A Famous Physician

Vita Medica. Chapters of Medical Life and Work. By Sir Benjamin Ward Richardson, M.D., LL.D., F.R.S. Longmans, Green & Co.

THIS is not only a detailed account of the medical life and professional labor of its distinguished author, but to some extent an epitome of the history of the progress of medicine during the past fifty years. It is full of instructive reading, not only for members of the medical profession, but for all who are interested in sanitary science and preventive medicine. From the time the author began his professional career, till the day of his death, his life, to make use of his own expression, was one of "constant endeavor." We cannot recall an instance of another physician who possessed such versatility of talent, and who labored to develop his original ideas with such unflagging, tireless energy. Besides being a successful practising physician, well informed as to the treatment of disease, Sir Benjamin was a scientific chemist, both in analysis and synthesis. In experimental physiology he made many important discoveries, and in sanitary science, no one man has accomplished more. In all new discoveries pertaining to medical science he took the liveliest interest. For instance, he experimented with various agents, hoping to find an anæsthetic that would destroy sensibility without taking away the consciousness of the patient, thus rendering it perfectly safe and harmless to life, and, although he did not succeed, he was firmly convinced that such an agent would yet be found. He was the first to make use of local anæsthesia in surgery, and Richardson's hand-ball spray apparatus for throwing ether upon the part to be operated on, which by its rapid evaporation destroys local sensibility, has been for many years, and is still, largely used by surgeons. The "lethal chamber," for putting domestic animals painlessly to death, was devised by him and is now in use on a large scale at the Dogs' Home at Battersea. Numerous other scientific discoveries were made by Sir Benjamin, among which was that of transmitting sunlight rays by means of a tube through the solid structures of the body—being, in fact, Röntgen's method, anticipated by nearly thirty years, but making use of sunlight instead of electricity. He succeeded in making bones visible, and some so transparent that large words could be read through them. This discovery he utilized for diagnosing and destroying tumors in soft transparent parts.

If Sir Benjamin had accomplished no other beneficent work during his busy life, his labors in the cause of temperance alone should entitle him to the gratitude of mankind. In Chapter XIX, "The Battle with Alcohol" is vividly described. He declares that he was not influenced by the moral denunciations of others against alcohol, but by the firm conviction, resulting from careful observation and experiment, that it was "not only unnecessary for life, but an enemy to life." For many years he waged war against its use, not only as a beverage, but as a medicine in the treatment of disease, and he at least had the satisfaction of knowing before his death that, mainly through his individual efforts, much had been accomplished in influencing physicians against its reckless and indiscriminate medical administration. In reply to the charge that abstainers are not progressing in the way they ought to do he says:—

"I think we have progressed rapidly. We were the citizens a generation or two since of an alcoholic world. Alcohol literally, as well as nominally, ruled the roost. A man or woman who would not offer a glass of wine was branded as mean, ignorant or vulgar. Not a medical consultation could be held but that in the consulting-room were found the wine-bottles and wine-glasses. They are rarely, if ever, there now. Every solemn act, down to the preparatory gathering at a funeral, was solemnized by wine. The solemnization has disappeared. Feats of speed, of courage, of hard work, were encouraged by wine. The encouragement has lost its bearing. People who were about to insure their lives were rejected if they were abstainers. They are certainly now daily rejected because they are imbibers of the very substance that once secured them. All great responsibilities are accepted and welcomed if they are undertaken by abstainers, and they are considered vulgar who press the wine-cup. At one time ministers in the pulpit were in fear whenever they raised their voices against the use of strong drink as a beverage or sustainer. Now they compete in speaking against drink wisely and well.

"A most important change has also taken place in the treatment of the sick. * * * Wine, wine, wine, was the cry of a quarter of a century ago. Brandy was the so-called sheet-anchor."

Alcohol having ceased to retain its sway as a food or medicament, as a logical consequence "I have witnessed two events: a hospital erected from which alcohol is practically excluded, and a society formed consisting of medical men who treat the diseases under their care without alcohol." Upon the completion of this most interesting volume the life of the gifted author came suddenly to an end. The last line was written just before eight o'clock in the evening of 18 November 1896; at ten he was stricken with apoplexy which caused his death.