

Section of the History of Medicine.

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Dr. Thomas Spens : The First Describer of the Stokes-Adams Syndrome.

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I WISH to direct attention to what I have little hesitation in naming as the first undoubted case of the syndrome now known as the Stokes-Adams disease described by a British writer. The case was published in the year 1793 by a Scottish physician, resident in Edinburgh, named Thomas Spens.

I propose to note, firstly, the evidence which establishes the priority of Dr. Spens's case over those previously held to have been the first described ; secondly, to epitomize, in the words of the actual text of the description, the features of the case which clearly denote its character as a true instance of heart-block, with its associated syncopal and epileptiform attacks ; and finally, to mention what I have been able to find out about this Dr. Spens, whose name in this association ill deserves the oblivion of 120 years.

EARLY RECORDS OF HEART-BLOCK.

Robert Adams, of Dublin, reported, so it is claimed, the first clear case of heart-block in 1827. In the same year a similar case was reported in great detail by Dr. William Burnett, who also called attention to the fact that Morgagni had described two cases of "epilepsy with slow pulse" in 1761. In 1841 Holberton described another case, but general attention was not directed to this condition until William Stokes, also of Dublin, published four cases in 1846.

It will be seen, then, that Dr. Spens's case precedes all these instances, with the exception of Morgagni's. Spens's case precedes Adams's and Burnett's cases by thirty-four years, Holberton's by forty-eight years, and Stokes's cases by fifty-three years.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE.

The account of the case is to be found in a book of some 592 pages, entitled "Medical Commentaries for the year MDCCXCII." Succeeding this title it states, "Exhibiting a concise view of the latest and most important discoveries in medicine and medical philosophy, collected and published by Andrew Duncan, M.D., F.R. and A.SS.Ed." The book was published in the year 1793 in Edinburgh. Mr. Graham, the Librarian of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, tells me that this publication was begun in 1773 under the title, "Medical and Philosophical Commentaries by a Society in Edinburgh," and there were twenty volumes in all (1773-95). With the seventh volume the title changed to the one above mentioned. Each volume has a separate dedication to some person of rank or quality of the time. The 1793 volume is dedicated to Dr. Thomas Fowler, of York.

The case is to be found commencing p. 458 and is entitled, "History of a case in which there took place a remarkable Slowness of the Pulse." "Communicated to Dr. Duncan by Dr. Thomas Spens, Physician in Edinburgh." It begins:—

"On the 16th of May, 1792, about 9 o'clock in the evening, I was sent for to see T. R., a man in the 54th year of his age, a common labouring mechanic. . . . I was much surprised, upon examining the state of his pulse, to find that it beat only twenty-four strokes to the minute. These strokes, however, as far as I could judge, were at perfectly equal intervals, and of the natural strength of the pulse of a man in good health. He informed me, that about three o'clock in the afternoon, he had been suddenly taken ill while standing in the street; that he had fallen to the ground senseless; and that, according to the accounts given him, by those who were present, he had continued in that state for about five minutes. . . . From the time of his first attack till I saw him, he had been affected with three other fits, mainly of a similar nature. These, however, were attended with some convulsive movements of his limbs, and with screaming during the fit . . . nor had he, at any time, any other complaint. . . . Upon visiting him on the morning of the 17th, I found that he had been attacked with several fits during the night . . . Upon examining his pulse I found that it beat only twenty-three beats in the minute . . . an hour after, I found it in precisely the same state as before.

He was now directed to take some spirits of hartshorn ; but, by mistake, it was given him very little diluted, and produced much uneasiness in his throat and mouth. From this cause I found him in great distress at one o'clock ; but it seemed to have produced no change in the state of his pulse, which at this time beat twenty-four strokes in a minute and was of the same strength and regularity as before. . . . In the morning of the 18th I was informed that . . . he had been frequently faint . . . his pulse beat only twenty-six strokes in the minute. About 8 in the evening he had no sooner smelt it (newly toasted bread) than he felt some of the sensations of a beginning fit ; and, as soon as he had tasted it he almost instantly cried out, and fell back senseless, with smart convulsions of all his muscles. He apparently recovered in a few seconds ; but hardly any pulse could be felt for a good many seconds. On the morning of the 19th I learnt that . . . he had been attacked with frequent fits, attended with violent convulsions . . . at three in the afternoon, I found that it (the pulse) beat only ten strokes a minute, though it still continued equally strong and regular as before . . . he expired on the 20th. The day after his death the body was opened by Mr. Fyfe, and, upon the most careful examination, no morbid appearance of any consequence could be discovered either in the thorax or abdomen."

All the features of the case point to its being an undoubted example of heart-block. The slow, regular pulse, the occasional faints, losses of consciousness, and convulsions, during which, if prolonged, hardly any pulse could be felt, are typical. Especially to be noted is the unaffected state of the pulse, even following the distress of the too strong hartshorn ; this static character of the pulse under varying circumstances being a striking feature of heart-block. Dr. Spens finally has evidence that two years previously the pulse of the patient presented no abnormality.

DR. THOMAS SPENS.

For what information I have been able to gather about this celebrated physician I am indebted to Dr. Byrom Bramwell, W. G. Spens, Esq., his grandson, Dr. Graeme Dickson, his grand-nephew, and T. H. Graham, Esq., the Librarian of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, and I would here express my thanks for their courtesy and kindness.

Dr. Thomas Spens was a distinguished Edinburgh physician. He was the second son of an equally distinguished physician, Dr. Nathaniel Spens, a gentleman who, apparently, was also well known as an archer, for he was a member of the Royal Archers (King's Bodyguard for Scotland), and his picture, painted by Raeburn, hangs now in the Royal

Archers' Hall, in Edinburgh. His son, Thomas, became also a member of the Royal Archers, and the same year was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, at the early age of 25. He appears to have served the College well, for we find him successively Librarian, President, and, for the last thirty-three years of his life, Treasurer. He was an ordinary Physician of the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh. His known published works are few, six in number, including his M. D. thesis, dedicated to his father. Its subject was "De Amenorrhœa." Three of his papers dealt with cardiac conditions. He died in Edinburgh in the year 1842.

Of any traits in his character, or of his personal appearance, I am unable to find anything; but we can imagine that he was not without a certain pride in his ancestry. It may be assumed that this quality was at any rate present in his father Nathaniel, for we find that, after a long career in Edinburgh, he was enabled to redeem a portion of the family estate of Craig Sanquhar, in Lathallan, Fife, which had been sold by one Alexander Spens, three hundred years previously. To this eyrie Nathaniel, of whom we are told from one source that "he early practised as a surgeon, but later became (!) a Physician," and from another source that "he appeared to have been more famous as an Archer than as a physician," in due time hied himself, and was gathered to his fathers at the ripe and honourable age of 88. Not all the family estates, however, had been thus alienated, for Dr. Thomas Spens's grandfather had lived at Lathallan. Should further proofs of the distinguished ancestry of Dr. Thomas Spens, the discoverer of the first case of heart-block, be required, there is evidence that they claimed descent from the ancient Earls of Fife, and it is certain that they bore on their arms the lion rampant of the Macduffs.

Dr. Thomas Spens never lived on the lands of his ancestors. He died, where he had lived, in Edinburgh. He had the luck to be born a second son, so his elder brother, Colonel Spens, resided at Lathallan, and Thomas remained in the grey city till he passed away at the age of 79.

Dr. H. D. ROLLESTON asked whether eponymic disease ought to be called after the first recorder of a case or after the person who described the condition so fully as to draw public attention to the condition.