

MEMOIRS OF AN IMMUNOLOGIST

As I Remember Him :

the Biography of R. S. By Hans Zinsser. Pp. x + 369. (London : Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1940.) 12s. 6d. net.

THIS book must be accounted a notable achievement when we consider that it is the paragon of one who spent a strenuous life devoted to researches in the fields of microbiology and immunology. The reader should keep clearly in mind that the author, Dr. Hans Zinsser, who was professor of these subjects in Harvard University until his recent death, adopted the fiction of narrating the events of his own life and experiences as if they had happened to "R. S.", a mythical friend. The author wrote the last chapter, which describes the thoughts of "R. S." during his fatal illness, when he himself was under the shadow of impending death. He did not use the device of anonymity in order to heighten his self-importance. On the contrary, he took pains to assure the reader that his objective counterpart was an ordinary intelligent person who was often not really competent to pronounce opinions on many of the topics that are discussed in the book. This modest attitude is stressed in the first chapter and also in the final sentence of the last chapter, which states that it seemed scarcely worth while to have written a book about his 'friend'—a view which is unlikely to be shared by its readers.

Zinsser's father migrated to the United States from the Rhineland and his mother from the region of the Black Forest. Their children were born in the New World, and the author tells us that he spoke no English until he was ten years of age. His youthful ambitions were directed towards a literary career, but the researches of Edmund B. Wilson on cell division so fascinated him that he chose biology as a subject of study and was later advised to take a medical course. He tells in an amusing fashion how an attempt to combine practice in New York with laboratory work proved unsuccessful and how he then specialized in bacteriology, lectured to students, directed the work of his research assistants, and in odd moments scribbled sonnets on scraps of paper.

In the course of time an intensive study of the mode of spread of typhus fever led him far afield : to Serbia, Mexico, Tunisia and Russia. He greatly admired France, had many French friends and thought Paris the most civilized city in the world. He makes vivid for us the romantic feelings aroused in him there as a youth of twenty-one ; and he recalls memories of spring in the Luxem-

bourg Gardens and of the rhymes of Ronsard, Villon and Verlaine ringing in his head. When he had become a noted man of science, he was appointed visiting professor at the University of Paris, where he lectured in French to the students, and his experience forms the basis of an interesting discussion on the relative merits of French, German and American universities. During the visit his friend Vallery-Radot gave him a copy of Pasteur's will, with permission to quote it in this book ; the will consists of three simple sentences embodying two equally simple wishes. Readers in Great Britain can scarcely fail to remark that the author's love of France apparently left him little room for appreciating British characteristics and cultural values ; perhaps he found it difficult to break down the barrier of British national reserve. However this may be, it is certain that we should have enjoyed his candid comments for, as his book abundantly shows, he was a kindly and tolerant observer of human nature. He deplored the political degradation of Germany and had looked forward in vain to its transformation into a free Republican State.

Towards the end of his life he visited Japan and China, and found in Peking a source of charm that no other city except Paris had ever held for him ; he was attracted, too, by the people, a natural consequence of his friendship with many Chinese collaborators during a period of more than twenty years.

Dr. Zinsser was a versatile man with a wide range of intellectual interests, and thus he was drawn to those whose view of life was not bounded by their specialty but—in his own phrase—whose minds swept the horizon. He notes that his friend the late Dr. Charles Nicolle, for many years an expert in tropical medicine and director of the Pasteur Institute in Tunis, was novelist, philosopher and historian ; and that Laennec, the inventor of the stethoscope, was an accomplished pathologist, classic, flute-player and horseman. Unlike some of the younger men of science of the present day he possessed a strong historical sense, and took pleasure in viewing modern ideas, customs and methods in the light of the past.

This book contains a wealth of reflections on a great variety of medical, educational and political subjects ; and, since the author has an easy style with a talent for descriptive writing that is enlivened by humorous and ironical comments, the reader's interest is never allowed to relax.

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