

SIR WILLIAM OSLER

By D. A. WEBB, M.D.

NEW YORK

IN sorrow though in pride this Society¹ would pay its humble tribute to the memory of a distinguished member of our profession. That memory is not for metropolitan cities and learned medical societies only, it is the proud heritage of every physician in the land be he ever so humble, as it should be of all who profess a solicitude in the uplift of their brothers. The life story of him we mourn to-night may well prove a benediction to those in the daily grind who seek equanimity of soul. The application of his teachings is not restricted to the confines of our profession. In the catholic sweep of its utility it embraces all weak, struggling men. His message is one not of visionary precept but of practical merit in that it was honoured by observance in life and was to him the solace and comfort it would fain be to others. It is a message of superlative wisdom such as is vouchsafed to few mortals, and to fewer still to be exemplified as in the life and teachings of William Osler.

We come to Osler not as did Anthony to bury nor even to praise him, we come as suppliants to learn the source of that wisdom which made him the Socrates of our craft, the beloved among men. His attainments in science will not answer our query, nor will his literary skill; methinks we find it in his kindly human self who can be written down as one who loved his fellow man. More than other endearing qualities that was his open sesame to the hearts of men, and because of it, in his ripe years with his sun westward turned, he was called to stand before kings.

A great man has been defined as several men in one. Others may discover more, I find in Osler three, the man of science, the

man of literature and the man of philosophy. It is a happy combination especially for the the physician. Prof. Welch, a colleague at Johns Hopkins University, says Osler's work will guarantee him a niche in the world of medicine. Osler was a great observer. His were the days and methods of Darwin, experimental medicine coming later. The pathological, not the chemical laboratory was his haunt; Virchow, his teacher. Someone has described his medical school as a morgue, an open body upon the table, Osler at one end and a student at the other with fellow students hanging about for words of wisdom dropped by the Oracle. He trained long and faithfully in America and in Europe. His unusual powers of observation made him a good diagnostician. His success as a man of science was determined by complex and diversified mental qualities and conditions. Of these the most important were his unbounded patience in observing, and in collecting clinical data, and good sense in making deductions. Even with moderate abilities those habits of industry will place a man above the common herd; in addition he did not suffer distraction nor waste time "making money." Not brilliant genius, not special inherited gift, not a concatenation of luck and good hits,—but the master word work did the trick. With him the one prudence in life was concentration, the one evil, dissipation. He himself says he was the man of but one talent. The achieving life is the life of sacrifice.

He might have excelled as a man of letters had he been less devoted to the study of medicine. Much of the charm of his textbook is due to its elegance of diction. An insatiate reader he lived much in the

¹ Read before the Lackawanna County Medical Society, Scranton, Pa.

atmosphere of Roman and Grecian minds; from them he got the foundation upon which he erected his edifice of equanimity. "De Senectute" was an appreciated gift at the testimonial dinner in 1905. He was too wise to tamper with poetry, the prerogative of mental extremes, but he was familiar with the best in English literature, as his writings prove. In 1919 he was president of the Classical Association in England. His accurate observations he described accurately; words were the guardians of thought. He endeavoured as did Aristotle to pass down to posterity the saving philosophy of his idol and ideal, Plato; hence to secure for his message permanency, he was carefully apt in the nuance of words. The remarks of Trench on words here apply:

Man feels that nothing is properly his own, that he has not secured any new thought or entered upon any new spiritual inheritance till he has fixed it in language, till he can contemplate it not as himself but as his word; he is conscious that he must express truth if he is to preserve it, and still more if he would propagate it among others.

"Oslerisms" were bulky thoughts condensed into brief, comprehensive terms. I do not think he caught them on the wing; he needed them, and their pregnant coinage shows selective care. What intelligent acceptance of Darwin's speculations would the world in general have made except for a few happy phrases as "the survival of the fittest," "the process of natural selection," "the struggle for existence?" And men will want to know the meaning of "Consume your own smoke," "Put your affections into cold storage," "Live in day-tight compartments," "Undress your soul at night." Then they will read Osler to the end and learn his *philosophia vitæ*. Trench's observation again applies:

The single kinglier spirits that have looked deeper into the heart of things have oftentimes gathered up all they have seen into some one word which they have launched upon the world

and with which they have enriched it forever making in that new word a new region of thought to be henceforth in some sort the common heritage of all.

And so, precise and concise language was the amber in which Osler safely embedded and preserved his most precious and subtle thoughts, and had the clothing, not the clothed, been his chief concern his skill as a physician might have been excelled by his art as a literateur.

Osler, the man of science, belongs to the profession of medicine, but Osler the philosopher, elludes our grasp and sallies forth into the world's arena to find an audience commensurate with his message. His theme is for all men, its age, that of the eternal hills, its sanity, conceded. Some of it antedates Christianity though not antagonistic to it. It found thought and saw life in Plato, was crystallized, into words, at least, by Shakespeare, and saw its best exemplification in the thought word and deed of the Nazarene. As lived and taught by Osler it has for present day usage the compelling charm of fraternity, a stimulus not merely to aspiration but indeed to action. It activated him and developed his fine poise.

He did not come by his equanimity without effort. The essays "Science and Immortality" and "A Way of Life" searched his soul. I doubt not that in the wrench that was his from the divinity to the medical schools in Canada he saw life at a different angle, but he also seemingly felt that the spiritual moorings of his early manhood should not be surrendered without a *quid pro quo*. He experienced himself what he warned against in others, the conflict between reason and emotion, but neither in this particular instance nor ever in his teaching does he treat regulated emotion as not befitting a man. He was not a disembodied intellectual being, he was a composite human one, and behaved like one, with human limitations. One can gather

from the summing up of his *Confessio Fidei* that the *chordæ tendinæ* to the old Anglican faith or to any faith were near the snapping point; men more indifferent would have thrown overboard those filial ties but Osler could not, I think, would not, entirely shake off his boyhood teaching. His artistic and serious soul did not thrive on the cold colourless data of scientific fact; science alone left a void in his soul no less than in his heart and he believed in nourishing both. Witness his commiseration for Huxley in the chasm of his spiritual void. One does not quote so frequently and so learnedly from the Bible as does Osler without leaning heavily upon it, consciously or not.

The evidence of order in the sequence of natural phenomena compelled recognition of a guiding Supreme Intelligence; and scientist though he was, the study alone of the phenomena was not a substitute for the reasonable acceptance of that Intelligence. With Francis Thompson in the poem "The Hound of Heaven" he too probably could testify that:

I tempted all His Servitors but to find
My own betrayal in their Constancy
In faith to Him their fickleness to me.

In his discussion on immortality he classifies men into Gallionians, Laodiceans and Theresians. Writing in the third person he did not commit himself. If anything, he was a Gallionian, certainly not a Laodicean, and though he distrusted their sanity he wrote approvingly of the Theresians. He yearned for something to cling to but not as one in a wilderness. He cites Tennyson:

Gone for ever! Ever? No—for since our dying
race began,
Ever, ever and for ever was the leading light
to man.

He would not remain in the sad quandary, common to men of science. With *tendinæ* tense to his old faith and the *pia mater* aching with the promptings of the new faith

of science he selected from all time a few definite tenets of which he could say,—“these have I proven, to these shall I cling come what may, for the rest I cannot be held responsible.” That was his *via media*,—at least more comforting than no way at all, he believed. It was another Oxonian of similar refined sensibilities, frail of body, tortured in soul, drifting from the faith of his childhood he knew not whither, who, of a dark night from the prow of his ship in the sea of Lepanto uttered with anguish of soul that piercing, plaintive prayer:

Lead kindly light, lead Thou me on,
The night is dark and I am far from home.

Osler too had known 'dark nights of the soul and he too longed for home,—for some home. And, when in his library at Oxford, I saw above his desk the portrait of that other Oxonian Newman, I felt they were kindred souls chastened and sweetened because of their travail "o'er crag and moor" that gave them each new spiritual birth, new spiritual anchorage. Newman wished to be firmly anchored; Osler was quite content with not being adrift, one a churchman the other a man of science, both serious men.

For his "Way of Life" Osler went to the dialogues of Plato, the teachings of Marcus Aurelius, to Montaigne, Shakespeare, Epicurus and the Bible. He was always a part of what he read. He knew his Bible better than most preachers. He is constantly quoting from it—his *vade mecum*. For many profane writers Paul's epistles are the storehouse, for Osler, Paul was too belligerent. Francis, the Assisian, he of the winsome soul, was more to his liking.

To the Greeks he went for inspiration; Plato was his counsellor and guide. In his last illness the "Dialogues of Plato" were at his bedside. From Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle he derived much of his equanimity. Those three were not idle dreamers, theirs was applied philosophy in their day. Osler

took them up, for he said the only knowledge worth while was knowledge that could be applied in this work-a-day world.

Plato was a disciple of Socrates with a passion for human improvement and a love of truth. The germs of all ideas, even of most christian ones, are found in Plato. In an analysis of him it is said that all philosophic truth is Plato rightly read; philosophic error is Plato misunderstood; and again, that conscious of his own infirmities he felt a profound sympathy with erring humanity. Osler imbibed much of that sympathy. Plato overstepped the limits of Hellenic borders to become a citizen of the world; Osler said that nationalism, in its chauvinism, was a curse and he too walked from it to become a citizen of the world. Intellectually the acutest, morally the purest citizen of his day Plato held a steadfast belief in a Supreme Being, the intelligent and beneficent Creator of the universe. He knew no luxury, he loved no wealth, he was just. It is therefore not strange that Osler's kindred soul chose him for a model,—for in addition he was a progressive man of good sense.

Of the Greeks, Sir Henry Maine says: "To one small people it was given to create the principle of progress. That people was the Greek. Except the blind forces of nature nothing moves in this world which is not Greek in its origin." One does not learn that simply by wrestling with his "Xenophon" or "Demosthenes de Corona" or his ponderous Greek grammar in his college days; the history of Grecian art, science, philosophy, letters must be re-read in the leisure of maturer years. Of that learning and wise philosophy Osler partook to a greater degree than most students and it was reflected in his writings and in his life.

Osler was the special friend of the old time general practitioner. He was ever ready to defend him from the derision of more learned brethren. To a graduating

class he endorsed him as quite worthy of the emulation of his hearers. A finished schoolman himself he made generous allowance for the deficient training of the general practitioner's early days; for in him he often saw the shrewd sane judgment and rugged virtues for which the finer embellishments of erudition alone are not a substitute. That tolerant attitude and that kindly sympathy ought to enshrine him in the reciprocal good will of this Society, composed largely of general practitioners! Let others pay homage to the more subtle things of the intellect, we of humbler ambition, though not necessarily of lesser discernment, love less Osler the scholar, because we love more Osler the man.

An obituary of him in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* epitomized his life-work in a tribute it was ever his ambition to justly merit, namely, that of "The Ideal Physician." That was the alpha and the omega of his life. And what is his message to this society? If I have culled anything of permanency from a study of his life it is the repeated counsel contained in the second admonition given on the Mount. And you, as well as I, know that, in smaller medical centers, especially, that counsel of tolerance one to another is too often observed more in the breach than in the performance. The older members are the worst sinners in that they keep alive old grievances born of early days of competitive professional life. Let the younger men improve on their elders: in them lies the promise of a wider charity. His second message would, of course, be about the things of the mind. He would boost our library. "Books have been my delight these thirty years and from them I have received incalculable benefits." "To study the phenomena of disease without books is to sail an uncharted sea, while to study books without patients is not to go to sea at all." "For the general practitioner a well-used library in the society rooms is one of the few correctives of premature

senility which is so apt to overtake him.”
 “It is astonishing with how little reading a doctor can practice medicine but it is not astonishing how badly he may do it.”

Again he says: “The very marrow and fitness of books may not suffice to save a man from becoming a poor mean-spirited devil, without a spark of fine professional feeling and without a thought above sordid issues of the day.” “Professional character is helped,” he says, “by contemplation of the lives of the great and good of the past, and in no way more than in the touch divine of noble natures gone.”

Some of that divine touch I have brought

here to-night in a gift to the Society of a portrait of Sir William Osler, Bart., as also of two volumes of the ANNALS OF MEDICAL HISTORY. These books will be a start along the road he pointed out to culture, to those finer and better things in our daily contact one with another and with the world. That is the society to aspire to, the society of books, where in quiet solitude we too will learn to commune with the great physicians of the past. In the lives of Osler and of the medical ancients we will realize and see, as perhaps in no other way, that the dignity of our work must ever make it a profession, never a trade.



Coat of arms appearing in Porta's "Della Fisonomia dell' huomo, libri sei". Gio. Giac. Carlino & Const. Vitale for Salvatore Scarano, Naples, 1610.