PHILIP COOMBS KNAPP
1858-1920

Obituary

PHILIP COOMBS KNAPP, A.M., M.D.

Philip Coombs Knapp was born June 3, 1858, at Lynn, Mass., where he received his preparatory education. He graduated from Harvard College with the class of 1878, and entered the Harvard Medical School. He received the degrees of A.M. and M.D. in 1883, after service as house officer at the Boston City Hospital and the Boston Lunatic Hospital, as it was then called.

Among the neurologists of this country who may be said to have influenced medical science should be ranked the strong personality of Dr. Knapp. Besides his scientific attainments he was a scholar and litterateur, with a singularly well-ordered mind, a superretentive and accurate memory, and a large store of learning on a great variety of subjects. He possessed a wide knowledge of current literature, history and fiction, and together with a solid grounding in the dead languages was familiar with French, German, Italian, Spanish and even Portuguese. He was an omnivorous reader, a close student of Dante, a writer on scientific subjects in leading magazines, as well as a speaker of excellent diction and a fluent though trenchant debater. As an extensive writer on medical subjects he is perhaps best known. All these accomplishments he enlisted in the service of neurology wherever possible. He was past master in its bibliography.

In 1887, 1895, 1901 and 1911 he acted as editor and cotranslator of the successive editions of Strümpell's "Text-book of Medicine," adding to the last an original section on mental disease. His first work as an author was a volume on "The Pathology, Diagnosis and Treatment of Intracranial Growths" which he published in 1891. He contributed the section on "Nervous Affections Following Railway and Allied Injuries" in Dercum's textbook on nervous diseases, and "Feigned Diseases of the Mind and Nervous System" in Hamilton's system of legal medicine. Few of the aspects of neurology or psychiatry escaped his ready and instructive pen, as the long list of his contributions to medical publications bears witness.

He held numerous positions and memberships, among them: the presidency of the American Neurological Association, the New England Society of Psychiatry and the Boston Society of Psychiatry and Neurology. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, and a member of the Neurological Society of the United Kingdom, the New York Psychiatric Society, American Institute of Criminal Law and

Criminology, the American Association of Medical Jurisprudence, American Medico-Psychological Association, American Medical Association, and several others. For five years he was a trustee of the Boston Insane Hospital. He was especially devoted to the interests of the American Neurological Association, and was among the foremost of its members in promoting a high standard of membership and quality of work.

Although by nature inclined to be silent and uncommunicative in private, he rarely missed an opportunity to speak—and to the point—at medical meetings which he attended religiously. His opinions, once carefully formed, he held to tenaciously, and was determined and outspoken in supporting them.

As a medical expert he was effective and thoroughly at home. Here his imperturbability stood him in good stead, while his discernment and fund of knowledge of nervous and mental conditions and criminology gave great weight to his testimony. He was consequently in great demand in medicolegal cases, and was highly respected by both bench and bar.

Of Dr. Knapp as a clinician a former student of his, Dr. Cannon, professor of physiology in the Harvard Medical School, gives the following testimony from personal experience:

Dr. Knapp placed extraordinary insistence on thoroughness. Each one of us in turn had to take charge of the examination of a patient while Dr. Knapp and the rest looked on, and to examine him from top to toe and report with exactness on everything that we found. After that there was a discussion of the interpretation to be placed on the objective findings which was highly illuminating. This experience was one which appealed to me very strongly, and I have repeatedly testified to the excellence of Dr. Knapp's method. Along with it there went in his teaching a dry humor which many of us much appreciated. He frequently made references to novels and other reading, and I recall his testimony that he managed to get through at least a novel a week. I have always regretted that more men did not have the advantage which I had of coming into relations with Dr. Knapp as a student, and deriving from him the discipline which he so capably enforced.

From 1886 to the time of his death Dr. Knapp held the position of physician for diseases of the nervous system at the Boston City Hospital where he soon became noted for his skill in diagnosis. From the first he was indefatigable in his efforts toward the development of that department, and he enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing it grow, through many years and much opposition, from a small outpatient clinic to a separate department for nervous cases on special wards. He was also a warm advocate of the treatment of mental cases on the wards of general hospitals, and was instrumental in having the practice adopted at the City Hospital—an entirely new departure in New England, and with but one or two exceptions in the entire country.

About five years ago he had a hemiplegic attack from which he soon recovered sufficiently to resume work. This he did with his old determination but diminished vigor and impaired motility. Nevertheless he spurred himself on and fulfilled his regular duties, in court, at the hospital, in private practice, etc. Even during the last six months of his life when he became increasingly and plainly incapacitated, he persisted in his efforts with indomitable spirit, only taking to his bed when locomotion became impossible. On Feb. 23, 1920, he died of cerebral thrombosis at the Boston City Hospital where he had served faithfully for thirty-five years as visiting physician. His widow survives him.

Dr. Knapp's strongest characteristic, known only to his intimates, was a constitutional diffidence that bred a certain taciturnity and unresponsiveness, and led him to assume a mental attitude which was at variance with his true nature. Only his closest friends therefore could fully know the warm heart, the loyalty in friendship, the fund of humor and store of knowledge which lay beneath.

HENRY R. STEDMAN, Boston.