

CUS 417/121.42

Week. Feb. 9-12

Storneliffa

(From Dr. Wilbert C. Davison.)

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In 1915, Sir William Osler spoke at the American Club in Oxford, on the history of his life. (This account is based on my memory four years later. I have tried to use Sir William's own words. He talked informally and humourously, stating that he wanted us to draw what lessons we could for our careers).

"Born 7th in a missionary's family, in Ontario, with twins ahead, I did not have an auspicious financial outlook. I went to Trinity College, Toronto with the expectation of entering the ministry. After few trimesters of the classics I decided that ^{for I had always been interested in it.} science was preferable. One of his old friends once told me that as a boy he would hunt for animalculae in the horse trough near his home. I took up the latter at Trinity but finally decided to go to McGill University Medical School at Montreal, as the advantages there appeared greater.

McGill at that time was conducted along the lines of the Scotch Medical Schools. At the end of the course every applicant for the M.B. had to write a thesis on some subject. There were two ways in which this could be done, ^{one} first by paying \$25.00 to an old physician in Montreal who would perform the task and the ^{other} latter was grinding it out alone. For various reasons I did the latter. I spent the summer after my last trimester performing autopsies and collecting the interesting specimens. When the medical school opened in the autumn my thesis and array of pathological material ^{was} ready. My specimens were displayed to the faculty in the amphitheatre. The summer had been exceedingly warm and methods for preserving material were not of the best.

My collection was impressive in more ways than one. The professors were so overcome by my labor that I was awarded a special prize.

The latter together with financial help from my brother enabled me to go abroad for further study.

After a short tour through Scotland and England I settled in London in Sir John Burd^{en} Sanderson's laboratory (my memory for names may be erroneous) to investigate the effects of two drugs on leukocytes. This research at least gave me more than a passing acquaintance with the white blood corpuscle.

I then swung around the Grand Circuit stopping at Paris and Vienna and ending in Berlin where I met Virchow who made a great impression upon me.

I had intended returning to Paris, but funds were running low and I returned to Montreal to receive an appointment as instructor in the Institutes of Medicine at Mc^Gill. In those days that course meant physiology and histology. Students paid fees directly to the instructors who provided equipment and material and lived on the balance. I did more of the former, and less of the latter. The supply of microscopes was meager and after remedying this defect there was little left in my pockets. I had to lecture on histology. This was a stupendous task for me for my medical education had been 'gold plated on a brown stone foundation'. However, in Germany I had heard excellent lectures, and these were being published monthly. I would eagerly wait for the mails, then carefully translate the lecture and deliver it the next day.

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I was always haunted by the fear that the supply or the mail would fail me, but it never did.

After ten years I had recovered sufficient means to return to Europe. Virchow had always been interested in anthropology so my offering to him was a perfect skull of the North American Indian. He was delighted when I presented it to him.

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I was resting in a German town when I received a cable from friends in Philadelphia, stating that if I would accept a professorship there, I should communicate with Dr. S. Wear Mitchell who was in Europe and who had been empowered to arrange the details. I sat up late into the night balancing the pros and cons of Montreal and Philadelphia. In the former I had many friends, I loved the work and the opportunity was great. In the latter the field appeared very attractive, but it meant leaving many dear friends. I finally gave it up as unsolvable and decided to leave it to chance. I flipped a four mark silver piece into the air. 'Heads I go to Philadelphia, tails I remain at Montreal.' It fell heads. I went to the telegraph office and wrote the telegram to Dr. Mitchell offering to go to Philadelphia. I reached in my pockets to pay for the wire and found them empty. My only change had been the four mark piece which I had left as it had fallen on my table. It seemed like an act of providence directing me to remain in Montreal. I half decided to follow the cue. Finally I concluded that inasmuch as I had placed the decision to chance I ought to abide by the turn of the coin, and returned to my hotel for it and sent the telegram.

It was hard to leave Montreal but I became very happy in Philadelphia.

Ten years later I had heard of the new hospital and medical school to be opened in Baltimore, so when Dr. Billings entered my room I instinctively knew his mission and accepted as soon as he had invited me to head the new medical service at Johns Hopkins.

This meant a new severance of ties that had grown up in Philadelphia but as I had survived the transplantation from Montreal I knew that the scars of this new change would heal.

After fourteen years of work and happiness in Baltimore I was called to Oxford as ^dReⁿius Professor of Medicine.* " This was my third and I infer my last change. Each time I have met new friends and retained the old.

At the commencement exercises before my departure from Baltimore I created a furor that was entirely unexpected. I had been reading Rousseau and Anthony Trollope and had been thinking of some professors who had remained at their posts after their period of usefulness. It was for them that I advocated chloroform as a peaceful means of retirement. The newspapers made much of it and misquoted it. Boys, do not read Rousseau. It is dangerous. #

* (Lady Osler told me that she was in Murray Bay, Canada, when Sir William was offered the Oxford chair. He could not decide whether or not to go so she cabled him "Do not procrastinate, accept at once." He had been working much too hard in Baltimore and she felt that he ought to leave.)