

CHAPTER V

SURGEON IN HADDINGTON

“WHAT are we to do with our boys?” is a difficult question to answer. One thing which my parents did for me, was to give me a good education. It was better than if they had given me a fortune. But what use was I to make of it? There was I, a passed surgeon, before I had completed my twentieth year. I was too young to start business for myself. If I did, who would have employed me? I looked even younger than I was.

Unfortunately, at that time, the number of surgeons was greatly in excess of the public demand. Europe was at peace. The army, instead of absorbing surgeons, discharged them; and in Haddington, as elsewhere, there were experienced army surgeons on half pay, competing with the local practitioners. The navy was also on a reduced scale; and with the demand for reform, it was likely that it would be still further reduced. There were to be no more wars. Some surgeons went to India, but I could not find my way thither, for I had no influence. Besides, as I was the son whom my mother most relied on for assistance, and as she wished me to remain at home for some years, I finally consented.

I did go to Galashiels in 1833 to visit my relations

there, and to look about me for an opening. There I found an old college friend who had just commenced business. He said, "If you come, I will go!" As he had first obtained possession of the ground, I retired and returned homeward. I came back by way of Abbotsford, which I visited for the first time. It was the year after Sir Walter's death, and the place looked very sad and silent. I also went to see my relatives, the Yellowlees, at Cowden Knowes Farm, and was hospitably entertained by them, then home by Lauder, the scene of the raid a few years before.

But I could not be idle. I was requested by Provost Brown (the first provost under the Municipal Reform Act), and by Mr Davie, the Secretary to the School of Arts, to deliver a course of Lectures on Chemistry to the members. This was a pleasant occupation. It took up a considerable portion of the summer; and I wrote out twelve lectures—the longest spell of writing I had ever undertaken. I had the use of the excellent apparatus belonging to the institution; and whether I improved my hearers or not, I know that I greatly improved myself in my practical knowledge of Chemistry, Heat, Electricity, and Galvanism. My former teacher, Mr Johnstone, gave a course of lectures, on alternate evenings, on Mathematical and Physical Geography; and Mr Archibald gave another course on Mineralogy and Geology. These lectures were delivered in the Parish School. It was used for the education of children during the daytime, and for the education of adults in the evening—a very proper manner of using public buildings for the benefit of all classes. The lectures were exceedingly well attended.

Eventually, I determined to settle at Haddington,

and practise medicine there—at least for a time. I scarcely expected much success, for the population of the town and neighbourhood was small and stationary, and I was the youngest of eight practitioners. There were the two Dr Howdens, father and son, who had an old established business; Drs Lorimer and Cruickshank, with the former of whom I had served; Dr Black, a retired army surgeon; Dr Burton; Mr Anderson, surgeon; and lastly myself, the youngest of them all. Still, I got some remnants of practice, mostly among the poorer people.

The life of a country doctor, though varied, becomes monotonous. Dr John Brown has given a good account of the profession in his essay, "Our Gideon Grays." He introduces it with the motto, taken from Mungo Park, who was originally a country doctor: "I would rather go back to Africa than practise again at Peebles." The doctor has to be at everybody's bidding, and must ride out to the country, wet or dry, far or near, whether paid or not. In my case, much of my work was done gratuitously—as is the case with every young country doctor. Still, I met with a great deal of kindness, among the farm-servants as well as among the farmers. The latter were always willing to give me entertainment while attending their people, as well as a glass of whisky toddy. This is one of the perils of the profession; and one which I often found it necessary to shirk. There was much to admire in the poorer class of people among whom my lot was cast. As a lady who had travelled much said to me, "The East Lothian peasantry are not *picturesque*, like those we meet abroad." No! but they are wonderfully well

educated at their parish school; and they have a great deal of shrewd common-sense—a sort of mother wit, which goes further than any amount of picturesqueness. The Lowlander is hardy, economical, and industrious—rather reticent of speech, but opinionated and argumentative—somewhat uncompromising and self-assertive.

I knew some of these men who were full of sagacity, the result of treasured experience—though their income was not more than ten shillings a week. Out of their little earnings, they would send their children to school. But how little remained for the doctor who attended them in their trials and troubles? One thing they were rich in, and that was Contentment. They were fairly satisfied with what they had, and tried to make the best of it. The rich man is he who is contented with what he has: for all men, as every wise person knows, cannot have a front seat in the social circle. Fortunately, goodness does not belong to any special class, and I have found some of the best men, and the best-mannered men, among those whom we call the poor. Manner is, after all, the expression of the nature of the man; and doing to others as you would be done by, quiet self-possession, tact, and courtesy, the essentials of a gentleman, are to be found amongst all classes, even in the most secluded districts. An old saint said, “One little turn of the eye sets a man either in the sun or in the shadow of his own body.”

Though the poor man may know that he cannot be a hero, yet he can always be a man—and the Man is the true thing after all. It is not the quality of the coat, but the heart that beats under it. He is the true gentleman who possesses and displays the refined

qualities of human nature ; and such men I have found everywhere. I have seen them in sorrow and suffering—when the house was dark with the shadow of death ; and yet never found them wanting in thankfulness and gratitude for the mercies that were vouchsafed to them. Here, for instance, is the record of the life of an old gentleman—the like of whom I have often known during my brief pilgrimage on earth. And yet he was only a shepherd, working through life for a wage of not more than ten or twelve shillings a week.

The local journal said of him :—

“ A feeling of tender regret and old remembrance will be awakened in many minds by the announcement in our obituary list to-day of the death of Mr John Wood, shepherd, Long Yester, who, after no special illness or suffering, but the exhaustion of extreme old age, expired on Friday last. He was the oldest survivor of a race of worthy men in their day and calling ; an experienced, skilful, and faithful shepherd, who, though disabled for many years for active work, took an anxious interest to the last in his sheep ; a man of honest principle and sterling worth, he could not speak or act an untruth. Exemplary in all the duties and relations of life, he lived and worked as ever in the great Taskmaster's eye, and thus, after 'life's long day,' near the place where he was born, and where, eighty years ago, he first tended the flocks, with life's taper burning slowly to its close, the fine old man has passed away. Of him it may be truly said in the words of the sage—

“ His virtues walked their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void,
And sure the Eternal Master found
His single talent well employed.”*

It is unnecessary for me to go into all the details of my life while practising as a country surgeon.

* This record, “*In Memoriam*,” is taken from the *Haddingtonshire Courier* of 2nd January 1882.

My employment was very fitful. Sometimes I was out of bed for two or three nights together ; at other times I had little to do. How to employ my spare time? I set to work at my French ; bought French books, and read and studied them. The works of Aimé-Martin were amongst my favourites, as well as those of Degerando. The former gave me new views about woman's power in the world, which I afterwards turned to good account. I had many amusements too. I studied music, practised violin-playing, and got up a quartette party. We even went the length of giving charitable concerts. I also revived my old study of drawing, and began painting in oil and water colours. I proceeded to prepare a course of lectures on Physiology and the Conditions of Health, and illustrated them with paintings, like my old instructor, Dr Fletcher of Edinburgh. The preparation of these not only filled up my time, but gave me much pleasure. I gave about fifteen lectures in the Sheriff's Court-room, and they were well attended.

I had many good friends. One of the most attached was Tom Todrick,* a most genial, honest, sensible fellow. We were boys, and became men together. We took the London *Examiner* in its best days, while Albany Fonblanque was the editor ; as well as the *Monthly Repository*, with Fox, Sarah Flower Adams, Dr Southwood Smith, and Mrs Lemam Grimstone, as principal contributors. I devoured poetry, especially Shelley and Keats. I afterwards rose to Coleridge and Wordsworth, for each age has its special poetical attractions. The highest of all is, I think, Shakespeare. From this, it will be seen that I made good use of my time.

Another friend was Samuel Brown. He was a

* Afterwards Banker, in succession to his father.

most able, though vehement and impulsive, young fellow, a splendid talker, and afterwards an impressive lecturer. Great things were expected of him; but somehow he missed his way. While studying chemistry, in which he was proficient, he fell upon some new views of atoms and the constituent elements of bodies, to the development of which he gave his life. As he himself said in one of his subsequent writings :—

“It is the first step that is the heroic step. It has to be taken in the dark, it has to be taken alone; it can be taken only by a man who is capable of taking all the past along with him, and it cannot be taken by him on whom the bounded present has already crystallised, changing him into a pillar of salt.”

This will give an idea of the fibre of the man. While he was still a student at Edinburgh, he wrote to me as follows :—

“Your views regarding theorising accord with mine. [I forget what my views were, but probably they meant that theorising, as is implied by the word, meant to *see* clearly.] I verily believe, and am prepared to prove that, notwithstanding the sound and fury that is eternally raised in our ears by modern writers regarding the inductive philosophy, very few of the great discoveries since Bacon's time have been made by analysis. Many who make such a *fracas* about the connection of cause and effect, and the *Novum Organum* in these fruitless and laboured prefaces, are knaves who would, though asses, dress themselves in the lion's hide, and palm off their bastard products as legitimate. Others, again, after they have discovered by synthesis, go on (half unconsciously) to erect a fabric from foundation upwards, just as the architect, after seeing in the perspective of his brain the beauty and grandeur of a fancied edifice, commences and pursues its construction. The common, and I believe

the most successful, way of philosophising proceeds in this manner. A man endowed with genius surveys a pile of facts which has been collected partly by former theorists in order to stablish their vantage ground, and partly by the myriads of idiots who crowd the highways of science. He conceives (or *perceives*, if you will) a bond of union whereby they may be all linked together in a glorious series of relations. He generalises; he in fact forms a theory; he applies the touchstone of truth; it bears the touch in the manner in which it has been applied; it is accepted; and what if it go the way of all living; what if it crumble into nullity like its predecessors? Has he not added to the number of known facts, as former theorists had done, and pointed out mines (perhaps of gold) for the unmotived to work? Is not all human knowledge valuable only for its facts? Is not the cause of humanity thus eminently served by this disposition to speculate? Did Davy not conceive that the alkalis and earths are metallic oxides, and then prove it? Did not Ærsted perceive that electricity and magnetism were identical, and then prove it? Did Newton not conceive the identity of terrestrial attraction and the celestial forces, and then throw around this conception the gorgeous illumination of mathematical evidence?

“The theories of a day are the expression of what is *known* in that day, and are the moving springs of that knowledge’s progression. Theories, like empires, pass away, and are no more known upon the earth. That of yesterday is mocked, and to-day’s may share its fate to-morrow! And must we ever grope on in miserable doubt? Shall we never arrive at ultimate principles as well as ultimate facts? Shall *no* granite be found which shall stand the wear of time? Have we *no* test whereby we may ascertain *when* we have clasped the golden things we looked for, *when* we may revel in intellectual luxury in the bosom of eternal truth, without the dread of some monster with his MORE FACTS saying, ‘What do ye?’ Aye! there is *one*, there *is* one: *Mathematical demonstration*, and that alone. What is proved by mathematics *must* be. No science shall, can ever, be perfect till reduced to the absolute logic of mathematics. Astronomy, statics, hydraulics, acoustics,

and so on, are perfect, *because* they are mathematised. For instance, we shall never be certain that we have gained a last and infallible generalisation of the wondrous alchemy of our world and its grandeur, till we can reason mathematically on chemical questions. Is there any hope that we shall ever be able to do so? Yes! you and I *will* yet see that jubilee day of corpuscular science! It *shall* be proved that all the varieties of matter issue from *one* elementary atom—that the fifty-five elements at present recognised are all isomeric compounds of this one with itself, increasing in an arithmetical progression; that the affinities of each are in the ratio of their bulk, which shall *then* be known; that——shall I go on? No! It would hurt you, and it would hurt myself. If this consummation, so much to be desired, were brought about, how many thousand thousand grandeurs would it expose in every branch of human knowledge! How it would bear on the great metaphysical questions! . . . I believe firmly that no great extension of metaphysical physiology can take place until corpuscular science is perfected.”

I have given this lengthy extract from Samuel Brown's letter, as it explains the dream of his life, on which his fortunes were wrecked. But I may be wrong. His dream may yet be realised; for we do not know what science may have in store for us. At all events, if he was right, he was long before his time. It is curious that the estimable Professor Robison of Edinburgh—a man of profound knowledge in physical science—entertained a belief in the possible transmutation of bodies. “The analysis of the alkalis and alkaline earths,” he said, “by Guyton, Henry, and others, will presently lead, I think, to the doctrine of a reciprocal convertibility of all things into all.”

Samuel Brown afterwards endeavoured to explain the doctrine to me in his chemical laboratory at Haddington, when he had the use of the apparatus

of the School of Arts, with which I was so familiar ; but I could never see my way into the gist or facts of his theory. He had a method of converting starch into iodine, by which he said the quantity of iodine might be continually increased ; and this was a matter to be determined by weighing the final result. But I never had the proofs put before me. Shortly after, full of his supposed discovery, he brought the subject under the notice of Faraday, one of the first men of the day. But Faraday never put out his hand further than he could draw it back. Though far-reaching and imaginative, he was yet humble in his speculation. He might have overlooked or neglected the young inquirer ; but he kindly answered him as follows :—

“ I have no hesitation in advising you to experiment in support of your views, because, whether you confirm or confute them, good must come out of your experiments. With regard to the views themselves, I can say nothing of them except that they are useful in exciting the mind to inquiry. A very brief consideration of the progress of experimental philosophy will show you that it is a great disturber of pre-conceived theories. I have thought long and closely on the theories of attraction and of particles and atoms of matter, and the more I think, in association with experiments, the less distinct does my idea of an atom or particle of matter become.”

Nothing further could be got out of Faraday. But Samuel Brown still adhered to his opinions. He gave a brilliant course of lectures on the Philosophy of the Sciences, in conjunction with Edward Forbes, before the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh. He made many friends, for everybody admired him. The Professorship of Chemistry in the University became vacant, and the young lecturer

appeared as a candidate. There is little doubt that he would have been elected, for his religio-political supporters were in a majority at the council. But he was twitted with his absurd and unscientific views (for so they were thought) about atoms and the convertibility of matter. He was very honest, and took his stand upon his views. He burnt his boats, blew up his bridges, and cut off his retreat. He would bring them under the notice of Liebig, admitted to be one of the greatest chemists of the day. He went to Giessen accordingly, and saw Liebig; but nothing was ever heard of the interview. It was unsatisfactory—unconfirmatory. The election at length took place at Edinburgh; and, as Samuel Brown had retired, another professor was appointed.

He was still determined to wrest from Nature her secret. I was afterwards informed by a young chemist who had joined him, that the two took rooms together at Blackheath, near London, and there entered upon a series of elaborate investigations. In order that they might confine themselves sedulously and exclusively to their work, the two agreed to shave off half the hair from their heads, and thus taboo themselves, as it were, from the charms of society. But Nature could not thus be conquered.

The next thing I saw of Brown's, was a remarkably clever essay on the Smallness of Doses in Homœopathic Medicine. He seems to have been attracted by the new treatment. After this, he wrote many vigorous articles for the *North British Review*; but he left for a time, or at least he did not pursue, his old walk of science. His cousin, Dr John Brown (of *Rab and his Friends*), says of him:—

“His wings were too much for him. He was for ever climbing the Mount Sinais and Pisgahs of

Science, to speak with Him whose haunt they were—climbing there all alone and in the dark, and with much peril, if haply he might descry the break of day and the promised land. . . . His fate has been a mournful and a strange one; but he knew it, and encountered it with a full knowledge of what it entailed.”

During the later years of Samuel Brown's life, he was seized with a fatal disease from which there was little hope of recovery. He went to Derbyshire (where he tried mesmerism), then to London, and finally returned to Edinburgh. The last letter I had from him was towards the end of his life. I had written an article about his father, the founder of Itinerating Libraries, in a London Journal, and he desired to have a copy of it. He said he was ill, fatally ill, but he desired to do a little duty to his father before he died. The Memoir afterwards appeared. Poor Brown died in his thirty-ninth year. He was most lovable—as a boy and as a man. He was perhaps too bright for daily use. He was fascinatingly brilliant—impulsive in his speculations—and, as many thought, a great deal too rapid in his conclusions. And yet his cousin, Dr John Brown, said of him and his theories:—

“Some of us may live to see ‘*Resurgam*’ inscribed over Samuel Brown's untimely grave, and applied with gratitude and honour to him whose eyes closed in darkness on the one great object of his life, and the hopes of whose ‘unaccomplished years’ lie buried with him.”

Note.—Though he “could not see his way into” these speculations of Samuel Brown, the modern theory of electrons and the recently discovered phenomena of radio activity, which they vaguely anticipate, seem to justify Dr Smiles' recognition of genius in the striking personality of his friend.—ED.