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Historical Vignettes—Henry Hill Hickman

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Henry Hill Hickman
(1800-1830)

HISTORICAL VIGNETTES

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HENRY HILL HICKMAN who experimentally produced insensibility by asphyxia and later by the use of carbonic acid gas (frontispiece) was born on January 27, 1800, at Bromfield, England. He became a student of medicine in the University of Edinburgh, where he soon was admitted as a member of the Royal Medical Society. He qualified for membership in the Royal College of Surgeons of England before he was twenty-one years of age. He also was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

Dr. Hickman first practiced at Ludlow, and it was there that the main part of his experimental work on animals was done during March and April of 1823. At some time between January and August, 1824, he moved to the village of Shiffnal, the birthplace of Thomas Beddoes, the well-known pneumatic physician.

Hickman's experiments were designed to produce insensibility by means of controlled asphyxia. He aimed at producing a temporary and reversible suspension of life which he believed would not only entail freedom from pain during swift operations but also would greatly decrease loss of blood.

Hickman's first communication on "Suspended Animation" was a private letter addressed to Thomas Andrew Knight in February, 1824; the second was an open letter to the same man, published in the form of a small pamphlet in August, 1824. In April, 1828, he addressed a memorial to King Charles X of France, in which he gave some additional information on the subject of his theory, but did not describe any further experiments. In all these communications he hoped for the support of his theories, but Hickman was ahead of his time and it was not obtained. Hickman remained at Shiffnal from 1824 until early in 1828, when he visited Paris. Returning to England in the fall or in the early part of 1829, Hickman settled at Tenbury on the Worcestershire border, where his house, now a chemist's shop in Teme Street, can still be seen. It is hard to believe that the leading scientists of both England and France failed to recognize Hickman's contributions but such it was. Only Baron Larrey, Napoleon's surgeon, supported Hickman's views.

Dr. Hickman died on April 2, 1830, probably of consumption, at the early age of thirty years.

