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Historical Vignettes—Paracelsus

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Paracelsus, 1493-1541

HISTORICAL VIGNETTES

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PERHAPS the first physician to notice the anesthetic qualities of sulfuric ether was Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelsus (frontispiece). This intellectual rebel and bold innovator was born in 1493 at Einsiedeln in Switzerland. His father was a physician. Paracelsus took his doctor's degree from the University of Ferrara in 1515. Restless and impatient, he participated in the wars of Venice, and then began to practice medicine in Strassburg in 1526. In Basle he was a municipal physician and a university professor for less than a year, in 1527 and 1528. Actually, he wandered all over Europe, and practiced briefly at Kolmar, St. Gallen, Nürnberg, Amberg, Innsbruck, Merano, Ulm, Augsburg, Kromau, Pressburg, Vienna Villach, Klagenfurt, and other places.

Paracelsus died destitute, alone and unmourned at Salzburg on September 24, 1541. Imbued with protest, he has been called the Luther of modern medicine, but in spite of his insurrectionary attitude and rough ways, he was judged to be an able

physician. He did early work in what is now chemotherapy, and he was said to be skillful in the treatment of wounds.

Paracelsus[†] had this to say about sulfuric ether:

"However, the following should be noted here with regard to this sulphur, that of all things extracted from vitriol it is most remarkable because it is stable. And besides, it has associated with it such a sweetness that it is taken even by chickens, and they fall asleep from it for a while but awaken later without harm. On this sulphur no other judgment should be passed than that in diseases which need to be treated with anodynes it quiets all suffering without any harm, and relieves all pain, and quenches all fever, and prevents complications in all illnesses."

[†][Extract from] Paracelsus; *Opera Medico-chimica sive paradoxa* . . . Frankfurt-am-Main, 1605, p. 125. Translated by Dr. Dorothy M. Schullian, Cleveland Branch, Armed Forces Medical Library, Cleveland, Ohio (1945).