

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

GEORGE RYERSON FOWLER

FOR twenty-five years previous to his lamented death in February, 1906, George Ryerson Fowler held the foremost place among the surgeons of Brooklyn, New York. In securing this place he had not been helped by any adventitious circumstance; it was the result of his own energy and capacity.

He was born in New York City, December 25, 1848, of parents who for several generations had transmitted the best traits of an English Colonial strain. Later his father, having been made the master mechanic in charge of the repair shops of the Long Island Railroad, removed to Jamaica, Long Island, where the shops were located. Here the young George grew up, and in the common school of the village was taught until he was old enough to enter as an apprentice the shop which his father superintended.

Meanwhile, the civil war broke out. George was fired with desire to have a part in it, and soon after its outbreak, being yet a boy of twelve years of age, ran away to seek a recruiting station in the City. A police alarm discovered him and he was brought back to his parents in the custody of a policeman and was persuaded to defer his military aspirations. He always retained a penchant for military affairs and in later years ran the whole gamut of the National Guard of his State, from a regimental assistant surgeon to surgeon, brigade surgeon and surgeon general. The Spanish American War found him at the height of his professional activities, but he did not hesitate to throw everything aside and put on the uniform of his Country's Army. He was commissioned a chief surgeon of division and was assigned to duty as medical inspector, consulting surgeon, and chief of the operating staff of the Seventh Army Corps, in which capacity he served throughout the war.

That the apprentice boy, working at the bench in a railway repair shop should develop into a great surgeon was due—so Fowler himself used to say—to an accident in the shop when he was called on to assist in the care of the sufferers. The surgical instinct was then awakened in him. As it grew it was fostered and directed especially by two men who took an interest in him, one a pharmacist and the other a former army surgeon. The open, frank, and enthusiastic nature of the boy, which enlisted the help of these men in realizing his ambition, caused him in after years, when he had boys of his own, to show his grateful appreciation

of what these early friends did for him by bestowing upon these boys the names of these earlier friends! Doubtless this experience of the shop accident called forth the peculiar instinct of the young apprentice, but the soil must have been ready for the seed—Nature's gift of the qualities that manhood was to develop and ripen.

The path from the shop to the benches of the medical school was an easy one sixty years ago. Three years of study including two courses of lectures at a medical school sufficed to earn a degree. Of course, then as now, such a training could only have introduced a man into the vestibule of medical knowledge. It opened the door, it pointed the way, the later progress depending upon the inherent qualities of the neophyte himself. Fowler made the most of his opportunities; he was thoroughly in earnest; he had a mind quick to apprehend, thirsty for knowledge, and a natural mechanical aptitude that turned him especially to those things in which the hand could actively engage to accomplish an end: he was a born surgeon, indefatigable in the dissecting room, and devoted to the clinic. He did not attempt to secure an hospital internship because he could not afford to put off for a year or more the beginning of the time when he could earn money to pay his debts as well as to secure his daily bread. In 1871 he was graduated as a Doctor in Medicine from the Bellevue Hospital Medical College, and at once opened his office in Brooklyn in a location that promised an immediate demand for his services.

It was in the crowded tenements of the poor that he found the experience that took the place of hospital wards. For fifteen years thereafter he carried on a constantly enlarging general practice, in which, however, the surgical element became increasingly prominent. He had no hospital connection, no teaching position, no influential coterie of friends to push his fortunes. It was purely the force of his own personality that made his career possible. He began his work just as the Listerian teachings were coming to be appreciated by the surgical world. Fowler accepted the doctrines of antisepsis with enthusiasm and led in their advocacy despite the critical skepticism of the older surgeons who had hitherto controlled the surgical situation in the community. He wanted to teach, he wanted the opportunities of a hospital ward, he constantly felt the urge of the surgical spirit that was in him. The avenues to such positions in all the existing institutions were preempted by others. At last the opening of a new hospital brought to him the desired opportunity, when, in 1883, he was appointed one of the surgeons to the recently opened St. Mary's Hospital. Four years later, when the Seney Methodist Episcopal Hospital was opened, he was appointed one of its two attending surgeons. Later when the staff of the Brooklyn Hospital was re-organized he was made its chief surgeon, and somewhat later still upon the organization of the German Hospital the first surgical appointment on its staff was given to him. By 1890 he was in the full tide of his surgical activities. Un-

tiring, full of enthusiasm, delighting in his work, he was passing from hospital to hospital. He was not only an untiring worker but he was equally untiring as a student. He read, he wrote, he traveled, he mingled with men, he steadily grew in mental breadth and in professional capacity, while his natural aptitude and his manual skill remained the dominating elements in his special work. He was elected to membership in the New York and in the American surgical societies. He attended the International Medical Congresses at Moscow and at Paris. When in 1890 the State of New York instituted a State Board of Medical Examiners, he was appointed one of its organizers, and the chair of surgery was assigned to him, a position which he continued to hold throughout the remainder of his life.

Fowler's contributions to surgical literature were frequent. Although he was continually doing an amount of work that would exhaust the endurance of a half dozen ordinary men, he never seemed to be tired, and after a full day's work in office, ward, and operating room, would settle down to writing in his library until the early morning hours. When he did retire an emergency call that would rouse him from his bed would be responded to by him with the readiness and eagerness of a recent graduate. The number and variety of his papers on surgical subjects testify to his industry and to the scope of his labors. While his writings dealt with all regions of the body, it is probable that his name will long be associated especially in thoracic surgery with the subject of the decortication of a lung in chronic empyema, and in abdominal surgery with the early operative treatment of appendicitis; and with the semi-sitting position in the treatment of general peritonitis the "Fowler position."

Among the pioneer workers in appendicitis he was most earnest in advocating early and radical surgical interference. His work on the subject, published in 1894, will remain as a valuable landmark in the history of the evolution of the surgery of the appendix.

For many years he labored in the preparation of a systematic treatise on surgery, to the writing of which he devoted hours that he stole from the tale of those that should have been devoted to sleep. It was published in 1906. The last proof sheets were corrected by his own hand, but he did not live to see a printed copy of the book over which he had labored so assiduously through the years. In February, 1906, while en route to attend a meeting of the State Medical Examining Board in Albany he was seized with intense abdominal pain; on arrival he was carried to the hospital. His colleagues operated with all promptness for the removal of a gangrenous appendix; he lingered for a few days; a paresis of the ileum developed which was obstinate to all efforts for its relief, and on the sixth day of February in the beginning of his fifty-sixth year, his great heart stood still. In the completion of his book he had evidently completed his life's work. His book is the epitome of his life—into every page of it he infused his own personality. It

is valuable in itself. In its clearness of diction, comprehensiveness of treatment, and the practical directions for resort to surgical relief it is unsurpassed by any book of its day. It is still more valuable, however, as an example of the possibility of the achievements of ardor, enthusiasm, pluck, energy, and perseverance in wresting brilliant success out of conditions apparently forbidding and sterile.

George R. Fowler was of medium height, compactly built, with a frank attractive countenance, and a piercing eye. He was companionable and engaging in his relations with his fellows, always kindly and sympathetic in his attitude to those who sought his help. He had a breezy positive way about him that could not fail to awaken the confidence of those with whom he came in contact. He always carried his profession with him and loved to talk about any phase of it. He left an enduring impression upon the community in which he lived as well as upon the surgery which he loved. In the work of his pupils and of his sons who now occupy positions of responsibility in the surgical world he still lives.

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