Sir Robert Hutchison

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SIR ROBERT HUTCHISON, Bt., M.D., F.R.C.P.

I

At The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, London

BY

KENNETH H. TALLERMAN

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be given the opportunity of paying a tribute to Sir Robert Hutchison on the occasion of his eightieth birthday; I feel it, however, a responsibility to be entrusted with the writing of a reminiscence of such an outstanding physician and such an eminent man. In our time there has been no physician of greater distinction; a clinician and teacher second to none, an acknowledged authority on dietetics, and a man of letters and affairs, he has held every high office his profession has to offer.

He received his medical education at Edinburgh University where he had a brilliant career, and after studying at the universities of Strasbourg and Paris he came to London in 1897 from Edinburgh, where he had been assistant to the Professor of Physiology, to work with Leonard Hill in the department of physiology at The London Hospital. He had by then had a wide and thorough clinical training, which had included work at children's hospitals, and in 1900, within a relatively short time of his arrival in London, he was appointed physician to out-patients at The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, and assistant physician to The London Hospital; he became full physician to the former in 1917 and to the latter in 1918. He was of a generation in which some general physicians specialized in paediatrics, the paediatrician, as we now know him, being then an exception in this country, and he practised both general medicine and paediatrics to the advantage of both. Among the many honours that have been conferred upon him are the honorary degrees of LL.D. of his own University of Edinburgh, D.Sc. of Oxford University, and M.D. of Melbourne University. He was Harveian Orator of the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1931, and from 1938 to 1941 was President of that College; he is only the third Scottish graduate to hold this office. He is also a past President of the Royal Society of Medicine and of the British Paediatric Association.

Although his career has been so outstanding and

successful, he has always been modest and unassuming.

My first encounter with him was just over 30 years ago, in 1920; it occurred on the first floor of the Examination Hall in Queen Square. The scene of the clinical examination was then similar to that with which any examination candidate of the present day is familiar, except in regard to the dress of the examiners. The bell rang, the doors were flung open, and I found myself confronted by a tall, rather gaunt figure, wearing a grey morning coat. He spoke in a quiet Scots voice, his questions were penetrating, and I recollect that, although there was nothing brusque about his manner, I was rather overawed by this examiner of whose identity I was then unaware. It was quite clear that there was no nonsense about him, and that any hope of bluffing one's way through was quite out of the question. I acquitted myself none too well, and left feeling rather woebegone.

It was not until five years later that I met him again, when I went to call upon him in the summer of 1925 as an applicant for the appointment of house physician to The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, in London. In those days the candidates for such appointments had to call on every member of the staff, and this often took up the best part of three or four days; one also had to submit an application and testimonials, always set out with meticulous care, which were expected to be printed. I recollect that as I entered his consulting room in Devonshire Place for my interview, he was in his desk chair, which was turned outwards to face the room, sitting in a characteristic attitude, leaning well back with his legs stretched out and knees slightly bent. He appeared to me to be incredibly long. His personality made a very deep impression; what struck me most was his absolute straightforwardness. He left no doubt as to where one stood in his estimation as a candidate for an appointment, and he made it quite clear, after asking a series of pertinent questions,

whether he did or did not intend to give his support.

I was most fortunate in obtaining this appointment, and then began that happy and highly prized association, first as his house physician and pupil, and later as a junior colleague at The London Hospital and a friend.

At that time there was at Great Ormond Street one house physician, who was responsible to three chiefs, Dr. G. F. Still (later to become Sir George Frederic Still), Dr. Robert Hutchison (as he then was), and Dr. Hugh Thursfield, and a second medical houseman who had the title of 'House Physician and Assistant Medical Casualty Officer', and who looked after Dr. Poynton's ward and had as well other duties in the casualty department. Robert Hutchison was at this time probably at the height of his medical career, although the crowning achievement, the Presidency of the Royal College of Physicians of London, was yet to come.

It was his habit to drive to and from the hospital in a taxi, and he always wore a morning coat, though not invariably a top hat, which the motor car had by now made rather unpractical. He visited his wards twice weekly; one ward round was carried out with his house physician and the medical registrar only, the second was a teaching round which was always very well attended by medical students and postgraduates. He arrived punctually, and was met by his houseman in what was then the front hall of the old building of the hospital, and then, in a very small and rather rickety lift, proceeded to Alexandra Ward, a long ward of 26 beds containing both infants and children mixed up indiscriminately. His visit to the ward used to last between one and a half and two hours, during which we were treated to a display of shrewd clinical observation and sound judgment and common sense, accompanied by appropriate comments. He was a superb clinician, and maintained the belief that the practice of medicine was at least as much an art as a science. Although he had a wide knowledge of the literature, and was very well acquainted with current medical work, it was his insistence on clinical findings and his opinion on a case as a whole that was so impressive. His ward round was punctuated by apt and caustic remarks which left a deep impression on those who worked with him. He always insisted on those things that are fundamental, and had little time for the fads and fashions of the moment. He was very conscious of the limitations of treatment, and would never attempt in this direction what he knew could not be accomplished. I remember him once turning to his audience in the course of a ward round and saying: 'I think there is really nothing that can usefully be done in this case, but let us now hear what my

house physician, who is a therapeutic optimist, is prescribing for the patient.' He laid great emphasis on the importance of common sense, and was always utterly opposed to doing something just for the sake of doing it. He was not cynical but he detested humbug, and rather enjoyed holding up to ridicule anything that he felt deserved to be exposed. His comments could be crushing, but he was always kindly, and criticisms made by him, however severe, were accepted readily, for they were seldom unjustified, and they formed a most valuable part of the training he so gladly gave to his housemen.

He is well known to be a beautiful speaker, and is witty and to the point, with a great sense of humour. Of his many amusing remarks, one underlining the difference between medical and surgical colleagues comes to mind: 'During the summer vacation the surgeon is to be found for a period of six weeks leading the fashion in the Upper Engadine, while the physician snatches a bare fortnight to take his family to some boarding-house in Brighton.' His utterances during ward rounds were much treasured by us. He was rather fond of alliteration, and I recollect him one day calling to a few of his juniors who were standing at the door of a ward: 'Hey, you paediatric pundits, will you kindly come here and concentrate your combined cerebral cortices on this poor child'; 'slender fingers are a great advantage alike to pickpockets, piano players, and percussors,' was another of his sayings. The real inner meaning of some of his remarks one came to appreciate more as one matured. 'My dear boy, all that you need to know about infant feeding can be written on the back of a postage stamp,' sounded perhaps a little more than just understatement, especially from one who was an authority on dietetics. But it is, after all, the principles rather than the details that are so important in the feeding of infants, and certainly these are relatively few and quite simple: this was, of course, the point he really wished to make.

His well known *Lectures on Diseases of Children*, based on lectures given by him to students of The London Hospital, is exceedingly good, and is a book which should be on the shelf of every paediatrician and general practitioner. It is delightfully written, and is as valuable now as when it was first published, for it sets out the ripe experience of an accomplished physician.

During his ward round at Great Ormond Street a charming little ceremony invariably took place. One or other of the little girl patients sitting up in bed with her hair ribbon carefully adjusted, would lean forward as Dr. Hutchison came to her bedside and present him with a buttonhole, usually a rose or a carnation. He would receive it with dignity,

thanking her suitably, and pin it in place. This always gave him pleasure. It was said that on one occasion the ward sister, prompted by motives of economy, had decided to put an end to this custom, and failed to provide the necessary flower. After reaching the last bed without the usual presentation having been made, Dr. Hutchison left the ward so obviously downcast and forlorn that the sister could not bear it, and at his next visit the buttonhole was again forthcoming, and thereafter the ceremony always took place as before.

Robert Hutchison's rather austere appearance and manner, and his critical and sometimes sceptical remarks went with a kindliness and understanding which earned for him the appreciation of all those who were associated with him; he was always referred to by us at Great Ormond Street simply as 'Robert', and at The London Hospital as 'Bobby Hutch'. His interests and reading have been wide, he has never been sympathetic towards dullness, and he has shown a full sense of the value of the good things of life, and has been glad to enjoy them.

He was helpful and loyal to his juniors, and could invariably be relied on to give the benefit of his wise counsel to those younger men who came to seek his advice and who wanted to discuss their problems with him. It has been supposed that he looked askance at women entering the medical profession. Certainly one woman of my acquaintance was warned when sitting the examination for the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians,

at a time when he was a Censor, that she should do her best to avoid meeting him as an oral examiner, or woe betide her. I do not believe this to be true, and undoubtedly he would be the first to acknowledge the great help and support he has received from his delightful and capable wife, who is herself a member of our profession.

Although his original contributions to general medicine and to paediatrics have been considerable, and his reputation extends far beyond this country, it is perhaps his wisdom, intellectual honesty, absolute integrity, and sound clinical judgment more than any other qualities which have impressed themselves upon all who have known him, commanding their admiration and respect.

What greater source of satisfaction can there be for any physician in his latter years than the sure knowledge that he has made a deep impression upon the medical thought of his day, and has exercised a powerful and beneficial influence which has spread far and wide? Such a satisfaction can certainly be enjoyed by Robert Hutchison, who has also earned the high esteem of the medical profession as a whole and the affectionate regard of his pupils and his many friends. It is a real pleasure to do him honour, and to offer him on this occasion most hearty congratulations and all possible good wishes. May he continue for a long time to come the enjoyment of his happy home life amid the delightful surroundings of his beautiful country house and garden.

II

At The London Hospital

BY

ARTHUR G. MAITLAND-JONES

The Scots are an active, acquisitive, and aggressive people and it was, therefore, with reluctance and with what courage I could muster that I accepted the invitation to write some words about a Scotsman, Sir Robert Hutchison, Bt. whose house physician I had the honour to be in 1919.

As I have indicated, the Scots are a difficult people; they are like olives in that the liking for them has to be acquired, but when once acquired, the very obvious virtues and very latent vices of this people hold attention if not admiration. As I had the great fortune to serve for some time in the first world war under a distinguished Scotsman, I acquired a wholesome respect for these formidable people and I was not as abashed and as alarmed as

I might well have been, when I was appointed house physician to 'Bobby Hutch', by which name he was known with affection and admiration by many generations of housemen and students at The London Hospital.

I took over my post on a Tuesday morning, my predecessor having in half an hour or so shown me over the 60 beds which belonged to 'The Firm'. At 2.30 o'clock on that day, a tall, gaunt, slightly bowed figure, dressed in a grey frock coat, entered the hall of The London Hospital, extended a rather limp hand to me, gave the six clinical clerks who were with me an astringent glance, retired to the staff room to put on the long white coat always worn on the rounds, and at 2.35 p.m. 'Bobby' began

the tour of his beds. These rounds took place on Tuesdays and Fridays, and they lasted for about an hour and a half, all of them to my delight, but some with occasional discomfoting moments. When I now look back on that happy time, and it was for me a happy time, I ask myself what I learnt in those six months and, furthermore, what did the clerks learn?

We, the clerks and I, learnt much; above all, I think, we learnt, as far as it is possible to learn, the basic principles on which a diagnosis is founded; we were made aware again and again that it is very desirable to diagnose the common illness, and not the rarity whenever possible, a principle so sound and yet so often neglected.

'Bobby' was kind to his house physicians, relied on them, and they, in return, were necessarily imbued with a sense of responsibility; he was always courteous and invested them, perhaps with malice aforethought, with some of his own dignity and composure. At times, he was in need of humouring, more particularly was this so when a cold north-east wind was blowing down the Whitechapel Road; in such weather the clerks were sometimes told what their future was to be, and how their course through life would be studded with the tombstones of their irrational mistakes. In general, the clerks were never encouraged to high flights of imagination; they were invited to examine their patients, demonstrate physical signs, and asked for their opinions which were received with some approval if right, with silence if wrong, if very wrong with a pitying look and the remark 'My dear -rr child', and we passed on to the next bed.

'Bobby' was aware of his position and well conscious of his dignity, and I remember an occasion when some foolish clerk had the impertinence to sit down when his chief was standing at the bedside. Bobby turned to the clerk, and his few crisp sentences, which I do not propose to quote, delighted me as I have always admired sound invective.

Little comment from me is required regarding the lectures which he gave too infrequently; they

were in manner and matter models of what lectures should be. I have always inveighed against lectures, but when they can be given by such a consummate artist as 'Bobby' was, they are then a pure delight.

I now come, after 30 years and more, to look back on those days, and to attempt an assessment of the man whose house physician I was and whose friend, if he will allow this, I became. I remember a man whose balanced and sane outlook on medicine has had a great influence on me. He was in some ways a poseur; he assumed an air of complete cynicism; he hoped, so he pretended, that all things were for the worst, but this attitude was, I am convinced, assumed, and behind it all was a mind intellectually gay with a cordial distaste for the earnest and the dull. 'A dull dog' was a phrase which he applied to certain men, and in doing so he often maligned the dog.

How will he be remembered by his housemen and clerks? That I cannot tell with certitude, but I do know that one of his housemen remembers him with affection and gratitude. Affection for his kind tolerance of the firm opinions of relative youth; gratitude for his insistence on the great necessity of asking on what evidence any statement made was based. I owe him much; he was a great teacher, a great clinician, and he infused into clinical medicine that critical approach which is too often lacking. 'Bobby' wanted facts, not prejudices, in support of new theories, and if facts were not forthcoming, and often they were not, there was brought to bear that gift of gay invective which was a delight to all.

The London Hospital, in which I had the privilege of working for over 30 years, has had the good fortune to number many men of fame amongst its honorary staff, and not the least of these is Sir Robert Hutchison. Sobriety of judgment, wit, courtesy, a knowledge of men and medicine; by these gifts will he be remembered and I, writing these lines in a remote countryside, on the eve of Bobby's eightieth birthday, express to him my very affectionate greetings.