

A STUDENT'S IMPRESSION OF OSLER

THERE are many of the friends and admirers of Sir William Osler who have written since his death of his many sided character and his vivid interest in his fellow men, of his erudition, his wit, his inspiring influence on all who knew him, so that there remains little unsaid. Rather than attempt any further estimate of the man, it seems that I may write of the impressions which we, as his first students in the new medical school at Johns Hopkins University, received from his teaching.

We had known him, of course, when we worked through our earlier laboratory studies, as one who appeared when there was an autopsy from his wards, and stayed until the essentials of the demonstration were complete; one who had almost always seen a well ordered series of such cases before, and was intent on adding to the information that the series had afforded. We had known him too, as a gay and kind, if somewhat elusive, host at his house at 1 West Franklin Street, where we were welcomed on Sunday afternoons. But it was not until our third year that he became our teacher.

Then we met in a small room in the Dispensary, small because there were only fifteen or sixteen of us, and a patient was brought in from among those who had come for the first time that day to ask for treatment. One of us was called upon to question the patient and later perhaps to make a physical examination, while the rest looked on and listened. Those were rather anxious times, although we were coached without a trace of ridicule by "The Chief" as he was always called. Assistants might afford information as to blood counts, or let us look at malarial parasites, but in those days the application of laboratory methods was simple, and there was little need to wait for such elaborate reports as now seem necessary. Of course we missed many things, but there was enough and more than enough to open to us a vista of new impressions. Sometimes we found symptoms or physical signs which quite obviously formed the expression of pathological conditions with which we had become familiar in Dr. Welch's laboratory. It was easy to grasp the meaning of the complaints of a man who came from down the bay with his blood swarming with malarial parasites;

easy to understand the symptoms of a cancer of the pylorus, or a mitral stenosis, for these we had seen at autopsy.

But our experience was very limited, and when one day a man presented himself with a huge tumour mass projecting palpably from the edge of the liver, we had not seen a gumma of that size, and it required his return quite well after a course of iodides to assure us that the diagnosis was correct. Nor had we any background of facts of pathological anatomy to help us on another day when there came Maggie Wolff, her comely face distorted by the most fearful grimaces, and in the midst of quiet talk jerking out imprecations of marine flavor. She feared to go out into the open square, she said, and sought our feeble help. Years afterward when an Armenian dramatist clung to me in terror, as we approached a long open bridge over the Danube and could be comforted only by the intimacy of the walls of a tramcar station, I remembered Maggie Wolff with her Giles de la Tourette's disease.

Every case was a text for Dr. Osler upon which he could talk in the most graphic way, going back always to the many other cases of the same kind that formed his series, and stirring us to recall or to watch for such cases. We learned with astonishment of all the degrees of the disease of Maggie Wolff, and recalled our friends who had a convulsive tic, or listened while we were told of this mediæval poet or that well-known physician whose daily doings were halted by a habit spasm.

We scanned the people in the street cars, searching for tophi, keratitis, rhagades, or clubbed fingers. No doubt we did them great injustice in our conclusions and it is fortunate that they could not read our thoughts, but for us the market place became peopled with the victims of every sort of ailment.

It was this ever fresh interest in the phenomena of disease that filled his thoughts rather than the impulse to search out laboriously the cause and the mode of production of any affection. His was the naturalist's attitude of observation and comparison, sometimes statistical, always with wonder and always with joy and excitement over some new manifestation which completed and confirmed the older observations. It was his wide range of familiarity with the pathological anatomy of disease, both in its external stigmata and the changes produced in internal organs, that gave to these observations of sick men their precision and fixed them indelibly in our minds. It was his remarkable memory of the history of these diseases and of the circumstances attending

their appearance in some distinguished man that lent them a charm to strengthen our impression.

When we followed him about the wards or attended his more formal clinics, there was the same delight in his fresh interest in each case. His own study of the physical signs of disease stirred our admiration by its extraordinary expertness. Auscultation and percussion, and more especially palpation, and inspection of contours and shadows and movements as seen in a good light, gave him information which was hard for us to follow but which usually proved correct. With the patients who instinctively recognized him as a person of another order, he was sympathetic, cheery and jocose, usually, however, at our expense, or at that of human frailty at large. Then he often spoke in epigrams.

I think he influenced us chiefly by his personal example, since he showed us how well these things could be done, how vast and inviting was the field of the effects of disease with which one might become familiar, and in what way the students of past centuries had laboured to search it. He gave it an almost poetic literary stamp and made us think in terms of the changing views of successive generations, and realize the age long obscurities and the remarkable discoveries of other centuries, as well as of this much vaunted one.

Whatever the disease he discussed, we were never told dogmatically details that would slip from memory and leave confusion; instead there was always comparison with other conditions and relations were made clear. In other words we were led to recognize a certain uniformity in the action of each cause of disease; there are some rules that govern them and all cases are not unlike. Given some features we might look for others if we knew enough, just as a botanist, finding a new *Hypericum* with red instead of yellow flowers, nevertheless looks confidently for transparent spots on the leaves.

While these were the natural channels in which his mind worked, he was by no means lacking in enthusiasm for the more remote results of technical studies of which the intermediate steps were not exposed to every eye. In his last letter he says of himself,

precious, for there are few of them left who trust to their own immediate powers, and I have purposely emphasized this to the exclusion of all else that might be said about him.

His home held a welcome for all of us alike; for us it was not a mere house like other houses, but an enchanted palace where we found without surprise, men of every country whose names we knew from books, all for a time under the spell of his presence in which we floated day by day. We would not have felt it strange had we found Montaigne and Laennec there one Sunday afternoon, but should have expected them to greet him as a familiar spirit.

It was hard to think of him as a sympathetic human being, able to help us cope with our difficulties and embarrassments in daily life. None of these things seemed to be of the stuff that could be brought to one whose world was so much larger than ours, and whose interests seemed to be part of the ages and not of this particular town and week. But every one of us has gone to him with our common troubles and he helped us as a man with a warm heart, and for that too, we loved him.

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