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153

A LITERARY LETTER : A Great and Lovable Physician.

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To those readers of *The Sphere*, be they few or many, who have been in the habit of reading this page, I offer my apologies in that for two weeks of illness I have failed to provide it, thereby depriving myself of a very great pleasure, whatever may have been the effect on others. Apart from these two weeks, I have enjoyed the thought that I have written without a break ever since the foundation of the paper twenty-five years ago.

"Have you read the biography of Sir William Osler?" asked a professorial friend in Canada, and I received it on a bed of sickness. I confess that its portentous size alarmed me, and although not easily deterred by solid book-making, my first inclination was to leave the book alone. But then I remembered what a fascinating man Osler was as described by his friends; that at one time I had thought of asking some common friend—Horace Hart, for example—to introduce me. But life is a treadmill within a limited radius for most of us, and the sad words, "too late," are written very large in my life story.

Assuredly I do consider this *Life of William Osler*, by Harvey Cushing (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1925. 37s. 6d.), much too long. But the author disarms criticism by telling us that they are merely *mémoires pour servir*, and that from them a final biography may be built up. Few there be, I fancy, who will get through these 1,400 closely-printed pages without some measure of skipping. Yet the plums to the mere literary layman are very attractive. Doubtless that layman may forget that there are a number of medical men, both in England and America, who will find the medical side equally attractive. The publishers have circularised the doctors in America, with immense results. Many also all but worshipped Osler, who seems to have been the most magnetic of men.

William Osler was of Cornish origin, and when he became famous and was Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, he went down to Swansea to unveil a tablet to his uncle, Edward Osler, who was born at Falmouth and died at Truro, was a gifted doctor, a hymn-writer, and editor of *The Royal Cornwall Gazette*. This sentence rather recalls that famous line on Boyle: "He was Father of Philosophy and brother to the Earl of Cork." The Oslers had lived for generations in Cornwall, "a race of successful merchants and shipowners for the most part," but it was on a farm in the wilds of Canada that William was born in 1849. It was in Canada and in the States that all early fame was secured, and there is something very wonderful in the fact that genius is able to assert itself in surgery as in other aspects of science, and that the professor of Canadian and American universities can be selected by Oxford Dons for a Regius Professorship. It is a secondary matter that he was obviously the best man in the English-speaking world for the job.

But I am not concerned with Osler as the great medical and surgical expert, but with Osler in his lighter moments. These to me are the "plums" of this biography—the dissertation on doctors in fiction, the discussion with Oliver Wendell Holmes as to whether one would rather have written Shakespeare's plays or "have snatched from the jaws of death scores of suffering women and restored them to a sound and comfortable existence." Most breezy was the row caused by a playful reference in a speech which produced the headline in American newspapers, "Osler Recommends Chloroform at Sixty," in which he paid the penalty of being too literary for an illiterate world.

It is Osler's wonderful literary sense which fascinates and produces the real "plums." There is his devotion to Sir Thomas Browne, which led him to collect assiduously all his writings. I love his passion for first editions, as here stated:—

I can read with pleasure a classic such as *Rasselas*, though issued in "penny dreadful" form by Mr. Stead, but feel nearer to the immortal Samuel when I hold the original in my hand. It is all a matter of sentiment, so it is; but the very marrow of my bones is full of sentiment, and as I feel towards my blood relations—or some of them!—and to my intimate friends in the flesh, so I feel to these friends in the spirit with whom I am in communion through the medium of the printed word.

This is the gospel of bibliography in a nutshell, but there are sometimes money-changers in the temple!

It was Osler who got the statue of Sir Thomas Browne set up in Norwich, and gave a cup to hold his skull. He was also instrumental in getting that skull restored to the grave. Of the *Religio Medici* he said that it—one of the great English classics—"should be in the hands—in the hearts too—of every medical student." "No book," he said elsewhere, "has had so enduring an influence on my life." It was on that occasion he quoted Seneca: "If you are fond of books, you will escape the ennui of life. You will neither sigh for evening disgusted with the occupations of the day—nor will you live dissatisfied with yourself and unprofitable to others."

Here is a glimpse of a famous club of which the inner life is too seldom revealed, although I possess, through the generosity of Edward Newton of U.S.A., a copy of the very rare *History of The Club*, printed by the Roxburghe Club:—

My first dinner at The Club. The Archbishop of York was to have been in the chair. There were present Sir Henry Newbolt, Kipling, John Buchan, Pember, Bailey, Oman, Kenyon, and Fisher. All but Newbolt and Bailey I had known. N. was in the chair, and I sat between him and Fisher, the Minister of Education. Very good evening. The room is a special one in which the club has dined for twenty years. Oil paintings of the founders and lithographs of many old members on the walls. Rarely more than ten or twelve members dine, so a round table is prepared for that number. Kipling was in very good form, and told many good war stories. He said he would not be surprised if in a few years the monastic life was revived—as men were seeking relief from the burdens of a hard world and turning more and more to spiritual matters. . . .

I would like to have referred to his romantic story of the rediscovery and return to the Bodleian of a Shakspeare First Folio; to say something of the breezy, lovable nature of Osler. I hope the letters to his wife may be recovered, and that Mr. Cushing, grateful as I am to him, will try again with a friendly blue pencil—a mind behind it—to help him to separate the quick from the dead in word pictures.



The Regius and the Undergraduate

A pathetic picture of Sir William Osler, Bart., and his son, Revere, who was killed in the Great War. Reproduced from "The Life of Sir William Osler," by Harvey Cushing. 2 vols. Just published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford