

**Professional Review.****MEMOIRS AND LETTERS OF SIR JAMES PAGET.\***

The Memoirs and Letters of Sir James Paget are edited most charmingly by Mr. Stephen Paget, one of his sons, and are full of interest to nurses, more especially to those of the nursing school of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. The life is that of a great and good man who, in the face of the greatest difficulties and adversities won for himself a place in the front rank of his profession, a position which he was proud to claim. We read of him "wherever he went he liked to be taken as a surgeon; and if he had chosen any other profession he would have upheld, with the same steady insistence, the dignity of work and of the professional life as the thing that places a man."

It is quite impossible in the limits of a review to deal at all adequately with these memoirs; I can only hope to indicate their interest to nurses sufficiently to induce them to read the book forthwith.

The first reference to the nursing staff of St. Bartholomew's is contained in a letter written in 1836 to his brother, and is not a flattering one. It runs: "We have now three excellent cases of fever; wine and broth in the discretion of the sisters seem the grand resources. By the bye, your friend Sister Mary is a worse nuisance every day; between her and the active new apothecary, stimulated to additional activity by the new regulations, my place in that ward is nearly a sinecure."

For some years—from 1837-1842—Sir James Paget was a sub-editor of the *Medical Gazette*, now known as the *Medical Times*, and he tells that he has always been glad to have known the work of a journalist. "I can," he says, "clearly trace some of my facility in the work of after life to the having been on the staff of a journal."

Other journalistic work was with Dr. (afterwards Sir John) Forbes in his *Quarterly Review*. In this his knowledge of and facility in acquiring foreign languages was no small help to him.

"When first offering to Dr. Forbes," says Sir James Paget, "to contribute to his Review, I wrote that I should be ready to translate papers from the French, German, or Dutch; and it struck me that it might be as well to add Italian, though I knew nothing about it. In answer there came a great packet of Journals, the majority of which were Italian; so this had to be learned and added to the languages in which I might read medical science."

The following quotation will throw a side light on hospital conditions in 1836:—"The Hospital in its subordinate arrangements is in a most disturbed state: a Sister suspended for a month for not reporting the misconduct of a nurse; a house surgeon severely reprimanded and in danger of suspension (not *per coll*) for threatening to throw a bucket of water over a boisterous patient; the dressers all in arms, and memorialising, because the Governors are enforcing a regulation that no dresser shall prescribe even for a casualty patient except in the presence of the house-surgeon; a Sister dismissed to-day for supposed neglect. All these, in the gale of wind which is now blowing, have put the whole establishment in confusion."

\* By Stephen Paget (Longmans and Co.).

In October, 1846, Sir James Paget gave the Introductory Address to the students of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, "On the Motives to Industry in the Study of Medicine," in which he emphasised the need of union and sympathy between seniors and students. His words on this occasion seem as applicable to our own profession as to that of medicine, and are specially noteworthy at a time when we are feeling after association.

**UNION AND SYMPATHY.**

"We ought all to be united, not only, as we must be, by one law of interest and of responsibility, but by all we have, or should have, in common; by the one pursuit of science, by one zeal for the honour of the school, one desire to maintain unsullied the reputation which we all derive from the great and honourable men who have worked here before us—by one feeling that a sordid or unhandsome act of one would be a blot on the fair fame of the whole body."

**RESPONSIBILITY.**

"Your responsibilities are as various as are the ills that flesh is heir to; they are as deep as the earnestness with which men long to be delivered from suffering, or from the grasp of death. Why, we sometimes see the beam of life and death so nearly balanced, that it turns this way or that, according to the more or less of skill that may be cast into the scale of life. And surely if we could gather into thought all the issues that are involved in the life and death of any man the anxiety of ignorance at such a time would be intolerable. For at all such times the issues and the responsibilities are manifold; it is not alone the fate of the sufferer (though in that, indeed, may be the most fearful consequence of all), but as each of us must have felt in some instance very near to his own heart, those that stand around have all their various griefs and fears, their hopes yet sad forebodings. And now, all is permitted to depend upon the skill of one. Conceive that one yourself. What would your remorse be if, when in their confusion and distress they look to you, you feel helpless as themselves, utterly unworthy of the confidence with which they still lean on you; your hand paralysed by the fear of ignorance; your mind confused in that half knowledge, whose glimmerings only show that more skill might have saved the dying man? Yet this last must be the remorse of everyone who will neglect the study of his profession, and yet dare to undertake its responsibilities. . . . Do not imagine that your responsibilities will be limited to the events of life and death. As you visit the wards of this Hospital, mark some of the hardly less portentous questions which, before a few years are past, you may be permitted to determine. In one, you will find it a doubt whether the remainder of the patient's life is to be spent in misery, or in ease and comfort; in another whether he, and those who depend on his labours are to live in hopeless destitution, or in comparative abundance. One who used to help his fellow men finds ground to fear that he may be a burthen on their charity. Another counts the days of sickness not more by pain and weariness than by the sufferings and confusion of those who are left at home without a guide, and, it may be, starving. Ah! gentlemen, I can imagine no boldness greater than his would be,

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)