ARThUR TRACy CABOT (1852-1912)

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Born a century ago, on January 25, 1852, Arthur Tracy Cabot impressed his fellow surgeons, both in his own country and in other lands, by his versatility and by his soundness. Protégé of the great Henry J. Bigelow, and his heir in litholopaxy, he achieved international fame in the field of genito-urinary surgery. American orthopaedic surgeons associate his name with the posterior wire splint for fractures of the lower leg, which he devised while surgeon to the Children’s Hospital at Boston and described in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal (110, 6, 1884). Displacing the old fracture box, “Cabot’s splint” retained its popularity for over thirty years and was one of America’s standard splints during the 1914–18 war. The Chief Surgeon, H.Q. First Army, American Expeditionary Force, issued an order: “The Cabot posterior wire splint or wire ladder splint is to be used for all wounds of the calf, ankle and foot.”

Many of Cabot’s communications were made in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, covering such topics as osteoclasis, resection of the ankle joint, successful wiring of compound fracture of the patella, treatment of tuberculous bone disease, and removal of the arm with the scapula and greater part of the clavicle for sarcoma of the scapula. In a paper, “The surgical treatment of ankylosis of the temporo-maxillary articulation,” published in The Lancet (ii, 304, 1897), he gave details of seven cases of his own, together with a review of the sixty-two cases previously reported in the literature.

After graduating at Harvard Medical School, Cabot continued his studies in Vienna, Berlin and London, where he heard Lister’s inaugural lecture at King’s College. He returned to Boston impressed with the importance of the pathological laboratory in the work of the surgeon, and fully appreciating the principles of antiseptic surgery. As early as 1876, the year of his graduation, he had succeeded in getting a “thoroughly aseptic result” in a compound fracture of the lower leg by using cotton batting which had been wrung out in a strong carbolic solution and allowed to dry. He and his brother Samuel made a generous donation towards the cost of a pathological laboratory at the Massachusetts General Hospital, as a memorial to their father, Dr Samuel Cabot.

Cabot was visiting surgeon to the Children’s Hospital, Boston, from 1881 to 1889, surgeon to out-patients at the Massachusetts General Hospital from 1881 to 1886, and visiting surgeon from 1886 to 1907. As an operator he was careful and deliberate. Though not a brilliant teacher or speaker like his master Bigelow, he could impart knowledge with forceful brevity and clarity. His writings were remarkable for their economy and choice of words. Many people found him cold, austere, and even stern; others succeeded in winning a “rare but electrifying smile.”

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