

of the Literary World

AN AMERICAN SURGEON

The Distinguished Career and Services of Dr. J. William White

J. William White, M. D. A biography by Agnes Repplier. With Portraits. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

IT may be taken for granted that few American physicians or surgeons have traveled as widely or gained the friendship of as many men of distinction in various professions as Dr. White. He possessed in a remarkable degree the esteem and confidence of men of repute on both sides of the Atlantic. When he was 21 years of age he went with an exploring party under Professor Agassiz in the South Atlantic waters, having been offered a berth as hydrographic draughtsman. The trip was made under the auspices of the United States Coast Survey and in a small steamer. Young White secured from the New York Herald a commission as special correspondent with a space rate of \$20 a column, double the usual rate at that time for such matter. Many years later Dr. White spoke feelingly at the Harvard Club of the lurid headlines which had caused him to suffer anguish in the days of that experience. It is noted in this record that Agassiz was "very religious" but would dredge seven days in the week, deeming it a work of necessity; others in the party were expected to do the same. We are told that White worked steadily and "tried hard to share Agassiz's wild delight when, off the coast of Patagonia they caught some uncommonly little fishes which could swim head first or tail first, 'as a matter of indifference.'" The author has informed us that there was once a folio volume written on a single imperfect specimen of these fish and that the Professor's pleasure was without bounds.

An interesting but not edifying glimpse of surgical practice in the hospitals of Berlin was gained by Dr. White in 1890 under the escort of so distinguished a practitioner as Sir Joseph Lister. He witnessed, at the hands of Dr. Von Bergman, holder of the most important surgical practice in the German empire at that time, a demonstration in the Royal Clinic of his methods of dressing wounds. Dr. White wrote: "The scars were ugly, pigmented, and irritable; the dressings stank. Pus ran out of the wounds. I have helped Agnew with hundreds of these cases and have operated on dozens of them and I can truthfully say that we have never had such wretched results." Dr. White left the clinic disgusted with this glimpse of German surgery and Lister expressed himself wholly in accord with his companion's views. Unlike many (and perhaps most) other professional men of distinction, Dr. White did not greatly enjoy rough life in the great out-of-doors. In the summer of 1894, with Mrs. White, he spent three months in a hunter's camp in the Rocky mountains. As the biographer describes it Dr. and Mrs. White "forsook civilization for three months and fled to the wilderness with a train of five saddle horses, eleven pack horses, two admirable guides and a bad cook." We learn that the doctor's diary revealed "not so much enjoyment as a heroic determination to enjoy." And it appears that Mrs. White was "the better woodsman of the two." A significant statement of the biographer in this connection is that Dr. White "never regretted the experience and never repeated it."

The friendships which Dr. White formed in his active career were many and included men and women of renown. A few may be mentioned, as indicating his varied interests and extended field of activity. The list includes Charles Francis Adams, Agassiz, Queen Alexandra, H. H. Asquith, Anthony Hope, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry James, and

to work in the Allied ranks and wrote to Dr. (now Sir William) Osler and to the French ambassador proffering his services. Meanwhile he was busy collecting funds for the Louvain professors after the destruction of their University and their homes. He raised five thousand dollars with ease and rapidly. At about this time he received an honorary fellowship in the American College of Surgeons; at the same time he was working hard on a Primer of the War for Americans and still harder to raise money and supplies for the American Ambulance Hospital in Paris. The Primer went through three editions and was translated into five languages by a committee of the British Foreign office. In June Dr. White sailed with the surgeons, physicians and nurses chosen from the staff of the University of Pennsylvania to take charge of the 180 beds consigned to their care in the American Ambulance Hospital in Paris. The death of Henry James in February, 1916, led to a renewed attack upon him on the score of his renunciation of American citizenship. Dr. White came to his friend's defence in a newspaper letter affirming James's loyalty to the ideals of this country. At this time White knew well that his earthly end was near and his last few days were shadowed by what he considered rank injustice to one of his dear friends. He died in the late spring of 1916. He had held for twelve years the John Rhea Barton Chair of Surgery in the University of Pennsylvania, had made important contributions to the literature of surgery and was an authority in his chosen field.