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BOOK OF THE DAY.

A WISE PHYSICIAN.

THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM OSLER. By
Harvey Cushing. Illustrated.
Oxford: The Clarendon Press. 2 vols.
37s. 6d. net.

Two ponderous volumes and 1,300 pages—though the late Sir William Osler was a most vivid and varied personality, a modern Melampus in medicine, yet the story of his works and days does not justify so vast a memorial. The biographer's excuse—that the contents of these volumes are merely *mémoires pour servir*, "merely the outlines for the final portrait to be painted out when the colours, lights, and shadows come in time to be added"—cannot be accepted, and, when the incredible excess of insignificant detail is considered, we must set down his work as the worst type of the cenotaph in book-form we have seen for some time.

In justice, however, to the victim we must do our best to extricate his wisdom and wit from this monstrous mound of the dust of circumstance. He was born at the far end of Yonge-street—the military road built by General Simcoe in the early days of the making of Canada from "Muddy York" (Toronto) to the lake that now bears the General's name. Happy the children that are born and raised in the places of pioneering: "Little burnt-holes-in-a-blanket," as the baby Osler was called from his complexion and dark eyes, acquired from the first a faculty of keen observation, a physique of steel, and that power of bringing his speed and strength to a focus which enabled him to throw a cricket-ball 118 yards, for cricket was—and still is—a cult in Upper Canada (Ontario). Also he had that radio-activity of the mind which is a characteristic of so many Canadians brought up in such an environment. In later years he would confess that he started life with just an ordinary stock of brains. But he put his talents out to usury—he was a "note-book man," had a life-long habit of reading for half an hour in bed before putting out his light, and studied medicine with all his heart and soul and strength. As a practitioner he lived up to the exact terms of the Hippocratic Oath, and he scorned the professional drones who never attended Congresses or did anything to keep up with the progress of their art. He made no great discovery himself, but earned distinction by many small pieces of research which, after all, help more than the layman knows to carry forward the banners of science in the medical sector.

The power and fascination of the man are not apparent in his letters, which are "facty" to a degree. Unfortunately, he did not preserve correspondence, so that Southey's dictum that "a man's character can more surely be judged by those letters which his friends addressed to him than by those he himself penned, for they are apt to reveal with unconscious faithfulness the regard held for him by those who knew him best" cannot be applied in his case. He was the most human of Professors, for the art of living with one's fellow-men was to him a greater thing than all the other arts (including medicine). Linaçre, Sydenham, and Harvey were his three medical heroes; he kept a panel of their portraits over the mantelpiece in his library at Oxford. It was in the spirit of the great physicians (who were, all, for example, "singularly free from the bondage of drugs") that he wrote "The Principles and Practice of Medicine," one of the best text-books ever produced in any vocation and an enduring memorial to his genius for interpretation. Yet it is not in books that the man's rich personality is to be found, nor in printed addresses, nor even in the bedside epigrams, of which the wearisome biographer gives a few examples (Vol. I., p. 593):

(1) There are incurable diseases in medicine, incorrigible vices in the ministry, insoluble cases in law.

(2) Probability is the rule of life—especially under the skin. Never make a positive diagnosis.

(3) Who serves the gods dies young—Venus Bacchus, and Vulcan sent in no bills in the seventh decade.

(4) Believe nothing you see in the newspapers—they have done more to create dissatisfaction than all other agencies. If you see anything in them that you know is true, begin to doubt it at once.

It is a pity a good collection of "Oslerisms" is not included in these *mémoires pour servir*. By the irony of circumstance, however, he will be best remembered by the address in which, betrayed to fools by his indefatigable sense of humour, he dwelt on the uselessness of men over sixty, and alluded to Anthony Trollope's suggestion of a college into which sexagenarians retired for a year's contemplation followed by chloroform. Yet he proposed an alternative—constant resort to the company of young men such as kept Hermippus alive to 153, *puerorum halitus refocillatus et educatus*. At Oxford he was a great success, as one of the five Regius Professors; in the quiet haven of Norham Gardens he evolved, in a growing serenity of spirit, a philosophy of life as well as of medicine, which was a palliative of modernity, perhaps remedial. There is a deep wisdom, for example, in his criticism of the specialists who came to resemble the old Scottish shoemaker in his response to the Dominie's suggestions about the weightier matters of life: "D'ye ken leather?" "But," he added, "every special branch carries with it the corrective of this most fatal tendency. Problems in physiology and pathology touch at every point the commonest affections, and exercised in these, if only in the earlier years of professional life, a man is chastened, so to speak, and can escape the deadening effect of routine." So he can—if only he will! At Oxford he kept in touch with all his old friends across the Atlantic; it was said he week-ended in America. In his last illness he was still his virile, various, vivid self; he loved to be read to, had an orgy of the delights of literature. He "smelt the rose above the mould"—yet he studied his symptoms carefully, only regretting he could not assist at the post-mortem. A great man, and the cause of greatness in others!

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