

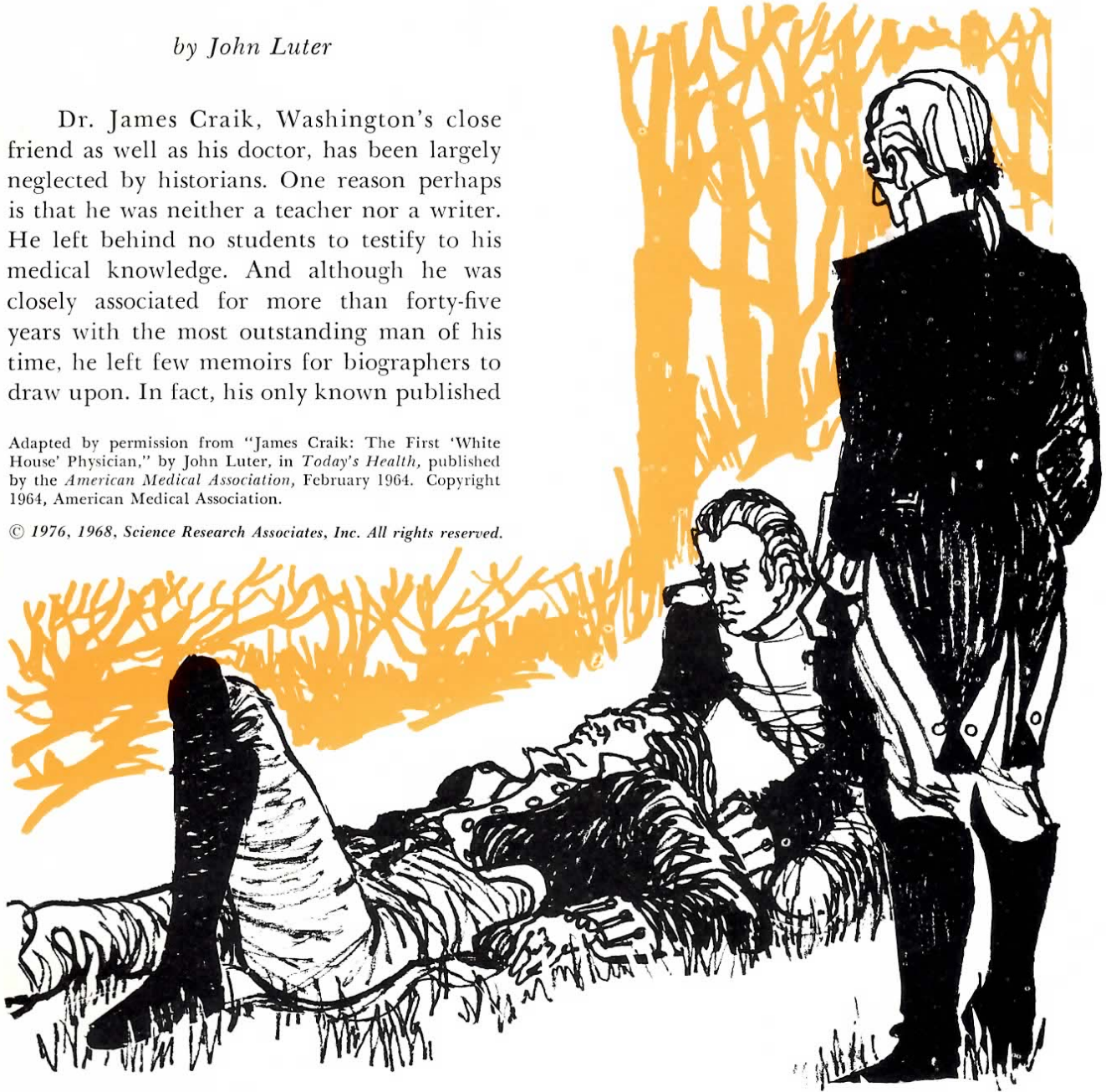
The First White House Doctor

by John Luter

Dr. James Craik, Washington's close friend as well as his doctor, has been largely neglected by historians. One reason perhaps is that he was neither a teacher nor a writer. He left behind no students to testify to his medical knowledge. And although he was closely associated for more than forty-five years with the most outstanding man of his time, he left few memoirs for biographers to draw upon. In fact, his only known published

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writing is a brief account of Washington's final illness.

This relatively unknown colonial doctor, however, figured importantly in the stirring drama of America's early years. He was not only responsible for the health of America's first president, but he shared in many of the major events of Washington's career.

It was in 1754, at the fort at Winchester, Virginia, that the young Scottish physician first met Washington, then a twenty-two-year-old officer in the Virginia militia.

The French at the time were trying to set up a line of posts in a wilderness area that the English claimed as part of Virginia. When they could not be persuaded to withdraw, the Virginia Assembly raised a regiment of three hundred men, under Colonel Joshua Fry, to enforce its claims. Washington was appointed second in command, and Craik joined the regiment as surgeon.

The two men were together in defeat at the Battle of Great Meadows. The following spring, both of them joined British General Edward Braddock when he marched against the French. Both were present at the disastrous Battle of Monongahela, in which Braddock was mortally wounded. The three-hour battle was a total rout. All Washington could do was try to rally the demoralized British and colonial forces. Two horses were killed under him, and four rifle balls pierced his coat. The risks he took were so great that Dr. Craik, who was on the battlefield caring for the wounded, later recalled: "I expected every moment to see him fall. His duty and the situation exposed him to every danger. Nothing but the superintending care of Providence

could have saved him from the fate of all around him."

In the retreat that followed, Craik attended to the wounds of the dying Braddock. When the general died at the roadside, Craik helped Washington bury him in a secret grave. The Virginia Assembly later awarded Dr. Craik thirty pounds and Washington one hundred pounds—very handsome sums in those days—for their gallant services at Monongahela.

Six weeks after Braddock's death, Washington was made commander of the Virginia militia. He promptly named Dr. Craik chief medical officer. For the next two years the small, poorly equipped force did its best to protect the Virginia settlers from marauding Indians. In 1758 the two men were together in the action that finally ended the French and Indian War. Following the capture of Fort Duquesne, Washington resigned his commission, and soon afterward Dr. Craik also retired from the military service. But the friendship they had formed on the battlefields grew stronger during the years of peace. In 1760 Dr. Craik married Washington's cousin, and he and his wife became frequent and welcome visitors at Mount Vernon.

The rising spirit of revolution, however, eventually turned the attention of both Washington and Craik back to military matters. Soon after the outbreak of war, Craik once again became a medical aide to Washington. In the early days of the Revolution, the army's medical services were disorganized. They were crippled by professional jealousies and they were pitifully short of supplies. Washington was deeply concerned, and Dr. Craik was

among those to whom he turned for help in correcting the terrible conditions.

During the bleak winter of 1777–78, colonial fortunes were at their lowest ebb. Craik learned that certain discontented groups in Congress and the army were plotting to replace Washington as commander in chief. Washington was already aware of the plot, but his friend's timely letter of warning was a further alert. It supplied detailed information that may well have helped Washington foil his political enemies.

In 1777 Craik was given one of the two most important medical posts in the army: assistant director general. In 1781 he filled the other post—chief physician and surgeon of the army—which he held until the war's end.

After the Revolution, at Washington's urging, Dr. Craik moved his medical practice to Alexandria, a few miles from Mount Vernon. Now he became physician not only to Washington and his family but to the others on the plantation. Over the years his practice there grew to nearly three hundred persons.

On December 12, 1799, Washington spent several hours riding about Mount Vernon in the rain and snow. The next day he complained of a cold and a sore throat. By evening a severe hoarseness had developed. Washington, who did not believe in treating simple colds, rejected a suggestion that he take medicine. But at three o'clock in the morning he admitted to his wife that he was very ill. He had violent chills, could hardly speak, and breathed with difficulty. He was given a mixture of molasses, vinegar, and butter, but choked and almost suffocated when he tried

to swallow it. In the early morning Dr. Craik was sent for.

Realizing that Washington's condition was serious, Craik promptly sent for two other physicians. They reached Mount Vernon by midafternoon, but neither they nor Dr. Craik was able to check the rapid course of the disease.

The exact nature of the President's illness is still disputed among medical men. Some have concluded that he had diphtheria. It now seems probable, however, that he was suffering from strep throat.

The doctors were severely handicapped by the inadequate medical knowledge of the time. Authorities today agree that Washington's death was hastened by the treatment he received. In a desperate effort to help him, the doctors employed some remedies that were simply useless, such as gargling with vinegar and tea, and inhaling steam. But they also bled the patient heavily—a common treatment in those days—which doubtless weakened him.

The nation was shocked and saddened when Washington died on December 14, at the age of sixty-seven. Dr. Craik was at his bedside. It was to him that Washington spoke the words that were among his last: "Doctor, I die hard, but I am not afraid to go. . . ."

Dr. Craik outlived his distinguished patient by nearly fifteen years. To the end, however, the devoted doctor carried a heavy burden of sorrow. He was keenly conscious of the limitations under which the physicians of his day labored. He knew that if his medical knowledge had been greater, the life of his friend might have been prolonged.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The author suggests that Dr. Craik is not well known because he**
 - A was not a teacher
 - B did little writing
 - C Both A and B
- 2. When Craik and Washington first met, the greatest allies of the Virginians were the**
 - A French
 - B British
 - C Indians
- 3. At the Battle of Monongahela, General Braddock was**
 - A defeated
 - B wounded
 - C Both A and B
- 4. For their services at Monongahela, the Virginia Assembly gave Craik and Washington**
 - A money
 - B promotions
 - C land
- 5. After the French and Indian War, Dr. Craik**
 - A retired from the army
 - B married a relative of Washington
 - C Both A and B
- 6. During the blackest days of the Revolution, Craik warned Washington of a plot by**
 - A political enemies in Congress
 - B British spies in the capital
 - C doctors in the medical service
- 7. Of the two most important medical posts in the army, Dr. Craik filled**
 - A neither
 - B one
 - C both
- 8. Medical men today believe that Washington died of**
 - A diphtheria
 - B strep throat
 - C tuberculosis
- 9. Bleeding was a medical treatment that was**
 - A very common in Washington's time
 - B partly responsible for Washington's death
 - C Both A and B
- 10. Dr. Craik regretted that he had been unable to**
 - A be present at Washington's death
 - B give Washington better care
 - C Both A and B

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