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HENRY PICKERING BOWDITCH, PHYSIOLOGIST¹

By Dr. WALTER B. CANNON
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL

SIXTY-EIGHT years ago a young chemist, Charles W. Eliot, was the new president of Harvard University. Almost from the first he undertook the hard task of revolutionizing medical education. In his report for the academic year 1870–71, he wrote that the corporation and overseers had “changed the title of the Parkman Professor of Anatomy and Physiology in the Medical School. Physiology having been made a separate branch of instruction, and an assistant professor having been appointed to teach it, the Parkman Professor will hereafter teach anatomy only.” The change, it was explained, was made with the assent of Oliver Wendell Holmes, for twenty-four years the incumbent of the combined chair. And later in the report President Eliot added, “The appointment of an Assistant Professor of Physiology and the equipment of a physiological laboratory has put that depart-

ment of instruction upon a much better footing than before.”

The comment is justifiable that no great change was required to bring about a considerable improvement. The literary Parkman professor had lavished his flowery adjectives on bodily structure, and had paid only incidental tribute to bodily function. He was, indeed, impressed by the revelations of the microscope, which, he declared, has “cleared up many uncertainties concerning the mechanism of special functions.” Unfortunately, however, nature had been reluctant. “If any prying observer,” he wrote, “ventured to spy through his magnifying tubes into the mysteries of her glands and canals and fluids, she covered up her work in blinding mists and bewildering halos, as the deities of old concealed their favored heroes in the moment of danger.” But progress was recognized. “Science has at length sifted the turbid light of her lenses, and blanched their delusive rainbows.”

Though there is evidence that Dr. Holmes in his lec-

¹An address given at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the American Physiological Society, Baltimore, April 1, 1938.

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