

On Life and Letters

THE DOCTOR'S DOCTOR

To the Editor of THE BRITISH WEEKLY.

SIR,—My mind is obsessed by one or two fixed ideas, of which I have no doubt these letters have already made you painfully aware. I shall not confess meantime to any of the others, lest I put you on your guard. But there is one theme on which I have touched more than once in the past, and to which I may often have to return, unless I succeed in converting the whole tribe of writing men to my own point of view. I mean the unhappy prolixity of biographers. My feelings on this subject have been freshly stirred by Harvey Cushing's biography of Sir William Osler (Oxford University Press, two vols., 37s. 6d. net). The story which it tells is most notable and beautiful; it is ably told; and it is worthy not merely of abiding but of widespread remembrance, because there is much in it from which the average man as well as the medical expert may learn. Yet it runs to two heavy volumes between 600 and 700 pages each. One cannot but admire the learning and the labour and the love that have gone into this great task, yet my fear is that a book of such prodigious proportions is destined to repose peacefully on the shelves of college libraries. The average lay reader will not dare to tackle it. The busy practitioner, who has a double right to know such a story, will never have time to get through it. If it had been half the size, it would have had ten times the usefulness. At that point I leave my little grumble and commend to all possible biographers my doctrine that a biography should be a shrine of remembrance and not a mausoleum.

I.

The public has not yet forgotten the sensation which was caused by the announcement in 1905 that the new Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford had declared men to be too old at forty. The world we live in is largely at the mercy of catchwords. If a great states-

a strictly limited reference, uses a phrase like "Wait and see," all his record of service and sagacity is forgotten. The multitude acts and feels as if he had never said anything but "Wait and see." So, when Osler came to England, comparatively little was heard, except, of course, in expert circles, of his laborious and brilliant work. The thing that rang round the country was his unfortunate dictum. The story of the incident is given in full in the biography, and is worth summarising. He was taking farewell of the Johns Hopkins University. He borrowed the title of his farewell address from Trollope's novel, "The Fixed Period." It naturally touched on themes suggested by his departure, the dangers of staying too long in one place, the value to a university of changes in the personnel, the possibility of having a fixed period for the teacher rather than an appointment *ad vitam aut culpam*. He went on to speak in a semi-jocular vein of two fixed ideas with which he sometimes bored his friends.

"The first is the comparative uselessness of men above forty years of age. This may seem shocking, and yet, read aright, the world's history bears out the statement. Take the sum of human achievement, in action, in science, in art, in literature—subtract the work of men above forty, and while we should miss great treasures, even priceless treasures, we would practically be where we are to-day. . . . My second fixed idea is the uselessness of men above sixty years of age, and the incalculable benefit it would be in commercial, political and in professional life if, as a matter of course, men stopped work at this age. . . . Whether Anthony Trollope's suggestion of a college and chloroform should be carried out or not I have become a little dubious, as my own time is getting so short."

The next day the newspapers came out with scare headlines: OSLER RECOMMENDS CHLOROFORM AT SIXTY. The uproar spread over the United States, and lasted for weeks. A friend met Dr. and Mrs. Osler one Sunday morning. Mrs. Osler remarked, "I am escorting the shattered idol home from church." Feeling was so intense that a project to rear an academy of medicine which was to bear Osler's name fell through because of the many subscriptions withdrawn. The irony of the situation was intensi-

fied by the fact that reverence for old age was one of the outstanding features of Osler's character: he had said at an earlier stage that he wanted to write a tribute to the old man in the profession. When this notorious address came to be published in volume form he made a noble apology in the preface:—

"To one who had all his life been devoted to old men, it was not a little distressing to be placarded in a world-wide way as their sworn enemy, and to every man over sixty whose spirit I may have unwittingly bruised I tender my heartfelt regrets. Let me add, however, that the discussion which followed my remarks has not changed, but has rather strengthened, my belief that the real work of life is done before the fortieth year, and that after the sixtieth year it would be best for the world and best for ourselves if men rested from their labours."

II.

Osler was born in 1849 at a Canadian outpost, where his father had gone as an S.P.G. pioneer, to lay the foundations of the Christian Church in a new community. He inherited both from father and mother the traditions of high character and of hard work. Edward Osler, the well-known hymn-writer, was an uncle. At first he was intended for the ministry, but he soon turned aside to the study of medicine. Two influences of the early years left an abiding mark upon him. One was the personality of Dr. James Bovell, a physician who later took holy orders. I remember an excellent Highland minister who had an intense devotion to a famous Edinburgh preacher, and sometimes, *à propos* of nothing, he would pull out his watch and remark, "Dr. — will now be having his tea." It seemed to be a joy to him merely to repeat the great man's name. Except this comparatively trivial instance, I do not remember any parallel in literature or in life to the impression made by Bovell upon Osler. It seemed to comfort him merely to write down

Osler's name and date. A college notebook of Osler's exists in which there is written, apparently whenever the student's mind flagged in noting the lectures, the words "James Bovell, M.D., M.R.C.P." This curious habit persisted through the later years. If he was trying a pen, he wrote James Bovell's name instead of his own. Sometimes if he was hesitating or puzzling over a letter received, he would write "James Bovell, M.D., M.R.C.P.," meditatively on its margins. He would do the same thing with his blotting pad when he was examining students and waiting for their answers. When he was leaving America for England and preparing a college address, he actually started to write on the title page "By James Bovell" instead of "By William Osler," but corrected himself. The other great and abiding influence was his love for the works of Sir Thomas Browne. His devotion to Browne's writings began at the age of seventeen. The second book he ever purchased was the "Religio Medici," and fifty-two years later that copy of the "Religio" was laid upon his coffin. He was a diligent collector of the various works and editions of Sir Thomas Browne, and he was the means of getting the skull of that great writer reverently stored in a casket in the museum at Norwich. It must have been a peculiar pleasure to Osler when attending the meeting of the British Medical Association in Edinburgh in 1898 to be present in St. Giles' Cathedral when Dr. Whyte (whose name is here misspelled "White") gave his famous appreciation of Browne, taking as his text, "The greatest of these is charity."

III.

Osler's first prominent post was the professorship at McGill University, to which he was appointed in 1875. There he laid the foundations of the clinical work for which he afterwards became so famous. In 1884 he came to Philadelphia, to be Professor of Clinical Medicine in the University of Pennsylvania. In 1889 he received what in many respects was the great chance of his life—the appointment as Physician-in-Chief to the Johns Hopkins Hospital at Baltimore. Hopkins had been a wealthy Quaker, who came to believe that there were two things that were sure to endure—"a University, for there will always be youth to train,

and a hospital, for there will always be suffering to relieve." Vast funds had been left in the hands of trustees and great things seemed possible, untrammelled by tradition or vested interests. The responsibility of organising the clinical side lay in Osler's hands. Here, also, he had the opportunity of producing his book, "Principles and Practice of Medicine." The work was an extraordinary success, and in later years it ran through many editions, each of which involved much hard work in the way of revision and bringing up to date. Here also he met his wife, and the story goes that, being much distracted between authorship and courtship, he finally appeared one day in her presence with the book under one arm and tossed it into her lap, with the words: "There, take the darned thing. Now, what are you going to do with the man?" They had one son, who lost his life in the Great War. Osler was offered the Chair of Medicine in Edinburgh, which had been held by Sir Thomas Grainger-Stewart, but at that time he could not persuade himself to leave America. It was in 1904 that he was asked to come to Oxford to succeed Sir John Burdon Sanderson as Regius Professor, and he thought it well to take this chance of a transference to new opportunity and new environment, while, as he put it, "there was still some elasticity in the rubber." His manifold and distinguished service was recognised by the baronetcy which was conferred upon him in 1911 at the time of the coronation of King George. But perhaps the happiest hour of his life was given him when his seventieth birthday arrived, and from all round the world loving tributes, printed, written and cabled, poured in upon him. He had always been liable to pneumonic weakness, and it was an illness of this kind that finally carried him away in January, 1920. He summarised his own life's experience in a letter written to a friend while his last illness was upon him:

"The harbour is not far off. And such a happy voyage! And such dear companions all the way! And the future does not worry."

IV.

I dare not embark even upon a

list of his professional achievements and discoveries. It would need a pen more technically skilled than mine, and the ordinary reader may be more interested in some of the qualities that lay underneath the detailed professional achievements. Medicine, like theology, was passing out of the stage of graceful generalisations. Osler was one of the pioneers in the task of cutting the conventionalities and getting at facts. One of his greatest gifts was his power of observation. An amusing instance of this is given, taken from a day in Baltimore, when he had with him around a bed in the hospital an unusually large crowd of students and younger doctors.

"Whose case is this?" said Osler. "Mine, sir," replied the fourth-year clerk, stepping forward. "Well, Mr. Freeman, what is the first thing you would do in examining this patient?" With some trepidation Mr. F. chanced: "Take the history, sir." "No, that's already been done; what next?" Mr. F., thinking to make a hit, replied: "Inspect the patient." "Not yet," said Osler; "what before that?" Mr. F. gives it up. "Well, the first thing to do is to ask Dr. Lambert to stand out of the light."

He was always wanting to show his pupils definite things. He would hunt for hours in his Philadelphian days to find out, say, the small artery concerned in a pulmonary haemorrhage, and if he found something interesting, he would send messages out to his students to come and see what he had found and discover the instruction that was in it. Nothing stands out more vividly to the general reader of these volumes than his belief in the therapeutic value of hope. The only time when he seemed to grow cross in hospital was when an assistant unguardedly let fall a word of despair in the presence of a patient. Consequently he had a good word again and again to say for faith-healing. He thought that doctors were often ignorant of their own faith cures, and too sensitive about those performed outside their ranks. When he came from Baltimore to Oxford he was recognised all over North America as the "Doctor's Doctor," and his care and kindness to the members of his own profession and their wives and families was illimitable. Such lives are an honour and a crown to humanity.

I am, sir, yours, etc.

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