

"THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRONICLE AND TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT."

A NOTABLE BOOK.

SIR WILLIAM OSLER'S LIFE.*

Sir William Osler at the time of his death was Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University. By birth he was a Canadian, the son of a rector who held the livings of Ancaster and Dundas, near the south end of Lake Ontario. As a consultant physician and teacher, Osler attained a world-wide reputation, passing from achievement to achievement, and reaping a succession of honours which culminated in a baronetcy. He is best known, perhaps, as the author of *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, which he wrote in 1891-2. This great work immediately received the recognition which it deserved. It passed quickly into many editions, and it is still considered one of the leading contributions to medical science.

But Osler was not only a great physician and a great teacher. He was a pioneer. The art of medicine has advanced so rapidly in the last twenty-five years that we can hardly realise that he began to practise his profession before the days of modern surgery and modern public health work. He owed his later position of pre-eminence largely to the fact that he was a man with a vision. Long before the present technique was attained he had foreseen it, and in his own practice and teaching anticipated it. He did more, perhaps, than any other for the elevation of the medical and nursing professions. He had a wonderful sense of what was only transitory and what was lasting. Thus when the world was running away with the idea that tuberculosis was going to solve the problem of the tuberculosis scourge, he referred in his address at the National Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis to a patient who was brought to him with this disease. He prescribed open air, golf and a rational life. "The mother, however, did not like this 'Go, wash in Jordan,' and two years had been spent on the Continent under tuberculin treatment. The patient had stood it wonderfully. She could not have been better if she had not had the treatment."

This exemplifies his sane outlook and his sound common sense. In him was the ideal combination of physician and scientist. Consider, for example, his attitude to the vexed question of vivisection. Demonstrating the advance made in the treatment of cretinism, he said, "The stunted stature, the semi-bestial aspect, the blubber lips, retroussé nose sunken at the root, the wide-open mouth, the lolling tongue, the small eyes half closed with swollen lids, the stolid expressionless face, the squat figure, the muddy dry skin, combine to make the picture of what has been well termed 'the pariah of nature.' Not the magic wand of Prospero or the brave kiss of the daughter of Hippocrates ever effected such a change as that which we are now enabled to make in these unfortunate victims, doomed heretofore to live in hopeless imbecility, an unspeakable affliction to their parents and to their relatives. . . . That I am able to show you such marvellous transformations, such undreamt-of transfigurations, is the direct triumph of vivisection, and no friend of animals who looks at the 'counterfeit presentments' I here demonstrate will consider the knowledge dearly bought, though at the sacrifice of hundreds of dogs and rabbits."

To readers of the *Sunday School*

**The Life of Sir William Osler*. By Harvey Cushing. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1925. In 2 volumes. Volume 1 pp. 685; Volume 2 pp. 686 and Index. 37/6 net. One volume India Paper Edition. 50/- net.

Chronicle and Times the life of Sir William Osler is chiefly of interest because of the sublimity of his character. One of his colleagues at Oxford remarked that "He was, indeed, one of the Saints of God." Could any tribute be greater? The fact is his life reflects in fullest human perfection that ideal which we have revealed to us in Christ. Warned once that his generosity was being abused, he replied, "There was no discrimination in the charity of the Good Samaritan, who stopped not to ask the stripped and wounded man by the wayside whether it was by his own fault the ill had come; nor of his religion, nor had he the wherewithal to pay his board." Truly it does one good to read of such breadth of sympathy.

Again, speaking to medical students he used these words: "The atmosphere of life is darkened by the murmurings and whimperings of the men and women over the non-essentials, the trifles, that are inevitably incident to the hurly-burly of the day's routine. Things cannot always go your way. Learn to accept in silence the minor aggravations, cultivate the gift of taciturnity and consume your own smoke with an extra draught of hard work, so that those about you may not be annoyed with the dust and soot of your complaints. More than any other the practitioner of medicine may illustrate the second great lesson, that we are here not to get all we can of life for ourselves, but to try to make the lives of others happier. This is the essence of the oft-repeated admonition of Christ: 'He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it,' on which hard saying if the children of this generation would lay hold, there would be less misery and discontent in the world. . . . To you as the trusted family counsellor the father will come with his anxieties, the mother with her hidden griefs, the daughter with her trials, and the son with his follies. Fully one-third of the work you do will be entered in other books than yours. Courage and cheerfulness will not only carry you over the rough places of life, but will enable you to bring comfort and help to the weak-hearted, and will console you in the sad hours when, like Uncle Toby, you have 'to whistle that you may not weep.'" Many similar passages might be selected all of which make one feel the potent influence of a good man.

Moreover, Osler was so human! He had humour, that most blessed of all possessions. Humour balances and softens life and is the root of tolerance and sympathy. It was said of Osler that his favourite point of view was the centre, from which he sympathised with all. This would be considered a fault by the fanatic, but from this position the physician sees life in its true perspective. And he kept his boyish humour to the end of life. After his sixtieth birthday he wrote to a child friend: "I had to go on in ink with this, as my fluffy-headed stenographer struck her fist on the table, and said she did not come here to take down nonsense—not she, not from any man. What do you think I said? Nothing—but I gave her a basilisk look, and she fainted dead away and is groaning with her fluffy head in the waste-paper basket, and there she can stay until I finish this."

"P.S.1.—The fluffy-headed vestal still groans. An envelope and two sheets of paper protrude from her mouth—the basket just fits her head."

"P.S.2.—I have just had a photograph taken of her."

"P.S.3.—She has recovered, and I am leaving quick.—Goodbye."

Osler was a great lover of books. He had a positive passion for libraries, and had he enjoyed the wealth might have gone further even than Mr. Carnegie. His favourite authors were Plutarch, Montaigne, Browne (the author of *Religio Medici*), Fuller, and above all Izaak Walton, whose *Compleat Angler* was his joy.

He was a worker, and preached the gospel of energy. He spoke of work always as "the master word" or "the magic word." "It is the open sesame to every portal, the great equaliser in the world, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes all the base metal of humanity into gold. The stupid man among you it will make bright, the bright man brilliant, and the brilliant student steady. With the magic word in your heart all things are possible, and without it all study is vanity and vexation. The miracles of life are with it; the blind see by touch, the deaf hear with eyes, the dumb speak with fingers. To the youth it brings hope, to the middle-aged confidence, to the aged repose. True balm of hurt minds, in its presence the heart of the sorrowful is lightened and consoled. It is directly responsible for all advances in medicine during the past twenty-five centuries. Laying hold upon it, Hippocrates made observation and science the warp and woof of our art. With its inspiration Harvey gave an impulse to a larger circulation than he wot of, an impulse which we feel to-day. Hunter sounded all its heights and depths, and stands out in our history as one of the great exemplars of its virtues. With it Virchow smote the rock and the waters gushed out; while in the hands of Pasteur it proved a very talisman to open to us a new heaven and a new earth in surgery." A man who could write and think like that may justly be acclaimed one of God's prophets.

Osler's last years were clouded by the tragedy of the war, when he lost his only and most beloved son. His own death from pneumonia but a few years later was no doubt accelerated by this. The manner of his passing, like the rest of his life, was alike heroic and beautiful. With the full knowledge of his condition he wrote in a most touching letter: "The harbour is not far off. And such a happy voyage! And such dear companions all the way! And the future does not worry. It would be nice to find Isaac (his pet name for his son) and Izaak Walton there and others, but who knows?" I think that a very sweet touch about Walton. What a privilege to have known Osler and to have felt, as so many did, the warm pressure of his hand, either in one's own or laid in his characteristically tender way upon the shoulder.

Truly we owe a great debt to Professor Cushing for revealing the man to us. One might say, perhaps, that these two volumes are a little overloaded with detail, and I think that from the immense mass of data collected so carefully a small popular life of Osler might well be written. For the present volumes have somewhat the dignity of a scientific text-book. They are monumental. They are written for the scholar, the student of human nature, and often leave readers to draw their own inferences. The book aims, no doubt, at being the standard work of a great man, and this aim will be admitted by all critics to have been attained.

CHARLES W. BUDDEN.

In the present issue is given the first of 5 articles by Dr. John A. Hutton on "The Problem of Sunday."