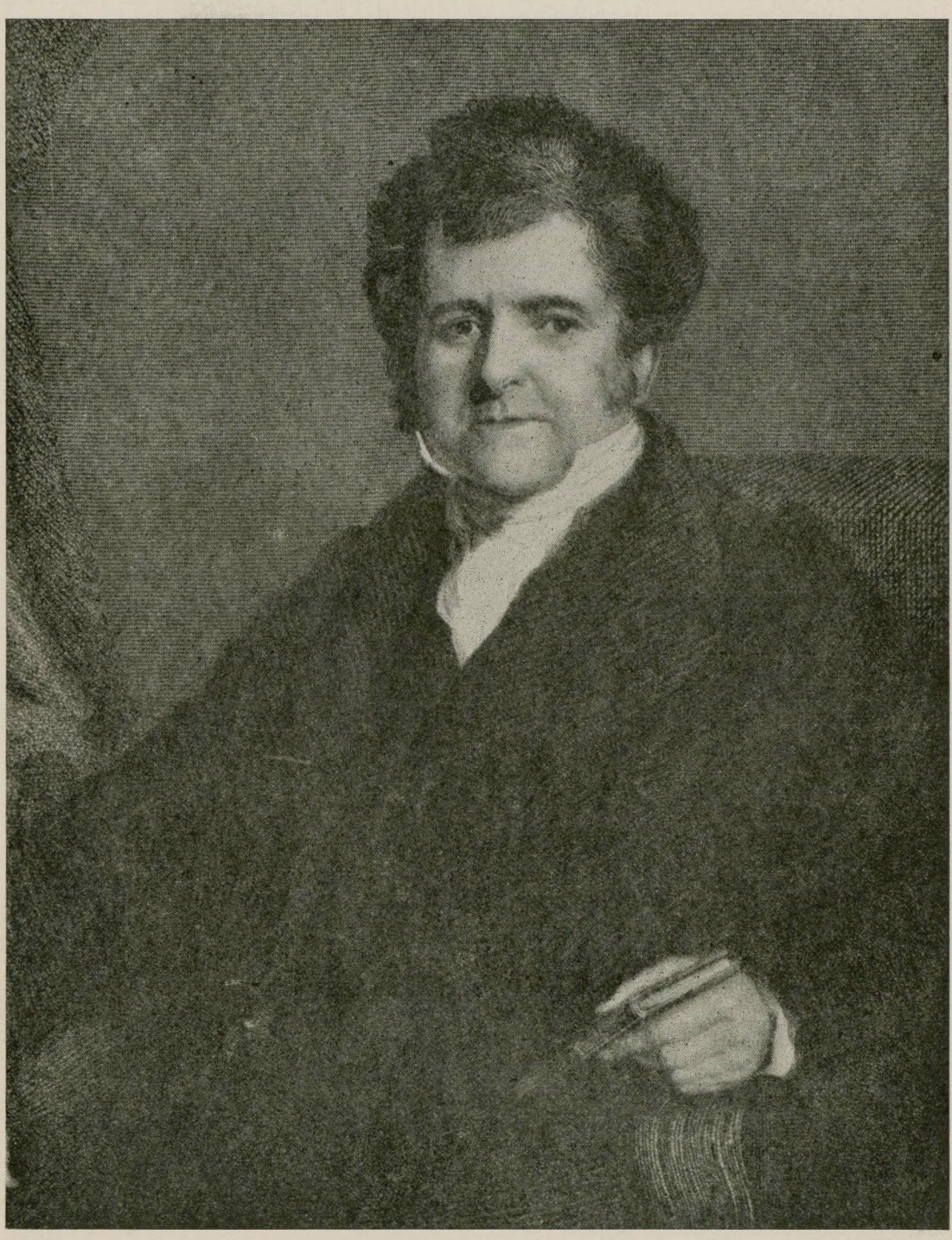

RICHARD BRIGHT

The Doctor's Page

RICHARD BRIGHT

(1789-1858)

Richard Bright, third son of Richard Bright, wealthy and influential banker of Ham Green, Somerset, was born at Queen Square, in Bristol, on September 28, 1789. He attended the private school of Dr. Estlin, near Bristol and later studied at Exeter. In 1898 he matriculated at Edinburgh where he studied anatomy under Hope, Monroe and Duncan. In the summer of 1810, he accompanied Sir George Steuart Mackenzie on an expedition to Iceland. His contributions to the study of botany and zoology of Iceland are published in the history of the expedition.

On his return, Bright attended Guy's Hospital in London, where he studied under W. Babington, Currie, Astley Cooper, the two Clines and Travers. Returning to Edinburgh in 1812, he worked under Gregory, studying geology and natural history at the same time. He took his degree of M. D. on September 13, 1813, with a dissertation "De erisipelate contagioso."

In the summer of 1814, he passed several months on the Continent, in Holland, Belgium and Germany, studying and observing. The winter of 1814-15 he spent at Vienna, studying with Hildenbrandt. The spring he spent in travel through lower Hungary. He reached Brussels two weeks after the battle of Waterloo. Here his experiences in the military hospitals are said to have been valuable. He described his travels in a carefully detailed volume, illustrated with excellent sketches from his own pencil. The work is that of a keen observer and serious student.

In 1816, he was admitted Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians and shortly thereafter was made Assistant Physician to the London Fever Hospital. In 1818 he again visited the Continent. He was made Assistant Physician at Guy's Hospital in 1820, and resigned his position at the Fever Hospital. In 1821 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society. Soon after obtaining his hospital appointment, Bright began to teach, lecturing on botany in its relation to materia medica from 1822 to 1825. In 1823 he gave his first clinical lectures and he was made Full Physician to Guy's Hospital in 1824, sharing with Cholmeley the course on theory and practice. He shared these lectures with Addison for many years afterward.

It was a stimulating period in medicine. Physicians were commencing to use and trust their senses, to investigate and explore for themselves. From the day Bright entered Guy's Hospital, he devoted himself sincerely to the study of morbid phenomena, spending as much as six hours a day at the bedside and in the necropsy room. For seven years he published little or nothing but these years were well spent. In 1827, he published his "Reports of Medical Cases," a remarkable collection of clinical and anatomical observations made for the most part during his three years of service as Full Physician at Guy's. In this work Bright points out scrupulously that among the comments and inferences there are some for which he "must bear the responsibility alone. Such are the statements and conjectures regarding the dependence of a peculiar class of dropsies on disease and irritation of the kidneys. Such are some observations on the peculiar changes in the structure of the liver, . . . and such are the hints thrown out on the influence of the peculiar state of the mesenteric absorbents on the symptoms of phthisis."

His "Reports of Medical Cases" (1827) contains his original description of essential nephritis with its careful distinction between cardiac and renal dropsy. The observation that dropsy was sometimes associated with hardening of the kidneys was not new. Aëtius, in the fifth century, and William Salicet, in the thirteenth, had mentioned it. In like manner the association of albuminous urine with certain dropsies had been pointed out in 1770 by Cotugno; by Cruikshank; by Darwin, and later by Wells and Blackall, each of whom noted the presence of renal disease in individual instances; but Bright

over

was the first to connect these symptoms with the peculiar inflammation of the kidneys, which he found in so many postmortems. In his second volume of "Reports," published in 1831, he continues his observations on renal disease. In 1836, he gives a more or less complete summary of his work and tells the story of the disease in a clear and concise manner. Among the symptoms he notes the fullness and hardness of the pulse, and his discussions, anatomical, physiological and pathological, are about as complete as anyone could make without the aid of the microscope and ophthalmoscope. Following this is a tabulation of the morbid affections in one hundred patients with albuminous urine in which he treats especially of the complications of renal disease.

In 1842, Bright published a brief note on some microscopical studies with Toynbee, which led them to believe that the essential element in the disease was the glomerular change. This ended the contributions which Bright made to the study of the renal disease in his own name, although valuable studies were made later under his guidance and direction. In a little less than ten years he had brought into medicine a remarkably clear clinical and pathological conception of those forms of renal disease which since then have come to be associated with his name. His contribution was not merely recognition of the association of clinical symptoms with anatomical changes; he studied not only the urine, but the blood serum and body fluids. He was one of the first to introduce methods of quantitative chemical study into routine practice.

Bright did much more than discover the relation between albuminuria, dropsy and renal disease. Thus, he gave original accounts of pancreatic diabetes and pancreatic steatorrhea (1832), acute yellow atrophy of the liver (1836), unilateral convulsions or Jacksonian epilepsy (1836) and "status lymphaticus" (1838). His "Medical Reports" contain accurate accounts of scarlatinal otitis, otitic abscess of the brain, laryngeal phthisis, pressure paralysis, cerebral hemiplegias, the hysteric equivalents of disease and striking plates of the pathologic appearances in typhoid fever, nephritis, acute yellow atrophy of the liver and cerebral disease. His observations on hydatid cysts are quite original.

Bright was a capable and accomplished artist and his early volume of Hungarian travels is illustrated with charming pictures drawn by himself.

In 1832, following the publication of his second quarto, Bright was promoted from Licentiate to full Fellowship in the Royal College of Physicians. He had become distinguished among his colleagues and loved by his pupils. In 1836, and again in 1839, Bright was a censor of the Royal College of Physicians. In 1839, appeared the first volume of the "Elements of the Practice of Medicine," by Bright and his associate, Thomas Addison, written as a book of reference for students.

Bright enjoyed his position at Guy's Hospital for nearly twenty years. In 1843, he was seriously ill and retired from the hospital positions of which he had made such good use, at the age of fifty-four years. His remaining years were given to his consulting practice, to travel and to his many artistic interests His practice grew to be perhaps the largest in London. For years he suffered from valvular disease of the heart. On the night of December 11, 1858, Bright was seized with melena, associated with great prostration, dyspnea and anginoid pains. He failed to rally and four days later just after midnight, on December 14th, he died.

Bright was a gentleman in the true sense of the word. He was a great observer, a disinterested lover of truth. He showed early an instinctive interest in the works of nature, in geology, in botany, in zoology. He could not have been called a brilliant man, but he was a simple, straightforward, kindly man who met life with charity and tolerance; a conscientious, painstaking physician; a patient, careful, modest, scrupulous observer.

Mahomet declared that "a man's true worth is the good he does in this world. When he dies, mortals will ask, what property has he left behind him? But angels will inquire, 'what good deeds hast thou sent before thee?' "

—American Medicine.