncommon eloquence he added boldness and energy, and a devotion which never waned or wavered. All his time, all his gifts as a writer and a speaker were fully and enthusiastically devoted to the institution.

The Transylvania Medical School under this organization grew apace. In the number of its pupils it began in a few years to vie with the older schools on our Atlantic border. The ability of its faculty could not be questioned. Its alumni showed themselves to be equal in attainments and

professional skill to the graduates of the oldest institutions. It took rank in a little while with the schools of Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia; and the reputation of Dr. Dudley rose with it. His admiring pupils bore to every part of the country reports of his surgical skill and of his powers as a teacher. Unquestionably from the beginning he was in their estimation the foremost man in the faculty. Drake entered it in the fifth year of the school, when its success had become assured, and he brought to it a brilliant reputation. But Dudley's preëminence continued undisturbed. Students doubtless there were not a few who would have declared for other professors, who took more interest in other lectures than his; but the great body of the class he had always with him. To him they always hurried, however listlessly they may have repaired to other teachers; and whatever other rooms were deserted his amphitheater was always full.

Why, it is natural to ask, was this ascendency? What was the source of that superior influence which he so long exerted? It will not be claimed, I think, by his most ardent admirers that he was intellectually superior to all his colleagues. Nay; he was the readiest himself to admit, as I myself know, that in point of mental endowments several of his associates had the advantage of him. There were with him in the faculty at all times men who surpassed him in all the qualities that go to form the popular lecturer. Caldwell was far more brilliant and eloquent, besides being a profound scholar. Brown was superior to him in voice and person, in versatility of mind, and in depth and variety of learning. Drake exceeded him in elocution, in earnestness, in the extent of his attainments, and in grasp of mind. He laid no claims indeed to oratorical powers or to professional erudition. He was not a logician, he was not brilliant, and he had neither humor nor wit. And yet in ability to enchain the attention of students, to impress them with the value of his instruction and his greatness as a teacher, he bore off the

palm from all the gifted men who at various periods taught by his side. By common consent he stood as an instructor among the foremost of them *facile princeps*.

This was partly due undoubtedly to the department of medicine taught by him. There is, as all medical teachers well know, an inherent charm about surgery for medical students, a dramatic interest in the cases of the surgeon, an *eclat* about his operations which is found in no other branch of our art. Something is also to be set down to his holding two professorships. This had its effect upon the imagination of students. But all this is far from accounting for the superiority which he maintained so long in the midst of such competition. The true explanation of the fact is to be found, I think, in the perfect devotion of his life to one pursuit. Choosing this wisely with reference both to his own aptitudes and its dignity, he concentrated upon it all the powers of his mind and made himself a master in it. All other studies he neglected. To all pleasures that would draw him away from it he turned a deaf ear. Cool, quick, calm, decisive, with a sound judgment and a steady hand, he had all the attributes of a great surgeon, and he improved them by severe application. In point of skill he rose to an eminence which no one around him approached. Patients came to him from afar because it was believed that he did better what others could do than any one else, and that he did much which no one else in reach could do. Students looked up to him as an operator who had distanced competition, and a teacher who gave them not what was in the books, but what the writers of books had never understood. Like John Hunter, he rather prided himself on his independence of authorities, and this increased the admiration of his pupils. They listened to his words as those of a master who drew continually upon the stores of his own ample experience, and not upon the teachings of others. They were persuaded that there was much they must learn from his lips or learn not at all.

His manner as a lecturer was singularly imposing and impressive. It was magisterial, oracular, conveying the idea always that the mind of the speaker was troubled with no doubts. His deportment before his classes was such as further to enhance his standing. He was always in presence of his students not the model teacher only, but the dignified, urbane gentleman; conciliating regard by his gentleness, but repelling any approach to familiarity; and never, for the sake of raising a laugh or eliciting a little momentary applause, descending to coarseness in expression or thought. So that to his pupils he was always and everywhere great.

The medical school at Lexington, owing to the influence of his great name more than to any other cause, flourished for more than twenty years. But he was painfully aware that it was beset by difficulties which must ultimately cause its decline. He often alluded mournfully to these circumstances in conversations with his colleagues; and when the effort was made, in 1837, to transfer the school to Louisville, it was expected that he would favor the measure. But he decided otherwise. His attachment to Lexington, where he had been brought up and was surrounded by such troops of friends, overbore all considerations of policy, and he remained with the school on the spot where they had risen together. His last course of lectures was delivered in 1849.

In some respects Dr. Dudley, as a practitioner, was in advance of his age. He condemned blood-letting, and used to say that a man's life was shortened a year for every bleeding. On this point he was up with those of our day who are the most ultra. His use of the trephine in epilepsy and his treatment of fungus cerebri were original. The bandage in his hands assumed an importance not dreamed of in our country before his time. His views on many surgical subjects were peculiar, and he adopted novel methods in the cure of others which have been sanctioned by general experience. But at his practice in another and a large class of affections

the physician of modern times stands aghast. To "puke and purge, purge and puke," as he advised, day after day, for weeks and months together, in tubercular diseases, affections of the hip-joint, spine, etc., all the while restricting patients to a diet of skimmed milk and stale bread, or a few half pints of water-gruel, would be, as we regard it, to conspire with the disease against the life of the patient. And yet if Dr. Dudley was not a successful practitioner he was greatly deceived—and the public was sadly deceived with him. Unquestionably he had the reputation of success, and he was himself fully persuaded that he was making cures all his life, by his energetic practice, of diseases which are esteemed the most unmanageable.

Dr. Dudley's reputation as a surgeon rests chiefly upon his operations for stone in the bladder, in which he succeeded better than all other surgeons either of our own or of former times. He performed lithotomy in the course of his life two hundred and twenty-five times, and it was not until after about his hundredth case that he lost his first patient as a result of the operation. This success, it is believed, is unparalleled. He never adopted lithotrity, but performed the lateral operation, and to the last adhered to the gorget for making the incision into the bladder, and preferred an instrument rather under than over size, regarding the danger from contusion of the parts in extracting a large calculus as less than that of hemorrhage from a free incision. He was an expert operator but rather cautious than bold, and conservative rather than adventurous ; not inclining at all to operate in doubtful cases. His confidence was great in the constitutional treatment of patients about to be submitted to the knife, and his remarkable success he always attributed more to the care with which he prepared his subjects for operations than to his superior skill in operating.

It was not until Dr. Dudley had been many years a leading teacher that he became known as a writer. It is doubtful

in fact whether he would ever have written at all but for the appearance of a journal of medicine under the auspices of Transylvania University. He had no taste for writing, and but little leisure. The Transylvania Journal of Medicine was issued on the 1st of February, 1828, edited by Professors Cooke and Short, and through their influence Dr. Dudley was induced to prepare a paper on injuries of the head. This remarkable paper forms the first article in the first number of that journal. Seldom has an article appeared in modern times setting forth more original views. By a number of cases he showed that epilepsy is frequently caused by pressure on the brain, resulting from fractures of the cranium, and is curable by trephining. Five epileptics were operated upon, and three out of the five were relieved; while the other two were much benefited by the operation. Spicula of bone in some instances were found growing from the seat of the fracture and penetrating far into the brain. The sense of relief experienced by some of the patients was immediate, and in some of them there was no recurrence of the convulsions after the bone was removed. Dr. Dudley always and justly referred to his operation of trephining for epilepsy as constituting a new era in surgery.

But another lesson of the greatest value was communicated in this paper, in illustration of which other striking cases are reported. They relate to the treatment of *fungus cerebri*. In one of his cases a brick-mason had his head extensively fractured by a piece of falling timber. The depression was so great that the surgeon thought he might have buried his forearm in the cranium. At the conclusion of the third week a fungus of frightful magnitude was detected growing up from the brain. For this formidable growth Dr. Dudley adopted graduated pressure. Dry sponge was placed on the fungus, and bound as close as the feelings of the patient would permit. By imbibing moisture the sponge exerted increased pressure. On removing the dressings he had

satisfactory evidence of the efficacy of the remedy, but it was discovered that the fungus had shot branches into the sponge. To prevent this subsequently a piece of thin muslin was interposed, and the patient recovered fully. And, what was remarkable, he showed on recovery a decided increase of intellect, which continued, however, for only a few years. In the end he became epileptic, and thirteen years after receiving the injury was nearly fatuous. Dr. Dudley, in connection with this case, remarks that he has cured *fungus cerebri* by the use of dry sponge in five days.

His second paper appeared in the following number of the same journal. The subject is hydrocele, in which he proposed a new operation: a free incision into the tunica vaginalis, the introduction of a tent, and exsection of the preternatural sac, if one is found to exist. In the fourth number he commenced an elaborate article on the bandage, which is continued through three successive numbers. In the fifth volume he reports a case of epilepsy successfully treated by the trephine. His next paper appeared in the ninth volume, and treats of fractures, in the management of which he shows the great utility of the bandage. His last paper was on the nature and treatment of calculous diseases, and was published in the same volume of that journal. It is rich in details most interesting to the surgeon. In his first case he found it necessary to apply a ligature to the transverse perineal artery, on account of its unusual size. Of one hundred and forty-five patients who, up to the time at which he wrote, had applied to him, he operated upon all but ten. In one case, when his patient was on the table before his class and some of his colleagues, he discovered that his accustomed operation was impracticable from deformity of the pelvis, and while his assistants were taking their positions resolved to make the external incision transverse, which was executed before any one else present had remarked the difficulty. A stone eleven inches in circumference was extracted.

This is the sum of Dr. Dudley's contributions to medical literature. He meditated other papers, but never found time to prepare them. It was once said of him by a colleague, who greatly admired him both as a surgeon and a teacher, that "his Hippocrene soon ran dry." From the turn of his mind and the nature of his studies this was necessarily so. He wrote only on subjects purely practical; and where his experience ceased, there he stopped. But if the stream which flowed from his pen was not an abounding river, it was a Vauclusa fountain which has arrested the attention of surgeons everywhere, and by the banks of which students of surgery still love to linger.

Dr. Dudley was married on the 9th of June, 1821, to Miss Anna Maria Short, daughter of Major Peyton Short, and sister of the late Prof. Charles W. Short. This estimable lady died young, leaving him two sons and a daughter: the present Dr. Wilkins Dudley, W. A. Dudley, Esq., and Mrs. Anna Tilford. He never married a second time. In the summer of 1848 he removed to a beautiful country residence near Lexington, and gradually withdrew from the practice of his profession. He delivered his last lecture in February, 1850, and the last entry on his books bears date April 28, 1853. He was consulted often afterward by his professional brethren, but from that time forward he never treated any patient of his own. His death took place on Thursday, the 20th of January, 1870, in the eighty-fifth year of his age.

The life of this distinguished and useful man was extended far beyond the term allotted to those who commenced life with him and were his closest friends. Of the surgeons who competed with him in early manhood, and of all those who were associated with him as teachers in the earlier organizations to which he belonged, not one now remains. He was permitted to linger on amid the scenes which had witnessed his triumphs for eighteen years after the last one of those

who had officiated with him in the first medical faculty of which he was a member had passed away, and for a quarter of a century after most of his old associates were gone. His beneficent life had surrounded him by hosts of friends. In his prime he had wisely provided for an old age of infirmity, and his declining years were solaced by all the comforts that wealth and affection can supply.