

Dr. John Otte's Last 10 Days

Note: Ms. Joanne M. Finley, M.D., granddaughter of John Otte and daughter of Major Frank Otte, kindly scanned for me the original letter by A.L. Warnshuis, who attended Dr. Otte as he died of the plague.

For more info, visit:

www.amoymagic.com/Amoymission1.htm

or www.amoymagic.com/JohnOtte.htm

or write: amoybill@gmail.com

Bill Brown, Xiamen University.

October 2007



Chioh-khut, Kulangsu, AMOY. April 19, 1910.

My dear Mrs. Otte,—

I hardly know how to begin this letter. It is a letter that I hoped I might never have to write. But it is in accordance with Dr. Otte's repeated request that I am writing it. Some three or four times he asked me,—"Warnshuis, you will write a good letter to my wife, won't you?" Each time I replied that I would do all I could but I hoped that he might write the letter himself. Our hopes have been entirely disappointed, and I must now do the best I can to fulfill my promise to the Doctor. I shall try to give you as clearly as possible a full description of the Doctor's illness and death.

On Wednesday evening, April 6th, the Doctor came home to dinner and told us of an experience he had that afternoon. He said he had been called to see a patient in the walled city of Amoy, near the Mohammedan mosque. Just as he was examining him, the man threw up a lot of sputum over the doctor's hands. The doctor had already diagnosed the case as one of pneumonic plague, and so made haste to get his hands cleaned. He said to us that fortunately he found that they had some creosol in the house, and he at once washed his hands with that as well as he could. Then he hurried back to the hospital, keeping his hands in his coat pockets so that he might not forget and use them in any way. One of the students tells me that he met the doctor coming back from Amoy that afternoon and he noticed that with one hand he was holding the other in his pocket so as to make sure that he would not use it. So the doctor told us that he thought he had taken all possible precautions, and he did not fear any ill results. Exposed as we so often are to infectious diseases, none of us perhaps paid enough attention to this incident, and most of us forgot about it in a short time.

On Sunday, I was away on Amoy Island, and when I came back in the evening he said to me that he had had a very quiet day and one that had been very restful. He said that he had felt unusually tired, and for that reason he had purposely spent the day quietly. Since we returned to Amoy this time, Dr. Otte had constantly been complaining of feeling very tired, so that I paid little attention to his remark on Sunday. It is only now as I think back that I recall that he said this and had said it with perhaps more emphasis than usual.

On Monday afternoon, at about five o'clock the Doctor came home but I was busy at my desk, and so I did not speak to him at that time. When I went in to supper, Mrs. Warnshuis remarked to me that we need not wait for the doctor because he was not feeling well and had gone to bed. Immediately after supper, I went upstairs to see him, and found him in bed suffering from a bad chill. He was covered with all the blankets that he could find, and yet was not warm, so I added his overcoat to his covering. We jollied him a bit about having malaria now after having been practically immune for so many years. Yes, he said, perhaps I'll have more sympathy with malaria patients after this. As there was nothing that we could do for him then, we went to the usual mission prayer meeting. There I spoke of Dr Otte having chills and fever, and after prayer meeting Dr Bonthius came in to see him. I spent just a few moments with him then, and as again there was nothing for me to do I left the two doctors together. When Dr Bonthius came out of the room, he said that he thought we were right in guessing that it was malaria. So we left him for the night.

Tuesday morning early I went into his room and found that he was still very miserable. Dr Bonthius came early and spent the morning with him. That morning Dr Otte suffered terrible pains in every part of his body, but this is not unusual in malaria, and as there were no other symptoms it was impossible to do anything. Tuesday afternoon, these pains seemed to be much less. Dr Bonthius was with him most of the time then. In the evening, Dr Otte asked that his boy might sleep in the room with him, so that if he needed anything he could get it easily. We expected that the attack would soon end, and so we agreed to this as it did not seem to us that he would need much care during the night, for he already seemed to be more comfortable.

Wednesday morning again at an early hour I went into his room, and to my surprise found him no better but apparently with a high fever. Dr Bonthius also continued to show his deep interest in Dr Otte, and came in as soon as he could. He examined him carefully, but excepting the continued fever he could find no symptoms that indicated anything different than malaria. Dr Otte however was very miserable indeed. He himself evidently suspected something more serious than malaria. On Monday and Tuesday he would permit Dr Bonthius to do scarcely anything for him, but now he submitted without any objection. When I went into the room after breakfast, he asked me to go to his room in the hospital and to get from the top of his desk some notes which he had written for his will and to copy these so that he could sign them, and also to get some letters which he had written but not yet mailed. Dr Bonthius stayed with him that morning again, and I went to the Theological Seminary as usual. However I started earlier, and so went to the hospital first to get the papers he had mentioned. For although I assured him when he had asked me to do this that it seemed entirely unnecessary to me and that I thought he could prepare his will at his own leisure in a few days, still I thought I ought to do what he asked so as to relieve his mind as much as possible. I found the notes for his will, ready on his desk as he said, and the letters in a drawer. Two of the letters were of no importance, addressed to local parties, the third letter was for Dr. Henry Hulst. Knowing that Dr Hulst was an intimate friend, I did not then think anything further about this letter, but mailed it by the first steamer. During the last few days I have been wondering whether that letter to Dr Hulst was not written when the Doctor began to suspect that he

might have plague and so might contain his own account of the way in which he caught the terrible disease. In any case it is perhaps the very last letter which he wrote.

When I came home Wednesday noon, I found that he was no better and perhaps worse. He himself was now suggesting that he might have typhoid fever. But Dr. Bonthius could not find some of the common symptoms of typhoid and so did not agree with him. I should have mentioned above that David had been to see him several times on Tuesday and also on Wednesday, and David also could not find anything to help diagnose the case to be anything other than malaria as the first symptoms had suggested. Dr. Snoke came in from Siokhe that afternoon as he had planned to do in order to spend a few days here and to arrange with the contractors for the rebuilding of the Siokhe Hospital. Before coming to the house he went to Hope Hospital to bring some patients there whom he had brought down from Siokhe. At the Hospital the students told him that Dr. Otte was ill and that it might possibly be typhoid fever. Dr. Bonthius had already sent for the hospital microscope in order to make a careful examination and to determine for sure whether or not it was a case of typhoid or only a case of malaria. Dr. Snoke had two of the students whom Dr. Otte had specially trained in the use of the microscope in diseases assist in this microscopic examination. The result of this examination was entirely negative so far as typhoid was concerned and there were some malaria microbes in the blood. To test the matter farther large doses of quinine were then prescribed and as the doctor's stomach could never take quinine this medicine was given hypodermically. Dr. Bonthius and I relieved each other in taking care of him after twelve o'clock that day. That afternoon Dr. Otte was very despondent. It was then that for the first time, he said—"You will write a good letter to my wife. Warnshuis, won't you?" I replied that I thought the quinine would fix him up so well that he could write himself next day, but he again replied, "No, I'll be under the sod in twenty four hours now." We did all we could that afternoon and evening to cheer him up, but we accomplished little. At noon, I mentioned to Dr. Bonthius about the doctor's will, and we agreed that it would be just as well to get it ready, but not to speak to him about it again. The, if he not ask for it again nothing would be lost, and on the other hand if he did ask again it would show that it was on his mind, and then it would be well if we could give it to him at once for signature and so relieve him without delay. So I copied the will and kept it ready in my pocket. The doctor's temperature had been rising Wednesday since morning. So after completing the microscopic examination and having decided on his quinine treatment, Dr. Bonthius and Dr. Snoke at once gave him a cold sponge bath to reduce his temperature. We arranged also to give him a period of perfect quiet so that he might get some sleep, of which he had had little for two or three nights. Just as we were lighting the lamps, he asked again for his will and I told him that I had it ready in my pocket, and if he wanted to sign it he could do so altho we saw no reason why he should be anxious about it now. But without discussing it, we gave him the paper, which he signed in the presence of Dr. Bonthius and myself. At this time he was very miserable indeed, and did not say much. Whenever he did say anything it was of a despondent character, and our uniform replies were for the purpose of cheering him up.

As Dr. Snoke was tired because of his trip down from Siokhe, and as Dr. Bonthius had been taking care of him most of the time for two days, it was arranged that Mr. Giebel and I should take care of him that night. So I was with him until about half past

one, when Mr. Giebel relieved me. During my watch, he did not rest much but still rested more than he had during the day. In the afternoon Dr Bonthius had succeeded in getting him to take some purgative medicine, which he had refused to take before this, and as the result of this his bowels moved three times before I left him. As they had not done this in two days, I thought to myself that this would certainly help to bring his fever down, and so I went to be somewhat reassured. His former student, Tan Thian-un called in the evening and watched with me until about ten o'clock. He too was unable to say what the disease was, and with the other doctors wanted to wait to watch the effects of the quinine.

On Thursday morning, I awoke only a little later than usual, and before dressing went in to see how the doctor was. I found that David had been there soon after dawn. I was much disappointed to find that the fever had not left him. Before I was ready for breakfast, both Dr Bonthius and Dr Snoke came in, and a few moments later also David and Thian-un. The evening before when Thian-un was here, the Doctor was asleep and did not see him. When he saw him this morning, he at once asked, "Is it plague?" Thian-un said, "I think not." The doctors made a very careful examination, and for the first time discovered some slight traces of pneumonia in his lungs. I was not in the room when Dr Snoke came on Wednesday, but he told me that the first question Dr Otte had asked him was, "Have I got plague?" To none of the others of us did he ever suggest that idea. We do not know when or how much he suspected that it was plague himself, and it is only from his manner and other words that we can now think back and guess that he himself suspected plague almost from the very beginning. Why did he not tell us what he thought? Perhaps, knowing that in that case there was no hope for recovery anyway, he did not want to make us anxious too soon. Perhaps, because he himself did not want to believe his own suspicions and was hoping that it might yet prove to be only typhoid. There was a brief consultation of the four doctors, after they had concluded the examination which had discovered signs of pneumonia. Not one of them would say it was the plague. Dr. Thian-un who has seen great numbers of cases of plague in his practice in Amoy said that he could not yet recognize this case. What made him somewhat suspicious of plague was the Doctor's pulse. He said if it were a Chinese patient, such a pulse would indicate plague, but knowing that that the Doctor's normal pulse was most extraordinary he did not feel that he could in this case depend upon this symptom. In order to dissolve the mystery as much as possible, the doctors decided to make further microscopic examinations. These were completed by a little after nine o'clock, and they revealed unmistakable plague bacteria in his sputum. Before this we had already begun the search for anti-plague serum. About eleven o'clock we received a bottle but without any directions. Half an hour later, David came in saying that he knew about the bottle we had received, and that it was too old to be safe to use. Besides, he had hunted all over Amoy and could find nothing else. The nearest place from which we could get serum was Chin-Chew, and we at once urged that telegrams be sent there. These could not bring the serum to us before the next evening, but we could not hope to get any sooner. An examination shortly after eleven o'clock showed that the Doctor's pulse was failing and that his respiration was increasing in rapidity. He was evidently much weaker than in the morning and the large quantities of sputum which the doctor was now bringing up confirmed the diagnosis of plague. The look on his face now, and the extremely rapid progress that the disease was making all pointed the same way. Up to this time no one

outside of this house had had any indication that Dr. Otte was seriously ill. At 11:45 with the advice of the doctors, I sent a note to the Talmage house and to the Pitcher house that the doctors now suspected that Dr. Otte was ill with pneumonic plague, and that he had become much weaker since morning.

The position in which we now were was most terrible. We recognized the enemy and knew his terrible virulence. And we had nothing with which to fight him effectively. All we could hope to do was to so strengthen the patient that nature herself might win the battle. Even at this time, he himself never suggested plague to us, nor we to him. Only, we saw signs that showed that he knew definitely what his disease was. At one time in the morning, Mr. Giebel stepped inside the door to inquire about the Doctor, and he had hardly put his face inside when the Doctor himself called out —“Don’t come in here, Giebel, I don’t want you here.” Afterwards Mr. Giebel told us that in the early morning hours he had begun to cough somewhat, and he would swallow the sputum that he coughed up. Mr. Giebel protested against his doing this, but he obstinately persisted. Why? As we saw clearly later, only because he knew the terribly poisonous nature of that sputum, loaded with plague germs, and did not want to endanger his nurses more than he could help. It was not until 9 A.M., when the quantities of sputum became too much for him to swallow that he consented to let us give him a rice bowl that he might use.

In the early afternoon we could not help noticing that he was failing rapidly. Between one and two o’clock, we noticed that his lungs were filling rapidly. At one time then he remarked to me as I was helping him,—“There is not so much blood in my sputum anymore is there?” I said,—“No, not as much as there has been.” He said, “Well, it does not make much difference. “What does not make any difference?” I said. “He answered, “It does not make any difference because I shall die of oedema of the lungs anyway.” This was just one of several remarks that he made which showed to us that he realised his condition very clearly.” All during the day of Thursday, he would at various times give us instructions as to his affairs after his death. Each time we listened carefully and made written notes of these things, for we too realized what the situation was. At the same time we tried to reassure him every time he talked that way that all hope was not yet gone. We thought that the one thing that would fight the disease with any hope of conquering it must be his own courage and reserve power. As soon as he himself surrendered, there was nothing more that could be done. So our whole effort was to keep up his own spirits.

As the result of some medicines the doctors had given him, he rallied considerably at about three o’clock. He breathed more easily, and he seemed to suffer less. We said to each other that if we could only keep up his strength long enough, he might yet recover. At about that same time, the Pacific squadron of the American navy came into the harbor, and he heard the guns saluting. We had all known that this squadron was expected. We did not know that the doctor was interested, and nothing was said to him about it. After a few minutes however he asked us whether it was the American squadron that had just arrived. When we replied that it was, he said,—“Send to Consul Arnold, and ask him to send some one at once to ask the fleet surgeons for some anti-plague serum.” That was the first time that he had fully admitted to us that he thought he had plague altho, as I have said, we knew from his actions that it was in his mind. Then too for the first time we admitted that he was right, for we told him that we had since early morning been

searching for serum, that David himself was hunting for it, but that all we had been able to get so far was some that was too old to use. Then he suggested that there might be some in his desk in the hospital. We sent at once for that too, but found out that there was none there, but only some for typhoid. We also sent at once to the Consul,—Mr. Giebel went in person,—and we thought ourselves very fortunate in that we caught the Consul just as he was going in person to the fleet. He had just time to send me a note to say that he would attend to it personally. But alas, at six o'clock or a little later, word came back from Mr. Arnold that there was no serum on the ships. The incident however shows how bright his mind was almost up to the very last.

The rallying was only temporary, and later in the afternoon he began to fail rapidly again. At about six o'clock we sent word to Mr. Pitcher to make preparations for the worst,—that altho we refused to give up hope so long as there was a breath of life left, still we should prepare for the disappointment of these hopes. At the same time, with the doctors we selected the words of the first telegram home, stating that Dr Otte was very ill, that he was failing rapidly and that his friends should be notified. The three of us who were caring for him had isolated ourselves as much as possible since the morning, having our food brought to us on the upper veranda. We never left that part of the house all day. In the evening there was not a bit of wind, and so we opened the venetians of the window in front of which was his bed so that he might get all the fresh air possible. We sat just outside that window, watching him closely that we might help him in every way possible. Down below us at anchor were the American battleships, and the great bell of the "Charleston" could be heard very clearly as it struck the half hours. Our watch was not very long. Shortly after seven o'clock the doctor became quite delirious. He talked Chinese altogether, but only fragments of sentences, and unconnected brief phrases. They were unintelligible and showed only that he was still in thoughts among the Chinese and in the hospital. The doctors tried again to rally him with medicines, but there was little response. At about nine o'clock they decided to make a last effort, with some ether, but it was too late. Before we could get the medicine we saw the end approaching. All evening his breathing had been very labored, and his lungs were evidently filling up rapidly. Quite suddenly at about 9.18 his breathing became slower. All three of us jumped to our feet. Each of the doctors took an arm to feel his pulse. His breathing came slowly and more slowly, and then at 9.22 it seemed to stop. There was just a slight rally again, a few more breaths and a little after 9.23 he fell asleep. The doctors with stethoscope made careful examinations but his heart had censed to beat, and our friend whom we loved so much had gone home to rest. I at once sent a messenger to Mr. Pitcher, and then there was nothing left for us to do but to care for the body and to isolate the room from the rest of the house. Shortly after one o'clock, Mr. Sullivan came with a coffin, and we reverently placed the poor, tired body in it, and it was carried off to the mortuary of the cemetery. Dr Otte during the day had requested me specially to arrange for his burial in the missionary cemetery, and not in the community cemetery. So Mr. Sullivan arranged for the burial at daylight on Friday morning. A memorial service was held in the large new London Mission Church, the largest place to seat an audience on the island, at six o'clock that evening. Of this meeting and the service at the grave, I must let others write, for none of us felt that we could attend lest we might spread the infection.

We read the burial service of our liturgy here, both for our own comfort and in memory of Dr Otte, and that we might unite our prayers for his family and his friends.

I am beginning to realise more and more how inadequate this letter is. Still I feel that it is impossible to give you a complete account of these last days of Dr Otte's life. I have tried to give you as detailed an account as I could of the Doctor's illness. I hope it may give you some comfort. In many ways his death was glorious. He was not afraid to die. During the day, at one time he had just spoken to me about some arrangements that should be made after his death. I told him not to be worried about that, for it was not yet sure that he was going to die. He replied at once and with much vigor, "I am not worried about dying, but you must attend to these things for me." His thoughts all through the day were about his work here and about his family at home. In the evening, when he was delirious he talked only Chinese. During the day, he kept urging me that I must surely write a good letter to you. The other things about which he spoke were details of the mission treasurership and other local business affairs, in which he wanted to help us in transferring them to others. I need not trouble you about these. In his will he has made certain definite bequests, and in addition to those he asked us only that his small silver watch might be given to his faithful servant for so many years, Koaira. Shortly after six o'clock, as the three of us chanced to be in the room at one time, he spoke to us and said he wished to say goodbye. We protested, saying that he should not yet give up hope, but as he seemed to desire him, we each gave him a hand which he took and said good-bye, calling us each by name. After that he said but little, and then only to ask the doctors to give him some medicine to ease his pain. As he became delirious soon after seven o'clock he said no more after that good-bye.

As I have been thinking of the way in which Dr Otte died, it has seemed to me more and more that if he could have chosen how he would die, he would not have died otherwise than he did. He was taken by this disease as he was faithfully performing his duty. It was as he was serving the people to whom he had given his life for Christ's sake. He was taken when he was still strong, when he was still full of ambition and full of large plans for the future. But our Heavenly Father had other plans, and He surely knows best, and the plans that the Doctor had are not forgotten, altho they may be accomplished in another way. You will from others learn of the sorrow evidences of sorrow that the Chinese and the foreigners show. To have been so confined to the house, as we are still quarantined, that we cannot see each of these, but we have even so soon enough to know that this sorrow is very general and very deep. Poor David came three times that Thursday evening, and when he heard the sounds of the Doctor's heavy breathing, he got only as far as half way up our stairway, and could not bear to come further. Mr. Peattle [illegible] wrote this morning that many of the Chinese were talking of some way in which they might raise a memorial to the Doctor [see note and photo on next page]. Marhal [illegible] was here for a moment this afternoon and spoke of the same thing. We have told them that we cannot do anything until your wishes have been consulted. I mention this only to show that it is not only the mission and his American friends who miss him, but it is the whole community that feels the loss very deeply.

There may be others things about which I should write now, but which I have been unable to think of. I shall try to include these in a letter which will follow this very soon and in which I shall also write about whatever action the Consul has taken. Dr. Otte's will has been given to him. Mr. C. Dosker is named by the will as executor.

We are very thankful that up to the present moment none of us who were exposed to the infection have developed any symptoms showing that we have contracted the disease. On Friday evening we succeeded in getting some curative serum from Dr. Paton in Chin-chew,—it was sent in response to our telegrams,---and we were all then inoculated.

Our thoughts have been with you very much these days. It is impossible to express in writing the feelings of sympathy which we have for you and for the fatherless children. We ourselves too feel the personal loss very keenly. We cannot understand now why this great blow should have fallen on us. We can only bow in submission and pray for strength and comfort. With all your friends, we unite our prayers that Our Father may fulfill for you all of his loving promises.

I remain,

Yours very sincerely,



[The following note was handwritten]

P.S. I want to assure you again that we did everything that could be done for Dr. Otte. He was taken care of from the moment he went to bed up to the very last in the very best way possible. No effort of any kind was spared. But in the face of this terrible disease it was all in vain – We can only say [illegible] took him – who are we that we should ask why?— A. Warnshuis

[Text of Otte Memorial on Gulangyu, 2007]

Reverend Johannes Abraham Otte, M.D. 1861-1910

“Born in Holland, educated in America, labored in China.

“The faithful use of his learning and skills in unwearied service made him a man of far-reaching influence. He left his homeland to give himself to the people of Amoy. Among them he labored with whole-hearted devotion for twenty years, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, healing the sick, building three hospitals, and training more than twenty medical students.

“We honor him as a man of great worth and unbending purpose. To accomplish his purposes, which were large, he gave all his strength in life, he spared not himself, and when he died his body was buried not in his homeland but, as he wished, among the scenes of his labors. This monument is raised by his students in memory of his character and deeds. This stone may crumble, his bones may become dust, but his character and deeds are imperishable.”

