

One Man Against Malaria

by Harris Edward Dark



When John Sappington, M.D., of Tennessee, made the decision to pull up his roots and strike out for an entirely new life in a strange land, he was already forty-one. Nevertheless, in the next few decades he was to become the most important American doctor

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of his time. Without his perceptive and passionate efforts, the nation's westward expansion would have followed a very different course. For John Sappington was the man who conquered malaria on the western frontier.

In the land rush days of the early 1800s, malaria was far and away the most serious disease in America. It was especially prevalent in the vast Mississippi Basin. Many a westward-bound settler fell victim and turned back toward the East in despair. Many a farmer would stagger home from the fields afire with the mysterious malady. Indeed, entire families would lie helpless in bed, unable to care for themselves—let alone their farms—and many would die. But once Dr. Sappington arrived in Missouri, the residents did not have to worry. It was known throughout the countryside that he and only he had the secret of curing the shaking ague.

Dr. Sappington's methods were a radical departure from the orthodox practice of his time. Among most of his contemporaries the "depletive" system was in vogue: the fevered patient was blistered with mustard and bled by leeches. He was half-smothered with blankets in the middle of summer to make him sweat, and given emetics or powerful cathartics to purge him of "poisons" in his blood.

Old Doctor John didn't do any of these things. He merely administered a bitter-tasting brown powder that stopped the fever in a few days. The medicine, Peruvian bark, had been known for almost two centuries as a treatment for malaria, but there was a tremendous prejudice against its use—with some reason. First, the bark varied in strength and quality, and

an overdose could cause dizziness and ringing in the ears; and second, it could not cure permanently. But there was also the erroneous belief that the bark was a violent stimulant, dangerous to use in the presence of fever. And so laymen and doctors alike avoided what is now known to be the only treatment of value for malaria.

Sappington was a student of human nature, and he knew he would never be able to conquer malaria quickly while confronted with a completely adverse public opinion. He never doubted that he was right and nearly everyone else was wrong, but he didn't have time to argue. He simply skirted the issue by not advertising among his patients that it was the controversial Peruvian bark he was using in their treatment.

In the early 1820s Sappington learned that two French scientists had succeeded in isolating quinine from the crude fibers of Peruvian bark, making it possible to prescribe exact dosages. He quickly put the pure drug to use, working out a recipe for mixing it with favorable ingredients to make it palatable. The results were dramatic, and his "magic" control over the fever brought him increasing fame, a flourishing practice, and an ever expanding circuit to ride.

But the enemy, malaria, was also on the increase, becoming a far greater barrier to colonization than the Indian. In many areas whole towns—some of them having a population of a thousand or more—had to be totally abandoned because of the destruction wrought by the disease.

Sappington finally realized that he was only one man and the Mississippi Basin was

a lot of territory. He could win many battles, but he would surely lose the war unless he could extend his treatment outside his own practice.

It occurred to him that he might make up large quantities of quinine pills and have other doctors administer them. He might even put them directly into the hands of the public with simple instructions about dosage. In 1832 the doctor turned his practice over to younger men and devoted himself to producing quinine pills. They weren't, however, called quinine pills, for there was the same prejudice against quinine that had existed against Peruvian bark. Sappington prepared and distributed large quantities of the pills, but he concealed their content. He wished them to acquire a reputation on their own merits—and this they did with amazing rapidity. Dr. John Sappington's Anti-Fever Pills quickly became the frontier's most famous medicine. During the next ten years they became popular as far away as Michigan and Texas.

The pills were turned out by the thousands in a tiny factory on the doctor's own place. To distribute them, he hired salesmen on horseback. There were as many as twenty-five salesmen, all traveling where the incidence of malaria was greatest, but not once, ever, in ten years of business, did one of the sales crew suffer from malaria. They were their own best customers, taking enough pills to ward off malaria symptoms completely.

Although the phenomenal success of the pills made Dr. Sappington a wealthy man, he had little regard for monetary gain. He always priced his pills, for example, at the very

minimum that would provide a decent living for his salesmen.

After more than a million boxes of the pills had been sold, John Sappington still was not satisfied with his war on malaria. Even with the wide distribution the pills had attained, the disease hung on. The public would have to be informed of the nature of the disease and—more important—of the make-up of the pills. He must write a book that would tell everything. Of course, the sales of the famous pills would fall off when people found out how to compound them for themselves, but the truth must be told: the fabulous success of the pills was due only to the fact that they contained the dreaded quinine, and quinine in the right dosage had little or no side effect.

Thus, at the height of his second career, the humanitarian physician deliberately scuttled his big business. In 1844 he published a book, *The Theory and Treatment of Fevers*. The book achieved two major distinctions: it was the first medical treatise published west of the Mississippi, and it eventually broke the prejudice against quinine. It was also the book buy of the century, selling below cost for as little as twenty-five cents a copy.

Most of the leading physicians of the day were loath to recognize the truth of Sappington's theories. They found it hard to discard ideas that had been in existence for centuries. Eventually, however, most of them came to the conclusion that the proper use of quinine was all that was needed to treat malaria. With that single barrier surmounted, the conquest of malaria was assured and the winning of the West was made possible.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. Compared with the depletive system, Dr. Sappington's treatment was vastly more
 - A comfortable
 - B effective
 - C Both A and B
2. A genuine drawback of Peruvian bark was that it
 - A caused undesirable side effects
 - B created poisons in the blood
 - C acted as a violent stimulant
3. Sappington dealt with the public's prejudice against the bark by
 - A pointing out its centuries of success
 - B producing patients on whom it had worked
 - C concealing the fact that he used it
4. The big advantage of pure quinine over Peruvian bark was that it
 - A did not have the bitter taste
 - B usually caused a permanent cure
 - C could be given in exact dosages
5. Sappington turned to the manufacture of quinine pills because he wanted to
 - A profit from the new market
 - B fight malaria on a large scale
 - C increase his local practice
6. Sappington labeled his medicine
 - A quinine pills
 - B anti-fever pills
 - C frontier pills
7. The pills' fantastic sales can be partly explained by the fact that the
 - A public didn't know what was in them
 - B price was set as low as possible
 - C Both A and B
8. The main reason Sappington's salesmen never suffered from malaria was that they
 - A took the medicine they were selling
 - B understood what caused the disease
 - C usually avoided malaria country
9. Dr. Sappington was sure that the publication of his book would bring about
 - A an immediate acceptance of quinine
 - B a decrease in the sale of his pills
 - C a temporary victory for malaria
10. The main reason the book was not popular with doctors was its
 - A place of publication
 - B prohibitive price
 - C unorthodox ideas

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