

Flexner, A.

ABRAHAM FLEXNER:

An Autobiography

A REVISION,

BROUGHT UP TO DATE,

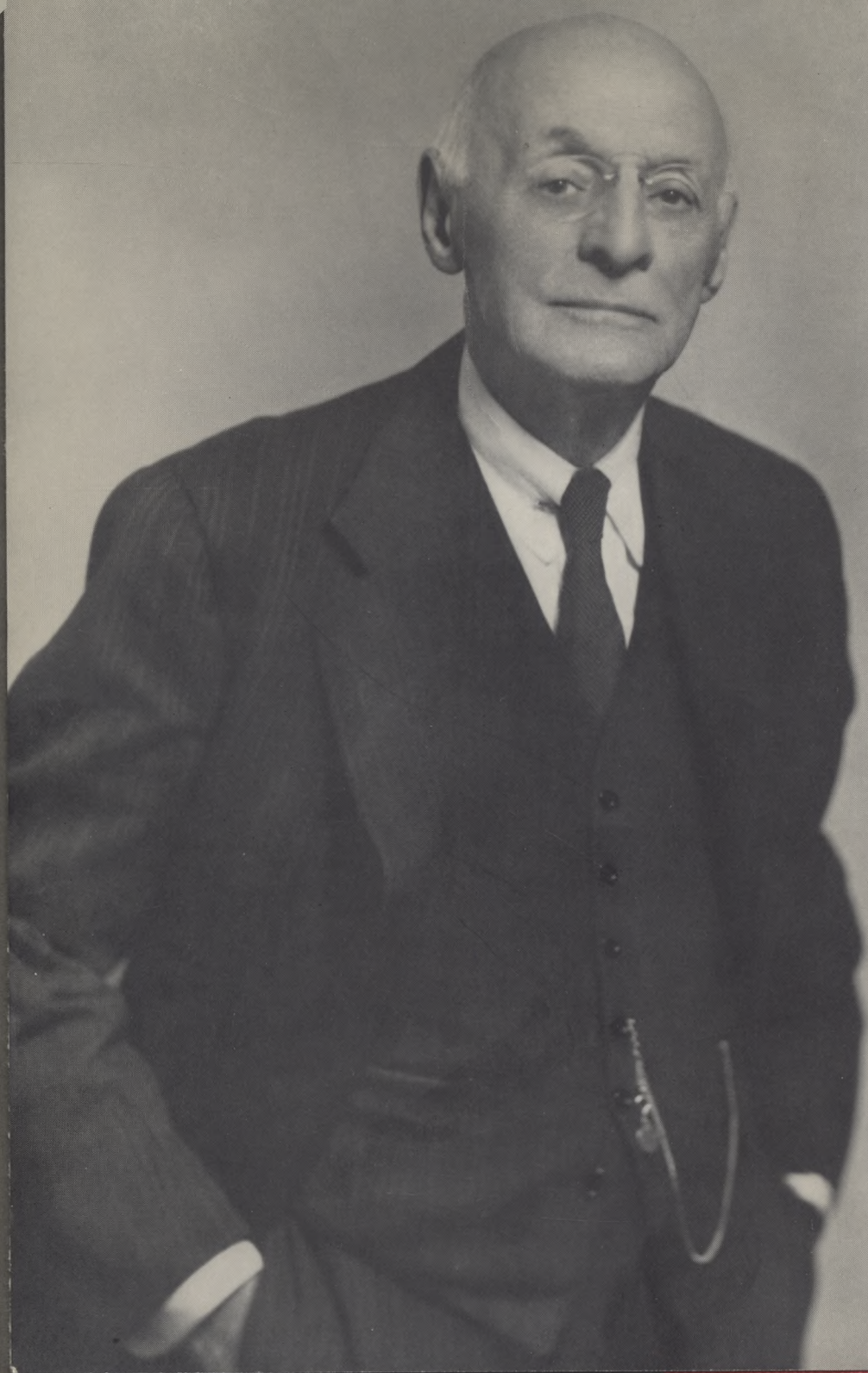
OF THE AUTHOR'S *I REMEMBER*,

PUBLISHED IN 1940

INTRODUCTION BY ALLAN NEVINS



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George Eastman

NOW THAT the General Education Board was somewhat amply supplied with funds, we were free to proceed both with reconstruction of existing institutions and the creation of new ones. Of the latter, one of the most interesting was the creation of the medical school of the University of Rochester in 1920. I had previously tried, without avail, to accomplish something at Columbia and Cornell. In the former case, initial progress was made. I remember a long conversation at the Century Club with the president, during which I tried to explain the impossibility of carrying on a modern medical school which did its laboratory teaching at Fifty-ninth Street and Ninth Avenue and its clinical teaching with practicing consultants in the Presbyterian Hospital at Seventieth Street and Madison Avenue. He appeared to be convinced and referred me to the dean of the school. But neither of them was half as much interested in scientific medicine as in the persons who held posts from which they would have to be dislodged. At Cornell the situation was not fundamentally dissimilar. The underlying subjects were properly equipped, taught, and inspired in a building on First Avenue. The clinical subjects were in the hands of practitioners and consultants at the New York and Bellevue hospitals. So for the moment New York seemed impossible. It struck me, as Dr. Buttrick and I were returning from the South, that the situation might be taken in the flank. As we sat together in a Pullman car one day, I said to him quite casually, "The University of Rochester is a modest but good institution, isn't it?"

"Yes," he replied. "I know it well. Gates and I are graduates of the Rochester Theological Seminary. I know Rhees well—a fine college head. Why do you ask?"

"It has occurred to me that if we could help to plant a first-rate medical school there, perhaps New York City would wake up."

"Why Rochester?" he asked.

"There are medical schools at Buffalo, Syracuse, Albany; it won't be easy to find money or men to reorganize them. Rochester has a clean slate; and besides there is Mr. Eastman."

"Do you know him?"

"No, but I do know that he has endowed a dental clinic. Perhaps that would prove a step toward medicine."

The conversation dropped. We soon reached New York. Dr. Buttrick found on his desk a letter from President Rhees: he would be in New York the following week. After their interview, Dr. Buttrick brought President Rhees to my office and, having introduced us, left us together. Our interview was brief.

"President Rhees, there is no medical school in Rochester; would you like to have one?"

"Only if we could have a first-rate one."

"We are not interested in any other kind. Do you know Mr. George Eastman?"

"Oh, yes, intimately."

"Can you arrange a meeting between us in Rochester?"

"I think so."

For the time that was all, but within forty-eight hours Rhees telegraphed me an invitation to breakfast with Mr. Eastman at his home on East Street. I reached Rochester about eight-thirty and motored to Mr. Eastman's home. As I entered I was greeted by the strains of organ music. After laying aside my hat and coat, I was ushered into a large reception room, where I was met by Mr. Eastman—a pallid gentleman in the sixties, well dressed, his thin white hair covered by a skullcap. The music continued. Before me was the organ, banked with flowers, the organist himself being almost invisible. A butler whispered in my ear, asking what I wished for breakfast. "Orange juice, eggs, and coffee," I replied. Mr. Eastman followed the music intently; not a word was spoken. A tray was soon brought and placed on the table before me. The strains of music continued unbroken. Promptly at ten the music ceased, and the organist made his way out

through the fragrant flowers. Thereupon Mr. Eastman rose and asked me to his study. Before a wood fire, the ashes of which were snow-white, we seated ourselves on a sofa. Mr. Eastman, lighting a cigarette, turned to me with the words "President Rhees tells me you wish to talk with me."

I might have been embarrassed, but his gentle smile and his soft voice were disarming and reassuring. I asked if I might tell him the story of medical education in the United States. He nodded affirmatively. I recounted what had been the situation when the Johns Hopkins Medical School was founded about thirty years previously, the efforts of Dr. Bevan's Council on Medical Education, the influence of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, the effect of the Carnegie bulletins, the present interest of the General Education board, Mr. Rockefeller's great gift, my notion that an excellent school might be created at Rochester; and, finally, by way of contrast, I explained the superb work of the German medical faculties over a period of almost seventy-five years as against the slow and ineffectual efforts which we had been making. Mr. Eastman asked an occasional question, but he was so good a listener that I was quite uncertain as to the impression I was making. Mr. Eastman's biographer aptly comments, "Eastman is a typical example of Disraeli's remark that nature gave man two ears but only one mouth." Toward noon he rose, pressed a button, and ordered luncheon for two. That, I thought, indicated progress.

We talked of other things during luncheon. About four o'clock he said, "I must go to my office now; what are you doing this evening?"

"I take the nine-thirty train back to New York."

"Dine with me here at six-thirty. I shall ask President Rhees also."

After an excellent dinner the three of us repaired to the study. Mr. Eastman set the ball rolling.

"I am interested in your project," he said, "but in these recent years I have given away thirty-one million dollars. What will the new school cost?"

"Eight to ten million."

"Let us figure on ten. I have spoken to my associate, Mr. Bowen (the name I remember). He tells me that I can spare two and a half million."

"Where is the rest to come from?" I asked.

"From Mr. Rockefeller's fund."

"In that event, it would be our school, not yours; it must be yours."

"That is the best I can do now."

"There's no hurry. Wait till you sell more Kodaks."

On that note I departed to catch my train. A few days later a telegram from Mr. Eastman brought me back to Rochester. Promptly after our meeting he said, "I have been going over things carefully. I can, I think, do a little better. I'll make it three and a half million dollars."

There was the same objection.

"I'd like to do this thing," Mr. Eastman said, "and now; for I am going to Japan with Frank Vanderlip. I should like to see it settled before I go."

"You shouldn't have said that," I responded, "for now I know you will go higher."

"I will not."

And once more I returned to New York. A few weeks later, in a handwritten note, Mr. Eastman invited me to lunch with him at his office in Kodak Park. I can see him now as he rose behind his desk, smiling and pointing his finger at me. "I shall make you one more offer and then I never want to see your face again."

I expressed my regret and asked for the offer.

"I'll give five million dollars, including the dental clinic valued at one million, if the Board will give five million."

"Very well," I said, "that offer I will accept. But," I added, "be-ware; with one gift, we have finished, but you have just begun."

"You are mistaken," he replied; "I too have finished."

"We shall see."

At the close of these negotiations Mr. Eastman said to me, according to a letter to my wife dated February 15, 1920, "You are the best salesman I have ever seen." The letter quotes him further: "When I asked him if he would give me a job in the Kodak business he replied, 'Yes, with the highest salary ever.' Who knows but I may yet be a Kodak drummer?"

I was back in New York the next morning and told Dr. Buttrick and Mr. Gates what I had done.

"But," said Mr. Gates, "you had no authority."

"I know that; but if the board refuses, I'll make good on our understanding."

Needless to say, the board approved with alacrity. Mr. Eastman wrote a personal letter to Mr. Rockefeller, Sr., reading as follows:

I venture to take this occasion to say that I am proud to have my name associated with yours in a philanthropic enterprise. For many years I have considered you the foremost philanthropist of the age and have admired the wisdom with which your vast wealth is being distributed. In this case it is not only the money contribution that this community appreciates, but the co-operation of your organization, without the skilled services of which the mere money would be impotent to obtain success.

President Rhees began at once to seek a head. Dr. Welch and my brother suggested Dr. George H. Whipple, then director of the Hooper Foundation at the University of California, formerly Dr. Welch's first assistant.

"I shall write to him at once," Rhees said to me.

"Don't do that," I advised; "go to see him. No letter can convey the full import of this undertaking."

Dr. Rhees wrote and Whipple declined. Rhees came to see me again.

"What shall I do now?" he asked.

"Go to San Francisco to see Whipple."

He went and within a week or so returned. Whipple had accepted.

Mr. Eastman shared my conviction that the laboratories and hospital should be built simply and out of income; the principal should be conserved. He himself supervised the construction, which, though plain, is dignified and admirably adapted to its purpose. He told me once that he had showed the new buildings to a New York architect.

"What style is this?" asked the architect.

"Early penitentiary," rejoined Mr. Eastman.

The medical school has fully justified all expectations. It has been excellent both as a teaching and a research institution. Dr. Whipple some years ago made the fundamental discovery which subsequently led Dr. Minot of Harvard to use liver extract in cases of pernicious anemia. For their brilliant work—alone enough to justify the Rochester School—they shared the Nobel Prize in medicine. Moreover, the medical school, pitched on the highest standard, as it was, immediately made its influence felt throughout the rest of the institution. At the time I first approached Mr. Eastman the endowment of the university was \$4,000,000. By the time the medical school was com-

pleted it was plain that "the tail was wagging the dog." Dr. Rhees and his associates undertook to rebuild the university on a site adjoining the medical school and to raise new endowment. Dr. Buttrick and I were both skeptical of his ability to raise the large sum required, but Rhees succeeded in record time. Within a comparatively short time the university's assets were increased to over \$40,000,000; and today it is one of the richest American universities.

Thus the creation and adequate endowment of the medical school had promptly reacted upon the entire university and transformed it from a small and inconspicuous college into an institution of national importance. Toward these further developments Mr. Eastman contributed generously during his life and in his will, as I had warned him long before that he would feel impelled to do. I myself had no part in the more recent development. One amusing note I must, however, quote. During the spring of 1921, when Dr. Burkhart, his adviser in dental matters, was absent on vacation, Mr. Eastman wrote him as follows:

Yours of March 21st from the steamer was received yesterday, and I was amused at your account of what Flexner said. He himself is the worst highwayman that ever flitted into and out of Rochester. He put up a job on me and cleaned me out of a thundering lot of my hard-earned savings. I have just heard that he is coming up here June 2nd to speak at the graduating exercises of the allied hospitals. I have been asked to sit on the stage with him, but instead of that I shall probably flee the town for fear he will hypnotize me again.