

## **The twilight of the Jenners / by Victor G. Plarr.**

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*The Twilight*  
*of the Jenners*

BY

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1902

THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF KING CHARLES THE FIRST

BY JOHN BURNET

WITH A HISTORY OF THE





## THE TWILIGHT OF THE JENNERS.

By VICTOR G. PLARR, M.A., Librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

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JENNER, like Shakespeare, has at periods suffered eclipse. The shadow settled on both shortly after their deaths. Edward Jenner died of apoplexy in 1823, and in July 1850 the *Lancet* writes, in its early trenchant manner: "Whilst Blenheim is dedicated to the descendants of a Marlborough, the solitary representative of a Jenner, we believe, if alive, is at this moment in poverty". The statement at once called forth an interesting letter from Edward Jenner's great-nephew, in which the then condition of the family is described. "Jenner died wealthy," writes William Henry Jenner, M.D., dating from Upper James Street, Golden Square, on 4th August, 1850, "having married a lady of family and fortune and having obtained a Government grant, but only by and after the almost superhuman efforts of the Berkeley family. His son, Colonel Jenner, was left, and deservedly enjoys, an ample fortune. My father, Jenner's nephew, and Hunter's only surviving pupil, though not rich, possesses sufficient means to supply all his primitive wants, and I am not in poverty. So much the respectability of the family demands. But, sir, the name of Jenner to me has been completely useless. I have had occasion to apply before now for an appointment, to obtain which I had hoped that my name would have been a little assistance, but some man with more impudence, and with the interest of some third-rate member of Parliament, had always somehow the power to make me, with high certificates of character and ability and my name, forgotten."

The letter, which strikes one nowadays as petulant and unprofessional, is headed, "A Nation's Gratitude for Services to Mankind". In a leading article in one of its later issues the *Lancet* compliments the writer on his "dignified remarks respecting the pecuniary condition of the Jenner family," and proceeds to tell an anecdote concerning Dr. W. H. Jenner, which the writer knows to be entirely misleading. "It will scarcely be believed," the story runs, "that some years ago there was the expectation of a vacancy in the post of Inspector of Vaccinators at the National Vaccine Institution, now in Russell Place, Fitzroy Square, an appointment in the gift of the Secretary of State. For this Dr. W. H. Jenner, who had himself laboured hard in the diffusion of vaccination in foreign countries, made an application to the then Minister, backed not only by his own name and character, but by what appeared to be influential interest. When the vacancy came it was, however, given to another person, and no notice was ever taken of the grand-nephew of Jenner. We feel ashamed of our profession ; or rather not of that, but of the institutions under which such ingratitude to the children of the benefactors of the State can be exhibited."

The "other person" who thus, in 1843, passed over the head of a Jenner was John Newton Tomkins, F.R.C.S. He had for years been deputy of J. A. Gilham, M.D., the late holder of the post. Gilham had been surgeon to Sir Ralph Abercromby in the campaign in Egypt, whence he had brought back what appeared to be a leprous affection of the hand. As it was necessary in those early days for the Vaccine Inspector to perform many vaccinations, and as this could not be done by a leper, Tomkins was called in to assist him. He was the obvious successor to his chief, and in applying for and obtaining the post he had the warm support—not of a third-rate member, but of Sir Henry Halford himself.

By a curious irony of fate there comes to the writer from Mr. Tomkins's study in the old Vaccine Institution perhaps the most interesting of later "Jenneriana". It is an account in the handwriting of Henry Jenner of some twenty-five



re-vaccinations performed by him in 1839. It is dated, Berkeley, 8th August, 1839, and is addressed to Mr. Gilham. At the head of the list of persons re-vaccinated comes the name of James Phipps, "the first person vaccinated," says Henry Jenner's manuscript, "after the establishing of the practice". This man was the Jenners' gardener and specimen case. He was inoculated from vaccine obtained from the hand of a milkmaid, and was not re-vaccinated for thirty-seven years. Yet, says Henry Jenner: "He was by me several times inoculated for small-pox after the first vaccination, but could not be infected with it". In 1843, in a pamphlet *On the Proper Management of Vaccination*, which is apparently based on the manuscript of 1839, he refers once more to this case, and speaks of inoculations "with fresh-taken active small-pox matter," which produced not the least constitutional effect. "Phipps," says Henry Jenner triumphantly, "always enjoyed good health, and never since he was vaccinated had a single day's illness, and now, though aged, constantly and ably pursues his daily labour, as an undergardener in our family." Phipps, as a matter of fact, had been dangerously ill in 1818, presumably not of small-pox.

So fanatic a believer in the protective powers of vaccination was Henry Jenner, that he seems repeatedly to have exposed his patients to variolous infection. Sometimes he inoculated with "fresh-taken active matter," as in the case of the gardener. At others he took the vaccinated to visit the sick. His own children, William Henry and twin daughters, he treated with successive inoculations of small-pox matter, and subsequently took the boy "into the room where a young person lay in the most loathsome and dangerous state of small-pox. The sight frightened him, and with great difficulty I obliged him to go to the bedside and take hold of the poor sufferer's hand, and the smell of the room was most intolerable, but he received no constitutional influence from the contagion." On another occasion this St. Paul of Vaccination urges a wife to sleep for several nights in her infected husband's bed. She had been vaccinated several years previously, and she consented. We may here remark that the poor of Berkeley



thought it very unlucky to change the sheets and linen of small-pox patients. In this they resembled Hindoo worshippers of a Goddess of Small-pox.

The woman above mentioned so thoroughly neglected her husband's linen that his shirt stood upright on the floor when taken from his body. But she had been vaccinated, and so escaped infection! It would be possible to multiply such instances from the MS. of 1839 or the pamphlet of 1843.

Yet courageous and strong-minded as he was, Henry Jenner seems to have fallen a victim to his own theory at least once. His greater uncle, Edward, refers to this case with a kind of gloomy candour that should disarm the anti-vaccinationists. Writing to the Rev. Dr. Worthington in February, 1819, he says: "We have at last imported the disease into this place. Henry Jenner, who, though he has seen nearly half a century fly over his head, has not yet begun to *think*, perched himself in the midst of a poor family pent up in a small cottage. It was the abode of wretchedness, had the addition of pestilence been wanting. He was infected of course; and his recovery is very doubtful. I am told to-day that he is very full of an eruption, the appearance of which stands midway between small-pox and chicken-pox." If the disease were true small-pox, Henry Jenner is almost guilty of *suppressio veri* when, in his pamphlet of the year 1843, he asserts: "I have vaccinated with my own lancet, some thousand persons of all ages, mostly of the lower class, gratuitously; but never except in one single instance" (the case of a child vaccinated while suffering from sores) "have I known the least influence after, of Small Pox on the constitution." In another place he writes, "Many are of the absurd opinion, that the efficiency of vaccination will only shield the constitution from Small Pox Contagion for a certain number of years". To these sceptical persons he recommends re-vaccination, but is himself, despite his own experience, manifestly of opinion that once vaccinated, always immune.

The old Jenner lancets lie before me as I write, and one cannot but reflect on the thousands of gratuitous operations that they have performed whether wielded by Henry or



George Jenner or by their famous uncle, and on the neglect from which their owners have suffered, and on the battle which rages around their owners' name to-day!

In 1840 Henry and George Jenner petitioned Parliament for pecuniary assistance. The paper was ordered to be printed and to lie on the table of the House of Commons, but nothing seems to have come of it. It runs as follows: "The humble Petition of Henry Jenner, Doctor of Medicine, and the Reverend George Charles Jenner, Clerk, Showeth, That your Petitioners are nephews of the late Doctor Edward Jenner: That they are of the respective ages of seventy-three and seventy-one years: That they both very materially assisted Doctor Jenner in the investigation and the practice of Vaccination: That they expended nearly the whole of their property in promoting the object of Doctor Jenner's discovery: That Doctor Jenner would have been a much richer man if he had kept Vaccination secret, and not divulged the practice of it for the benefit of mankind: That Doctor Jenner, by his will, left Doctor Henry Jenner only an annuity of twenty-six guineas, and the Reverend George Charles Jenner a legacy of twenty pounds: That, under these circumstances, your Petitioners humbly submit to the consideration of your honourable House their case, trusting that their services, and for the sake of the memory of a man who conferred the greatest benefit upon the human race that, under Divine Providence, was ever conferred upon it, will not be passed over."

The annuity to Henry Jenner is not even mentioned in the copy of Edward Jenner's will at Somerset House. Of his two nephews the uncle seems to have preferred George, the cleric, to whom he refers in one of his writings as one who understood his business, having been brought up to the profession of Medicine. Later we hear nothing of this nephew save that, in 1818, Edward Jenner was "deeply hurt," as Baron his biographer points out, at being repeatedly unable to obtain a "living" for him. Henry, on the other hand, had become apprenticed to his uncle when Edward's practice was becoming extremely busy. Quite at first the nephew had been sent long daily walks to take notes upon the cuckoos,



which were at that time the subject of one of Edward's scientific inquiries. There followed the period of the "Vaccine Inquiry".\* In 1801 the battle of Vaccination seemed won, and honours, diplomas, and addresses began to be showered on Edward Jenner. In 1802 Henry and George went as his ambassadors to Dublin, where the medical profession received their instructions in the proper method of vaccinating with the extreme of respectful attention. Then the tide began to turn ever so slightly, for in 1806 Moseley published a virulent attack on Edward and Henry Jenner, in which both are accredited with a string of failures,—cases of small-pox following vaccination. "But mark his audacity," cries Edward Jenner. "They are of children I never saw in my life, and whose names I never heard of till they were placed before me in this murderous publication. Mr. H. Jenner, whose name he brings forward with a list of failures annexed, assures me that *the whole* is a most impudent forgery. What can be done with such a man as this?" What indeed? Since 1806 the Moseleys have rather increased than decreased.

In 1839 Henry Jenner communicates the manuscript above described to the Vaccine Establishment, and in 1843 we find him confessing: "I have sacrificed my health and a vast deal of my time with anxiety, attention, and exertions in the cause, and promoting the wide extension, and universal humane adoption of vaccination, with much of my pecuniary resources and lessening my professional practice, indeed to such a degree as to induce my receding to a more humble station in society." Headstrong and often inaccurate, he had none the less suffered much in the cause of Vaccination, but, nothing daunted, he still asks: "Is it not better to save life than to kill?"

In this year (1843) William Henry Jenner, as we noticed at the beginning of this paper, is defeated in the matter of a public appointment, just as in 1840 his father and uncle had been shelved by Parliament. Henry Jenner reappears for a

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\* Henry Jenner's *Address to the Public on the Advantages of Vaccine Inoculation*, was published in 1799; Edward Jenner's two *Enquiries* appeared in 1798-99.



moment through being mentioned in William Henry's letter to the *Lancet* in 1850, and on 3rd July, 1851, he dies quietly at Berkeley at the advanced age of eighty-four, and is dismissed in a few civil lines in the same journal's obituary notices.\* The time of George Jenner's decease we do not know, but William Henry Jenner apparently died in 1859. His death is unchronicled in the leading medical journals, but we arrive at it by the customary process of exhaustion known to medical antiquarians, for in 1859 his name drops from the Royal College of Surgeons' lists. In July, 1860, he is certainly dead, for we find the *Lancet*, loyal as of yore to the cause of the Jenners, deploring the fact that the claim of his widow to assistance has twice been ignored by the Royal Medical Benevolent College, and that she is now for the third time a candidate. "Is it not a reproach to England that any one bearing the name of Jenner should be in want?"

So much for the living : and now for their effigies. On his walks through Kensington Gardens many a London medical man must have become familiar with the statue of Edward Jenner, planted, remote and irrelevant, in the little patch of Florentine landscape at the western end of the Serpentine. What has he to do with this part of London any more than Shakespeare with Leicester Square? The answer is that he is indeed in banishment. While his great-nephew was perhaps dying, Edward Jenner was being honoured with a statue at last. Baron, Jenner's biographer, and the *Lancet* had bravely worked for this consummation. Calder Marshall's statue was solemnly inaugurated at the Royal College of Physicians in May, 1858. No Jenners seem to have been present, but Prince Albert and a distinguished company did honour to a great man's memory. The statue, however, was not permitted to remain in Trafalgar Square. The *Times* and orators in both Houses of Parliament held that a man who has saved much life excites comparisons when found in the neighbourhood of famous slayers of men. Perhaps the

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\* It is of interest to note that he was of great assistance to his first master, John Hunter, conjointly with Sir Joseph Banks, in forming the Hunterian Collection.



objectors were right. Yet, are we not justified in suspecting them of wanting to get rid of Jenner at all costs? They certainly succeeded in banishing him.

Though even the worst of the Stuarts is now honoured with floral offerings in Whitehall by bands of so-called legitimists, no pilgrimage is ever made to Jenner's solitary statue. Indeed, during the earlier days of the present small-pox epidemic, the authorities kept the path in front of him railed off and under repair, as though fearing a demonstration on the part of "conscientious objectors," led by some renegade "Dr. Thorne". To many of us who hurry by the statue to-day, and for a moment glance at the meditative attitude of Edward Jenner, there must come a flood of bitter reflections. We think of the glories of 1802, the decadence and reaction of 1902, and the formidable and growing epidemic now attacking the London that Jenner lived to save.





