

## Dalhousie Medical Journal

### THE TEST

AN ALLEGORY

By ARTHUR L. MURPHY

The man gave a lot of attention to lacing his shoes. He knew the test would be long and hard; but he was eager for it. It was a test almost every man wished instinctively to face.

The man checked the bread and butter, and the water bottle in his knapsack. God looked down and put a little more butter on the bread, because it was spread thin.

The man walked to the starting line. It was the finish line, too, but he did not think of that, only of starting and doing well. There were a few people loitering on the grass inside the circular track. They rested, or stood about in little groups. They paid no attention to the man. A fellow wearing a bowler hat, as if it were part of a uniform, stood at the starting line. He has a bright red vest beneath his black coat. He motioned the man onto the track. The man checked his laces again, made sure that his knapsack was snug on his shoulders. He started off.

He was a poor runner but he knew that with perseverance he would improve. His wind was short, his gait heavy and uneven. He had a strong soul. This did not help his running, but it was a comfort to him.

As he ran his stride became more even and breathing was less of an effort. There were others running, too. It was not a race, but the man was pleased when he passed one of them. He did not like anyone to pass him. Often he could not run fast enough to prevent it. Once a runner passed him, then, only a little further on, stopped on the grass to rest, so the man moved ahead of him again.

The fellow with the bowler hat had his coat open wide. The man liked to see the red vest each time he rounded the track.

He was running well now. He gloried in his strength, his easy stride and his manhood. His head was high. He ran lap after lap without even noticing the fellow with the bowler. He ran happily, for the sake of running. People in the grass sometimes turned to look at him. He noticed this and was proud.

His joy lasted a long time. Gradually it changed to monotony. He was running as well as ever, but with less verve. Those who were slower, he passed. He made no effort to pass those who kept ahead of him. When a runner went by him from behind it no longer disturbed him.

The grass inside the track looked cool and fresh, relaxing. He saw others pause to dally there and enjoy themselves. He wanted to stop, too, but he felt that he must not. He kept on. He reached back in his knapsack for bread and butter. The butter was thicker than he had remembered and he was thankful for it.

His feet were hurting him. He wanted to loosen the laces. He knew he was only seeking an excuse to stop. He knew loosening them would make his feet worse. A cool breeze

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from somewhere passed across his forehead and he felt refreshed.

He was not running as fast. The bystanders did not look at him anymore. He pounded his feet down harder but this only jarred his body and made his head ache. He passed the fellow with the bowler. The coat was buttoned and he could not see the red vest anymore. He asked the bowler a question with his eyes. The fellow shook his head without expression.

The man ran on. He was tired but he did not think to stop. Running was a habit. The grass was a blur of green, perhaps because his eyes kept watering. It no longer attracted him. He saw no people. He was alone on the track. If anyone passed him, he did not notice. He ate less bread and butter and drank more water. He felt his skin drawing tight over his bones and his muscles wasting, painfully.

The man knew he was running slower and slower, but he seemed to pass the fellow with the bowler more often. Each time he looked at him, questioning. Sometimes the fellow shook his head: sometimes he ignored the man.

The man knew nothing but running and breathing and the pounding in his ears. This was what he had always done, for ever and ever; yet he thought back to when he had come on the track and it seemed only a little while.

He came around the track again. He asked his question again. The red vest was shining. The fellow with the bowler nodded his head.

The man's body shuddered, frightened. His soul leaped with expectancy. He threw his head high. He pounded proudly with his feet and thought he moved faster. He thought a bystander turned to look, but his sight was blurred and he could not be sure. It did not matter, anyway.

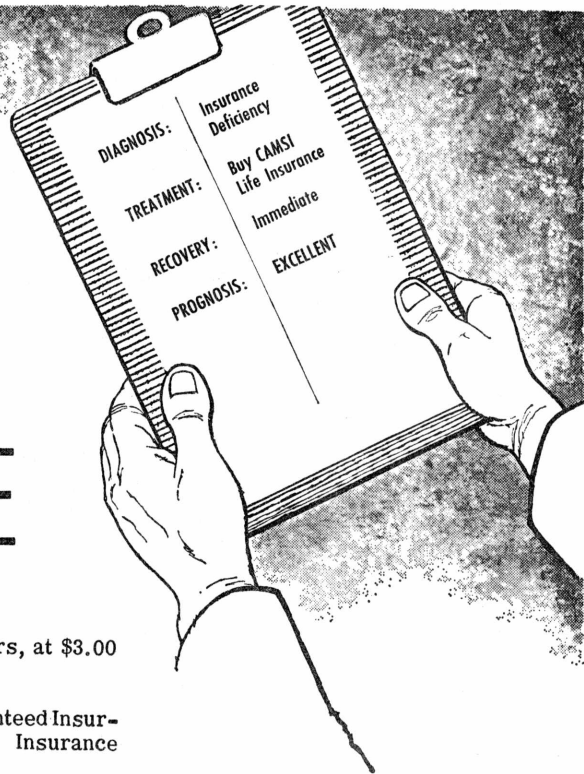
He came around the last turn on the track. He could see the tape stretched across, at the finish line. It had been the starting line, he remembered, with a vague wonder. He pumped his arms to help him breathe. He could see the fellow in the bowler clearly now. There was expression in his face for the first time. He looked surprised, as if he had not expected the man to break the tape, as if nobody had ever broken it.

The tape was coming closer to him. The man reached out his hand. A few more pounding steps would be enough. The tape stopped coming to him. The man fell on the track with only one gasp of pain.

The fellow with the bowler was not surprised any more. He nodded to attendants who came and put the man in a box. One piece of bread was left in the knapsack. They saw the butter on it was very thick. They put the bread in the box, too, and put the box in one of the holes beside the track. They left the man's soul lying where he had fallen.

God put the man's soul in the palm of his hand. He looked at it and was satisfied. God breathed on it.

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