

John Augustus Hartwell

September 27, 1869 — November 30, 1940

Ordinarily it is a distressing undertaking to write about a close friend who has passed away. In the case of John Augustus Hartwell it is uplifting, rather than depressing. His departure was a glorious finale to the life of a great soldier, an outstanding citizen. He had been a sufferer for years; he worked for months while prostrated and in bed. He recovered sufficiently to renew active life and to indulge in his favorite sport. He died suddenly, as he would have wished, on entering a duck blind, looking forward to a morning of sport. It is typical of Hartwell that his widow announced his wish that flowers be omitted at his funeral and that, instead, contributions might be made to the British War Relief.

John Augustus Hartwell was born in Sussex, New Jersey, on September 27, 1869. He was the son of Samuel S. and Clarinda (Stiles) Hartwell. Having worked his way through college by coaching during the summer vacations, he was graduated from the Sheffield Scientific School in 1889 at the age of nineteen. He was assistant to Professor R. H. Chittenden for one year and then entered the Yale Medical School from which he was graduated in 1892.

During his college career he was a notable athlete, in fact one of Yale's great athletes. He was a famous end in football and a leading oarsman and captain of a winning crew. His love of sport continued throughout his life. He was an enthusiastic hunter and fisherman and was devoted to conservation of bird life. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him one of the organizers of the North American Wild Life Conference and he was first president of the organization known as "Ducks Unlimited."

But Dr. Hartwell's real life was centered, first, in the practice of surgery; second, in elevating the ideals and practices of his profession. He was identified with many hospitals and societies and became one of the outstanding members of his profession. He was closely identified with the Cornell Medical School in which he held the following appointments: Instructor in Physiology, 1898-1900; Demonstrator in Anatomy, 1900-02; Assistant Professor of Physiology, 1902-09; Assistant Professor of Surgery, 1911-18; Associate Professor of Surgery, 1918-32; Professor of Clinical Surgery, 1910-38; and Professor of Clinical Surgery, Emeritus, 1938-40. He took an active part in the organization and administration of the Cornell "Pay Clinic" which was planned to provide medical facilities at moderate cost for the "white collar class" which has always received the worst medical attention. The clinic proved a notable success and is accepted as such by the profession which at first opposed it vigorously.

Dr. Hartwell served in various capacities on the Second Surgical Division of Bellevue Hospital from 1904 to his death; he was Director from 1916 to 1928 and after that served as consulting surgeon. In 1916 he was one of a committee to reorganize the House Staff. During the winter of 1917-18, at the request of Surgeon-General Ireland, he conducted a course in war surgery for medical officers of the United States Army. At this time he held the rank of major in the Medical Corps.

Dr. Hartwell served as President of the New York Academy of Medicine for four years, 1929 to 1933, and as full time Director from 1934 to 1939. During that decade the effectiveness and influence of the Academy were markedly increased and broadened. It was written of him when he was president: "Probably few men in the country have Dr. Hartwell's pre-eminent qualifications to discuss the problems of present day medical practice. His seniority gives him the authority of experience, his position at the head of a great institution has brought him in close contact with current problems, his vitality makes him a first rate speaker."

He was consulting surgeon to a number of hospitals, including Presbyterian, General, Memorial, Lincoln, and the United Hospital of Port Chester. In February 1939 he was appointed associate director of the American Society for the Control of Cancer. He was a member of the leading medical societies such as the American Surgical Association, the American College of Surgeons, Society of Clinical Surgery, American Medical Association, and the New York Surgical Society. His clubs were the Century, Links, South Side, Graduate Club of New Haven, and the Army and Navy Club of Washington.

As a tribute to a life crowded with activity and accomplishments, the New York Herald Tribune on December 4, 1940, carried the following editorial appreciation of Dr. Hartwell:

"The death of Dr. Hartwell, the distinguished surgeon, removes from the New York scene a rare and many sided personality—Hartwell always had a sense of social responsibility. He made his influence felt with great vigor and clarity, on many issues. He fought fee splitting. He warned against overspecialization. He denounced the senseless raid on the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in 1929. He prevented legislation which he felt might hamper surgical research. He was effective in stopping the exploitation of unproved cancer 'cures.' He advocated hospital care for everyone regardless of financial status. Moreover he was a singularly attractive man."

In Dr. Hartwell's death on November 30, 1940, at the age of seventy one, the profession lost a great leader, the community a great force, his associates a great friend.

"The soil out of which such men as he are made is good to be born on, good to live on, good to die for, and good to be buried in."