

MARGERIE BLACKIE - THE WOMAN

THE SECOND BLACKIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

given by

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HRH Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester
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Your Royal Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour I very deeply appreciate to have been invited to give the second of the Blackie Memorial Lectures; these lectures that keep alive the memory of a woman who dedicated herself to the work of healing, and who laboured unceasingly for the cause of homeopathic medicine.

I have recently completed the first full study of Dr. Blackie's life, so it seemed appropriate that I should devote my lecture to an account of her as a person. Thus I have entitled it "Margery Blackie - The Woman".

In writing Dr. Blackie's biography, which is soon to be published by John Murray, my aim has been twofold. Firstly I have, of course, concentrated on her work as a physician and as a champion of homeopathy. I have described her professional achievements in detail. I have told of her career in medicine, her methods as a general practitioner, her amazing gift for diagnosis, her utterly devoted care for her patients, her faithful service as a hospital physician, her leadership in the whole homeopathic scene, her genius as a teacher, her adamant resistance to any corruption of the classical homeopathy she taught and practised, her foresight and initiatives in the fields of training and research, through The Blackie Foundation Trust that she founded.

But my second aim in the biography - and it is my aim in the present lecture - has been to put on record what sort of person she was; to bring her to life as a woman; a woman whose friendships and background shaped her character, who possessed to a high degree not only single-mindedness, enthusiasm, determination and perseverance, but also great personal charm.

I never met Dr. Blackie, but I have gradually come to know her very well through the memories of her friends and relatives, her acquaintances, colleagues and patients, as well as from photographs, documentary evidence, tape-recordings, and so on. I can see her now - as I am sure many of you can remember her - with her laughing eyes, her soft wavy hair, her erect carriage, her animation, and her brisk decisive manner. I can see her holding out her hand in warm greeting, a slight, attractive woman in an elegant brightly-coloured suit. She had a philosophy of dress; she believed that it was part of her job to look smart and cheerful. She had found a style that suited her to perfection, and she kept to it. Red was her favourite colour - one of her patients who was also a friend, nicknamed her "the Red Queen".

Dr. Blackie - or "Margery" as I shall call her - was a person who inspired devotion in her friends, and throughout her life affectionate friendships were a support without which she could never have achieved what she did. Especially she was a person who had to have a best friend.

As a girl her best friend was, perhaps surprisingly, a niece of hers, Mollie Nott. Margery was the youngest, much the youngest, of a family of ten, and Mollie, the daughter of her eldest sister, was only a few years her junior. The two were at school together and Mollie (now in her eighties) remembers Margery as a worker, not a brilliant scholar. She did not sail through exams with honours, but she made up for this by her perseverance.

Then when Margery was a medical student at The Royal Free Hospital's School of Medicine for Women, where she took her training in general medicine, her best friend was a fellow student, a lovely young woman called Susanna Bernard, who later went as a doctor to the Far East. After they both qualified, and when they were house physicians (Susanna at The Royal Free Hospital, Margery at The London Homeopathic Hospital), they shared a flat in Marylebone. It was exactly sixty-one years ago, in April 1924, that Margery began work at the London Homeopathic Hospital ("Royal" had not yet been added to its title). Later the two young doctors moved to the house of an aunt of Susanna's on the borders of Kensington and Fulham; Drayton Gardens was where Margery first "put up her plate"; in other words, where she first started her own practice. She was then twenty-eight.

During her novitiate at the hospital, her best friend was a woman doctor of almost the same age as herself, Helena Banks. Temperamentally they complemented one another ideally. They shared a burning enthusiasm for homeopathy, but Helena, a buxom, kindly Scotswoman, was shy and self-effacing, in contrast to Margery with her courageous initiative and sparkle. It was not long before they decided to set up a practice together. So, in the late 1920s they started a joint practice in the house which later became 18 Thurloe Street - it was then called 18 Alfred Place. And there, for over thirty years, Helena Banks was Margery's partner and intimate companion.

The best friend of the latter half of Margery's life was not a fellow doctor, nor was she (as Margery was) a Londoner. Miss Musette Majendie, whom she first met in 1945, when they were both in their forties, had family roots at Hedingham Castle in Essex, and she was essentially a country woman, who thrived on outdoor activities, such as riding, wooding, and running a company of Boy Scouts. She and Margery became very close friends, and through her Margery's life took on a new dimension. Her non-stop professional work in London continued as usual but at the same time, at weekends, she joined in the leisurely life in Essex, and as she grew older the great country-house at Hedingham was more and more her home.

All these "best friends" were of her own sex. One may well ask whether there were any men in Margery's life. Might she have married? I cannot give a full answer to this. All I know, from members of her family who are now of a great age, and whose memories are patchy, is that at the time when she was starting her medical career she did fall in love, and she had hopes of marrying a young man who was very keen on music. They often went to concerts together. But for reasons which remain obscure her family disapproved of him, and even employed detectives to track him, so as to get evidence that would put Margery off. This sad episode ended when he married someone else, and Margery in later life hardly ever referred to it - though she was once heard to say: "Music, that's the one thing I'm grateful to him for".

It would be easy to claim that this fiasco was the spur which impelled Margery, on the rebound, to devote her life so whole-heartedly to medicine, but I think this would be an over-simplification. Even as a small child, so the family legend goes, Margery had declared that she intended to be a doctor. Yet there is no denying that her disappointment in love may well have given an added impetus to her purpose.

Of course, there were other men in her life, but her relationships with them were not romances. When she was a learner at The London Homeopathic Hospital several of the physicians there influenced her profoundly. Dr. John Henry Clarke, for one, who was then the hospital's senior consultant and perhaps the greatest expert of his time on the subject of homeopathic medicines. The author of books which have become classics, he held strong views on how homeopathy should be presented to the world at large, and he was an ardent upholder of the classical approach, insisting that results must be allowed to speak for themselves. For Margery this attitude became axiomatic. She had a felicitous personal link with Dr. Clarke because he had known and greatly admired her uncle Dr. James Compton Burnett (father of the novelist) who, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, had been one of Britain's most notable homeopaths. Dr.

Clarke was happy to befriend Dr. Compton Burnett's young niece, and he several times did Margery the honour of taking her to the Royal Society of Medicine.

Margery was also very fortunate in her chiefs. The two physicians with whom she was constantly in touch during her years as a resident, and whose lectures she eagerly attended, were doctors of exceptional calibre. Later she often paid tribute to "these two wonderful men", Douglas Borland and Charles Wheeler. By their teaching, and by their examples in diagnosis and prescribing, they set standards that remained with her throughout her life. Dr. Wheeler, the senior of the two, was a man of great intellectual brilliance who hailed from Australia. Dedicated to his work in medicine, he also had wide-ranging interests in art, music, drama, literature and science. A kind man, genial and tolerant, he delighted in sharing his very extensive knowledge with beginners who, like Margery, were really keen to learn. He liked to start his rounds at 8.30 and always arrived half-an-hour beforehand so as to have breakfast with his house physicians. Thus she had frequent chances, over tea and toast, to learn from him about homeopathic medicines, where they came from, who had discovered them, and how they should be prescribed. "The spoken word in homeopathy", she once said, "is worth pages of printed ones".

But it was Dr. Borland who counted for most - by far the most. Writing of him after his death Margery called him "a giant among doctors". He was a "born doctor", she said, and eminently suited to be a homeopath, because he was always interested in the whole person - body, mind and spirit, so much so that there had been a time when he was undecided whether to go into the Church or into medicine. At a first meeting Dr. Borland (who was a Scot from Glasgow) often gave an impression of aloofness. But this was only a mask for his shyness. Behind it there was an utterly charming, gentle, and generous personality.

Contemporary with Dr. Borland, and like him a senior physician at the hospital, was another Scot whose name will be familiar to you - Sir John Weir - or Dr. Weir as he was when Margery first knew him. Physician to Royalty over a long period he was, in his day, Britain's most important advocate for homeopathy. Thickset in figure, meticulous in manner, he was a great talker and relished regaling his patients with "wee stories". Dr. Weir was not a man who evoked admiration in Margery, nor did he have cordial feelings for her. This antipathy is said to have arisen after an incident which I must describe to you.

There was a tradition that at the hospital's annual staff dinners the guests themselves should provide the entertainment, chiefly by means of doggerel verses lampooning well-known hospital personalities. On one of these occasions in the 1930s, young Dr. Blackie - then an assistant physician in the Children's Department - contributed a composition of her own which she called "The Cure of the Chronic Invalid (by himself)". In it she did not hesitate to contrast Dr. Weir's abilities with those of Dr. Borland. Here are the verses concerned:

For twenty-five or thirty years
I suffered agony and tears ...
I placed myself in various hands
 and found no remedy at all -
My tottering hopes began to fall
Until a friend I chanced to meet
Said "Why not try Great Ormond Street?"

The first Physician I met here
 was called, I fancy, Dr. Weir.
A large man with a rosy face
He talked at an alarming pace,
 percussed my lungs, and banged my thighs
And told me stories thick as flies
My heart went thump - my heart went hop,
I thought that he would never stop.

I came all over feeling queer

And tottered out from Dr. Weir
Replete with anecdotes galore
But as to my
Pet maladie
No wiser than I was before ...

And I was recommended then
To Dr. Borland, best of men.
He sat me down upon a chair
And started with an absorbing stare.
I felt his eyes investigate
The deepest secrets of my state ...
His stare bored down into my heart,
I felt the perspiration start -

My feet, my knees, my hands, my head,
All shook with a consuming dread ...
Oh! What a power for a physician
To know by force of intuition
His patient's scandalous condition.

When I had almost ceased to hope
I thought I saw his fingers grope
And from his pocket came to light
A tiny powder wrapped in white.
One sinewy arm he forward flung
And placed that powder on my tongue -
Scarce had I swallowed the contents
I felt its marvellous influence -
I ceased to sweat, I ceased to shake
I ceased to gibber and to quake.
I felt as certain as old Nick
That Dr. B. had done the trick.

What an experience indeed
For one so long an invalid!

The laughter that greeted these verses can well be imagined. But one person in the audience was not at all amused. Several of Margery's colleagues have insisted that Weir never forgave her for making fun of him, and that the memory of his humiliation was behind his unspoken antagonism towards her.

During the 1930s, and then during the war, one of Margery's dearest friends was a man who was old enough to be her father - Dr. George Campbell Morgan. He was not a medical doctor, but a nonconformist minister, who for many years was the leading Congregationalist preacher of his day. He was a towering figure, thin and gaunt with beautiful white hair and a rich, clear voice. When Margery first knew him he was the star preacher at the Westminster Chapel in Buckingham Gate. She came to know him in the context of her Christian faith, and here a few words must be said about this aspect of her private life. She seldom spoke of her faith, and very few were aware of what it meant to her. But unknown to almost all her patients and colleagues it was vital to her. She was no theologian; her religion was of the heart, not of the head. It sprang from childhood roots, for her parents had been Wesleyan Methodists. Her Welsh mother had been especially ardent, and her father, whose family came from Scotland, had been an energetic lay preacher. So Margery had been brought up in a home where family prayers and regular chapel attendance were the norm, and where of course the Bible and Sunday sermons set the standards of life.

Her early acquaintance with Dr. Morgan soon blossomed into a close friendship with his family as well as himself. During the years just before the war, "Blackie", as he and his wife called her, accompanied them on several holidays. Margery was a good driver and enjoyed acting as chauffeuse. There are snapshots

of the Campbell Morgans with Margery, who was then in her thirties, looking radiantly happy.

But this friendship involved much more than holiday outings. Before the war, and on through the war years, Margery used to go almost every morning to the Campbell Morgan flat in Westminster, to see whether anything was needed. Then she often went shopping and helped generally, this despite her usual heavy burden of work - the hospital, the practice, and the home visiting that she regarded as all-important. Her daughterly service to the great preacher was a top priority in her life. And meantime, on the spiritual level, she came to rely more and more upon the inspiration of his teaching. She went regularly to hear him on Sundays and also - until the air-raids began - she attended his "Friday evenings", when with a blackboard in the great mahogany pulpit at the Westminster Chapel, he used to give "Bible Lessons", expounding the Scriptures in his compelling evangelical style to the crowds - often numbering more than two thousand - who came from all over London, drawn by his magnetic personality. The intimate dependence upon the Bible for ethical guidance, which so characterised Margery's thinking in later life, undoubtedly dates from this time.

A further bond between Margery and Dr. Morgan was that he and his family were firm adherents to homeopathy. Not long after she met him he became her patient, and his gratitude to her was profound, as witnessed by the dedication of one of his books, The Parables and Metaphors of our Lord. It reads as follows: "To my friend and physician, Margery G. Blackie, MD, to whose skill and devotion I owe more than I can tell". What a heartfelt tribute! And the wording is of special interest. For by implication it is an acknowledgement of one of Margery's outstanding abilities. She was a master of the delicate art of combining friendship with a professional doctor-patient relationship.

In the light of all this, we can see what a desolation of grief Margery must have suffered when Dr. Morgan, in his eighty-third year, died in May 1945. Thus ended a chapter in her emotional life. A terrible gap was left - but not for very long. It was only a few months later that she first met Musette Majendie. Furthermore, she was not left without someone to whom she could turn for religious counsel. Dr. Morgan had been assisted at the Westminster Chapel by a younger minister, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a strong personality who had earlier abandoned a very promising career in medicine to follow his vocation to the ministry. Like Dr. Morgan, he was a preacher who attracted huge congregations, but his manner was very different. He did not use the language of the professional evangelist. He had a clear and analytical mind and at the same time the ability to speak on religious themes in an everyday idiom, though he was not in the least chatty. He spoke with passionate conviction and deep concern, and this had a powerful appeal.

When Margery first knew him and listened to his sermons, she did not react kindly to him, for he was so different from her beloved Dr. Morgan. But in due course, as the years passed after the older man's death, she found him a wise counsellor and understanding friend.

Latterly, at Hedingham, under the influence of Musette, Margery found a new religious home in the Church of England, and the two friends regularly attended the local parish church together. But Dr. Lloyd-Jones, after his retirement, often came with his wife to visit Margery and this gave opportunities for private talks. Till the end of his life he was her trusted spiritual guide.

It was in 1969 that Margery became a member of the Royal Medical Household - the first woman in history to hold such an appointment. She followed after Sir John Weir, who at long last retired at the age of eighty-nine. By this time Margery herself was in her seventies, but she was as vivacious and energetic as ever. One might have guessed that she was at least ten years younger. As a homeopath she now had a lifetime of experience behind her, but this had not made her exclusive, or prejudiced against other therapies in case of need. After all, she herself had trained in general medicine and she understood the viewpoint of

her fellow physicians in the Royal Household, who always found her admirably co-operative.

Only when she reached the age of eighty-one, in 1979, did she feel that the time had come to relinquish her Royal Appointment, a position of trust that she had held with the utmost integrity. "She was very discreet", one of her fellow homeopaths has said, "never revealing any confidences about her most illustrious patients, even to her closest colleagues". Her devoted service to the Royal Family was given formal recognition in the 1979 New Year's Honours, when she was appointed to the Royal Victorian Order in the rank of Commander. And then in June came her resignation. "That splendid lady Dr. Margery Blackie has quietly retired as the Queen's homeopathic doctor", announced the Evening News under the headline "Queen's Fringe Doctor bows out".

To end this lecture let me give you one or two glimpses of Margery which highlight various facets of her personality. For instance, her courage. At Thurloe Street there was a small lift to the upper floors, and on one occasion it broke down when Margery was alone in it. Trapped in the dark she did not show any signs of panic but spent the time till she was rescued singing hymns. She had a lovely singing voice.

And then there was her directness. During her latter years, Hedingham Castle had been re-organised as a centre where elderly friends and relatives of Musette's, patients of Margery's and others, could live together in very congenial surroundings. They all foregathered for meals, and at weekends the table talk usually centred round Margery, who had strong likes and dislikes. "Popery" was one of the topics which roused her to vehemence, and if anyone spoke out against the Reformation she slapped them down. Then sometimes she would enliven talk with an exclamation such as "I hate ladybirds!" She had a violent aversion to insects - "Creepy crawlies", as she called them. But she adored birds - she had loved them ever since a child - and her keenest hobby was bird watching. Hedingham, with its fine trees and thickets was an ideal place for this. No cats were allowed at Hedingham, and the birds were fed and cherished. There is a tale that once when a shy visitor was trying to make conversation about gardening, the talk turned to forsythia. "But aren't the birds a problem" said the visitor, "always pecking off the buds?" In a scathing tone Margery replied, "We grow the forsythias specially for them".

In summer at Hedingham Margery enjoyed taking part in the croquet and she became a skilful player, but she did not like losing. In the evenings, too, at bridge, she liked to win. However, her favourite indoor pastime was not playing cards but doing jigsaw puzzles. For thirty years she subscribed to the British Jigsaw Puzzle Library. When immersed in one of these puzzles she could almost relax - she could almost forget her work.

Margery lived to the age of eight-three. She died, worn out, on 24th August 1981. During her last days two books were always at her bedside; they symbolized a lifetime of dedication. One was the homeopathic handbook which was her professional "bible" - Kent's Repertory, and the other was the Bible itself.