A Selection of Harvey Cushing Anecdotes

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SOME happy paradox seems to propagate stories about a great man, even as the circle of those who knew him grows smaller. To be sure, mythology clouds veracity; but with the years the misty memories acquire a warm nostalgia permeated with the expanding humanity of the image we choose to remember.

It is in such a mood that we have gathered together this vignette of stories about the amazing person that literally founded and fathered the specialty of neurosurgery and whose 100th birthday we celebrate this month. The number of those who actually worked with Harvey Cushing is steadily dwindling; but with their cooperation, we have collected these new first-hand recollections.† There were many colors in the Cushing personality, but none of them was gray, and most of them are represented here.

Dr. Cushing: Host

The first two stories are told by Dr. John E. Scarff.*

"I remember the many delightful visits to the Cushing home in Brookline where we

* Deceased.
† The New York Academy of Medicine in 1954 sponsored a "Harvey Cushing as We Knew Him" evening; since the subsequent publication of those seven reminiscences reached a relatively limited group we are grateful to Dr. Saul Jarcho, the editor of the Bulletin of the N. Y. Academy of Medicine, for permission to retell a few of them.

residents would be invited for Sunday dinner. When the weather was nice we would stroll around the grounds to get the sun before dinner, often the only sun we would get for weeks at a time. I remember one amusing little game that Dr. Cushing played on several of these occasions. He had a trapeze bar in the old barn on the property. He would ask each of us to write on a piece of paper the length of time that we thought we could hang by our hands from this bar, and proposed that we all place a dime or a quarter on the piece of paper. The one who hung closest to his estimated time was to take the pot. It is an interesting thing that Dr. Cushing knew just how long he could hang and invariably won the pot; it was equally interesting that invariably he could hang longer than any of his residents."

"I was particularly delighted to be invited to Dr. Cushing’s home for his 61st birthday, which fell on a Sunday; I took with me as a little gift for that occasion Emil Ludwig’s new book, The Life of Napoleon. I had been particularly intrigued by the book because the first half of it told of Napoleon’s unique genius and his inexhaustible energies as he rose to power and world-wide eminence; but the last half told of his days on St. Helena when there was no outlet for those energies and where his world was slowly contracting. I could not help thinking of the impending parallel in Dr. Cushing’s
life when he would be retired by the age rule from the pinnacle of power and success to a life of relative inactivity.

"The next morning when I came down to breakfast at the Hospital, I found two envelopes side by side in my mailbox. One was the familiar blue-gray of Dr. Cushing's personal stationery and the other a plain brown manila. I opened the blue-gray envelope first and there was a very nice note from Dr. Cushing which went something like this: 'Dear Scarff: It was so nice to have you with me on my birthday and I want to thank you for the delightful book you brought as a gift. I read the book through last night after you left—and got the point! Sincerely, H. C.' In the other envelope was a terse command 'Come to my office immediately!' and when I got there I was met by a machine gun account of things which I had neglected to do the afternoon before while I had been a guest at his home and which should be done immediately. The two notes, one warm and personal, and the other almost fierce, had been placed in the box at the same moment! Dr. Cushing kept his social and professional lives in strictly guarded compartments."

Dr. Percival Bailey, who was with Dr. Cushing at the Brigham longer than any other assistant except Gilbert Horrax, tells the following story.

"Dr. Cushing loved to advise his residents to 'put their affections on ice' during their years of training. One Sunday at tea in his home he remarked that a young doctor should take example from Wordsworth and study the birds and flowers and other beautiful objects of nature. This was too much for me and I remarked that Wordsworth had studied other aspects of nature also, for I had read in *Mercure de France* a long account of an illegitimate daughter whom he abandoned in Brittany. Dr. Cushing glared at me, jumped up and growled, 'That's what comes of reading those filthy French magazines. I always had great misgivings about permitting you to go to France to study."

Dr. Eric Oldberg has contributed these two reminiscences of Sunday lunch with Dr. Cushing.

"In 1930, I was the last of the Cushing residents to work solo. After that there were generally about four on the service at once, each desiring to get a piece of the great man prior to his retirement in 1932. Dr. Cushing required his residents to do chores that would never be tolerated today, such as taking eye fields on all patients, even spinal cord cases, or measuring and recording the exact number of diopters of choked disc on every patient at least every 48 hours. One can imagine the exhausted but happy state of the resident when Sunday morning came along. Alas, about once out of every three Sundays, I would receive a call about 9 A.M. and the stentorian voice would come over the telephone, 'Oldberg, come out to lunch,' and that was the end of the time I had set aside for catching up. There was always one consolation. This was the possibility that there would be some foreign luncheon guest who had never seen corn on the cob. All during the season, it was Dr. Cushing's delight to serve these gentlemen with a well-buttered cob, and then watch them try to eat it with the least possible spattering, sucking noises, and bits of whatever it is between the teeth. Only those close to Dr. Cushing knew the malicious glee with which he watched the embarrassed debacle."

"When I came to the Brigham as a house officer, I brought with me several books of piano music for four hands. Marshall Fulton, who is now in Providence, was then a resident in medicine at the Brigham, and we used to play these pieces, Marshall on the treble, and I on the bass, in the upstairs sitting room of the Brigham house staff quarters. Dr. Cushing heard about this, and we were ordered to appear at his house in the late morning one Sunday to exhibit our prowess and to stay for lunch. No one could have felt more embarrassed about this than Marshall and I, but orders were orders, so we took some Mozart overtures and went out to the Cushing house to perform for him on his ancient and untuned upright piano.

"Now the effect of our efforts, not to mention those of the great composer, was that John Fulton and Dr. Cushing, who sat alongside, spent the whole time discussing the speed with which the visual input from the printed musical score could be transferred to cortical impulses and sent along