

"The beloved physician" : in memoriam Lucian S. Wilcox, M.D.: an address / by Nathaniel J. Burton, paster of Park Church, Hartford, Conn.; December 4, 1881.

Contributors

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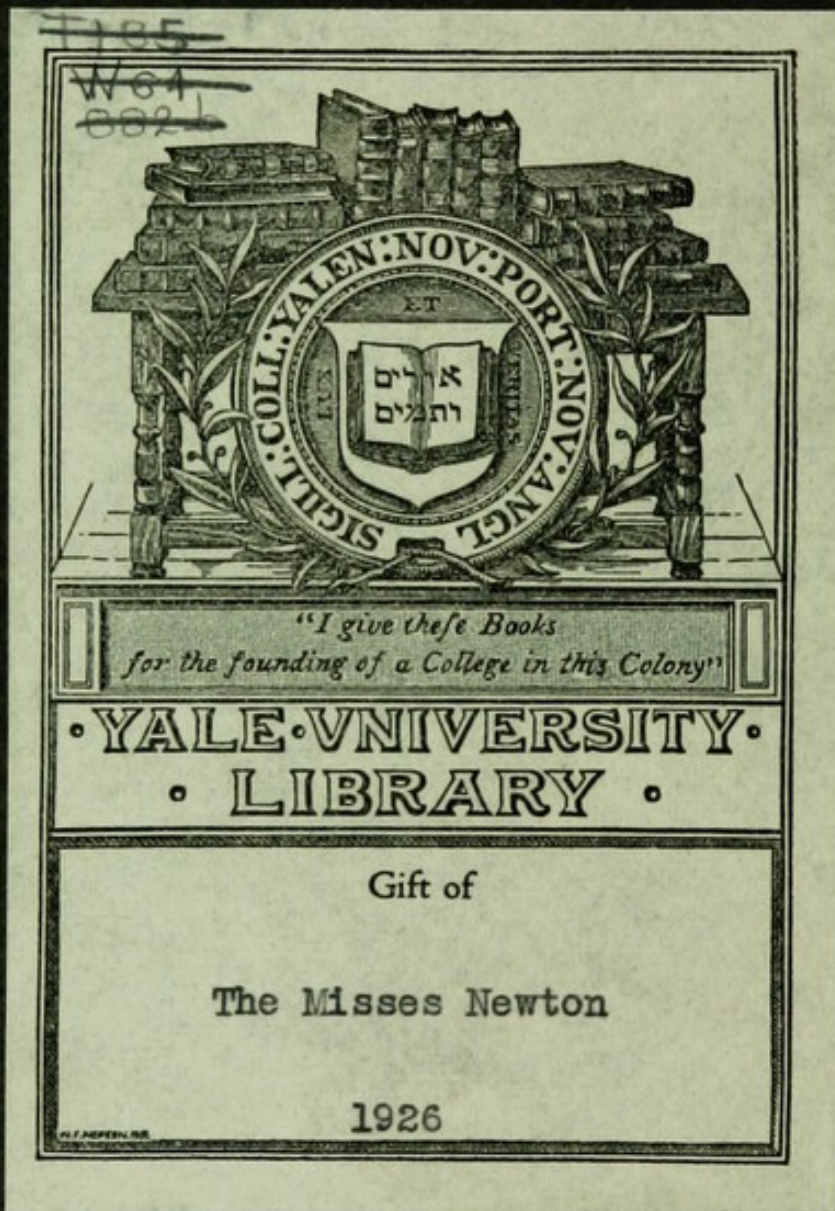
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Lucian S. Wilcox, M. D.

Hartford, 1882.



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"THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN."

In Memoriam.

LUCIAN S. WILCOX, M. D.

AN ADDRESS

BY

NATHANIEL J. BURTON,

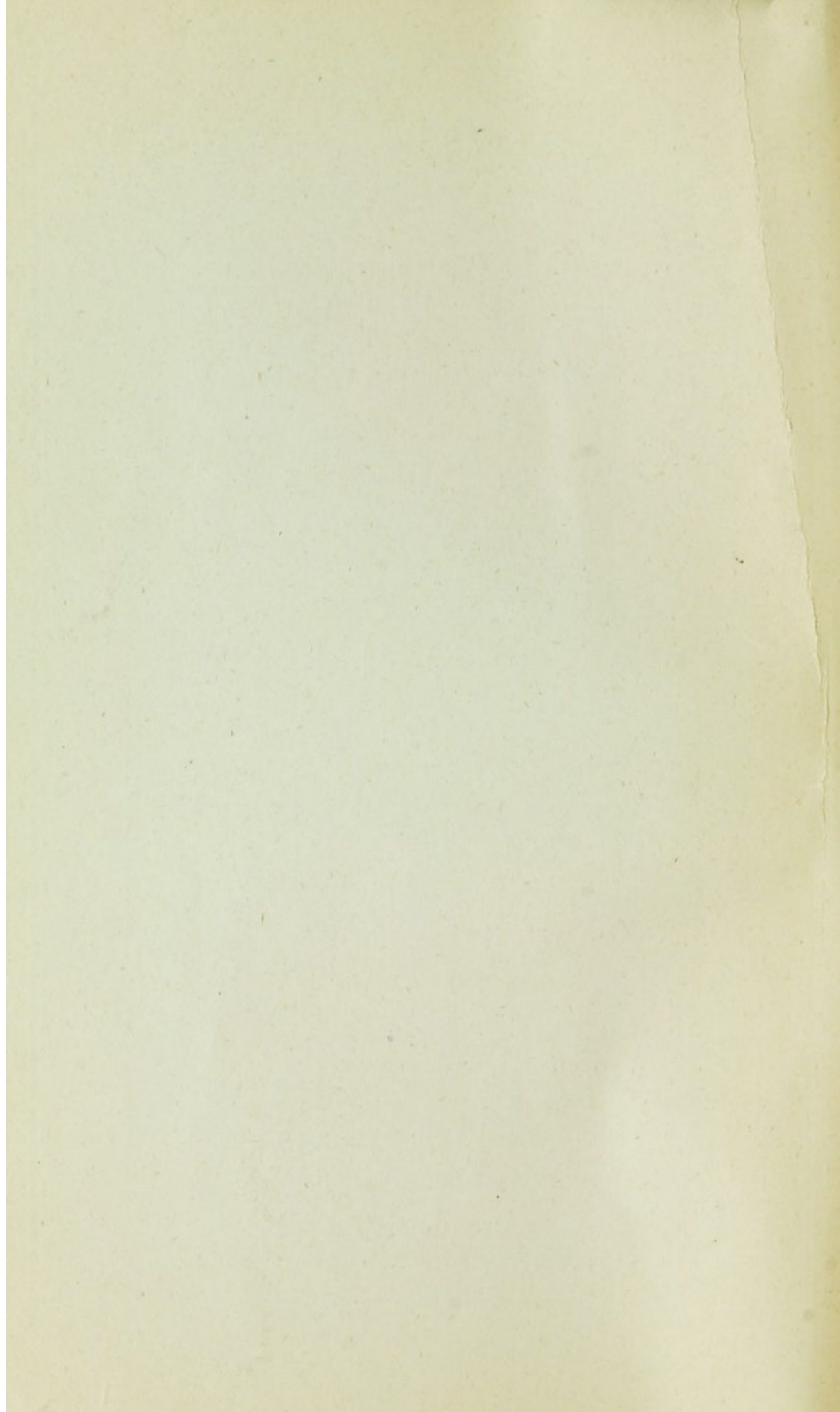
PASTOR OF PARK CHURCH, HARTFORD, CONN.,

DECEMBER 4, 1881.

HARTFORD, CONN.

THE CASE, LOCKWOOD & BRAINARD CO., PRINTERS.

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ADDRESS.

It was in my heart to speak to you here this morning in regard to the life and character of Dr. Lucian S. Wilcox who has recently gone from among us, but when I read the very suitable and cordial notices of him published in the daily journals of this city I concluded to keep silent, feeling that I could add nothing of interest to their words. But as the week wore on I changed my mind. I remembered the days far back when he and I, students in preparation for college, sat together in daily classes in the Wesleyan Academy, at Wilbraham, Massachusetts, and it seemed to me that I was about to prove in some sort unfaithful to those blessed days if I did not now speak. I remembered also that in my frequent interviews with Dr. Wilcox during the last weeks of his life, he spoke of this church of his choice with much interest, and even asked me to carry messages of Christian affection to you, his brethren and sisters in the Lord. And aside from all this, pressing me to speak, I knew that any human life, carefully studied, is a most engaging theme; full of instruction, full of spiritual edification, and full of unspeakable pathos; a theme therefore to which we may recur over and over.

I have been interested to make some little search into the earthly beginnings of this, our departed brother, to see if I might discover there precisely the influences which made him to be the man which he eventually was.

And I will relate to you, hurriedly, what I have found—only remarking by way of preface, that there is a curious amount of tenderness in explorations of this sort. It would be a matter of some interest to track a great river to its source and observe the humble and feeble way in which it starts out. It is a matter of great interest to track a mighty idea from its upspringing in a single mind to its final world-wide prevalency. It is a profound and touching study to go back to the birth-hour of nations, and read the beginning of their grandeur. But I think we are most touched when we take a single person whose life is at last completed, and who has lived so nobly and usefully as to draw the admiring and grateful attention of his fellow men, and make a pilgrimage to the very spot where he was born, to the household wherein he was reared, to the school where he was first taught, to the church whither his feet were first led, to the scenery through which he roamed, to the old neighbors who recollect him, and to the church-yard where his many kindred sleep and to which, perchance, he himself has been taken after all his wanderings in the broad world, that he may rest where he would most dearly love to be—for although ambition and pleasure and inevitable affairs do take us away from the early home places, even to the end of the earth sometimes, and detain us there as long as we live, nevertheless when death draws nigh, of all places there is no one which so fills our thought as our first home, and no gathering place of the dead which seems to us so full of tranquility, and of precious company, as that one back among the hills, which we first knew.

I. As regards our friend of whom we now speak I find that he was born into a characteristic New England home, and made his start under that inestimable advantage. His father was the admired and trusted physician

of that country town where he lived, a strong and good and happy-hearted man, although not a member of the Christian church. What obstructed him at that point I do not know, and have not inquired. But it is plain to be seen that his spirit was right, and could be counted on for any Christianly thing. This is continually implied in those frank religious passages which I find every now and then in the letters written to him by his son after he had left home for school.

The mother was a steadfast, thorough-going, Christian of the old-fashioned type, a church goer, a woman of prayer, serious minded, intent on the spiritual welfare of her children, a woman, in fact, to make an abiding impression on her boy, who not only much resembled her in his personal appearance, but put forth the very image of her sedateness, and quiet, solid, persistence of moral character.

With the details of her training of him I am not acquainted—though I know from the nature of the case what, for substance, they must have been. Given first, a real mother-heart, and next a God-fearing and sanctified heart, and our imagination can easily supply the rest. She took him to the country church, diligently. She read the Bible to him and explained. She had her quiet talks with him at eventide and by his bedside. She took him aside for earnest prayer, he and she together. She had him kneel at her knee and say prayers of his own. She strove to turn his boyish tribulations to good moral account. She instructed him by the wildness and waywardness of neighboring boys, and by the straight-forward walk of others whom he knew. She poured out her love upon him in the instinctive mother-fashion, day by day, but she took good care to flush it all with somewhat of the heavenly love—not certainly knowing what would come of it, to be sure, or whether the evil influences of the world

might not sooner or later nullify all, and make of this boy the sorrow of her old age, but, in the midst of whatever uncertainty, pushing on in tender faithfulness, oftentimes quoting to herself the reassuring passages of God's word, oftentimes recollecting how blessedly pious culture had eventuated in case after case with which she had been acquainted, and oftentimes picturing before her fond imagination what it must be to have a son in whose spotless life and wide service of his fellow-men, her own declining years should be blessed and proud.

Dear Old Mother! Even so it was—for when last spring, in the fulness of your seventy-five years, you died, the boy you loved and nurtured stood before you in the maturity of his manhood, stainless, noble, trusted by all and loved by many. The manly image of your own self, an heir of the life everlasting through Jesus Christ; and even then, as we did not know, on the verge and brink of the rest which remains for the people of God.

Behold then, my friends, the very sufficient parentage of our brother, and thank God that he had it.

II. Notice next, that he had the advantage of being one—the eldest—in a family of five sons and one daughter. The advantage I say, for is it not an advantage to be organized thus from the start into a little community in which one may be drilled in the social virtues, in courtesy, self-denial, fidelity, and affection; and thus be prepared for his place in the larger community of mankind.

Then too, where one is the eldest in such a group, his brotherly love is made to take on a sort of parental tone, and he has throbbing in him two loves in one. He protects the younger ones, and counsels them, and makes plans for their welfare; and they look up to him as to a father, minus the fear, and accept his words of wisdom where they might not if they came in the form of father-

ly law—and when he goes away to school and college, it assists to make him upright, and earnest, and persevering, to remember the lesser ones at home, and the self-denials, perchance, which they are daily practicing in order that he, the young man of the house and its pride and joy, may have an ample education. I tell you, the opportunities of life are three times sanctified when they rest upon such a background as this: and these many boys in college who lead disorderly lives, and shoot pang after pang, and anxieties unutterable, through the dear hearts at home, know not what they do; or what bitter recollections they are preparing for themselves when time has brought its changes and the old circle is broken and scattered, some to distant places and some into the world eternal.

I need not say to you that the boy Wilcox took advantage of the family love with which he was blessed; was a good brother while at home, helpful and much-loving; a good brother when he went away to be a student, their pride and not their disgrace; and a good brother while his life lasted—though as years went on, three of the original group passed forward into eternity.

III. I spoke of self-denials often practiced at home in order that the older ones of the family may be educated, and that reminds me to set it down as one of the felicities of Dr. Wilcox's life that he was born into neither poverty nor riches. There was enough in that home of his for generous living as well as enough for securing the education and culture necessary to a full range of life and influence. On the other hand, there was not enough to ungird endeavor and lead on to prodigality. While absent at school, he needed to practice economy, and he did practice it—partly because he could not have gone on in his chosen course unless he had, and partly because his

faithful heart would not permit him to draw over-heavily on the home treasury. And what amount of self-denial he practiced in this respect was good for him, very good. It established him in simple tastes and frugal habits, and made his after success possible. It kept him far away from self-pampering, and the insidious demoralization thereof, and made it possible for him to be the solid, intelligent, strong-charactered, man which he finally became.

That word in the Book of Proverbs is a pretty good word—"Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me, lest I be full and deny thee and say, who is the Lord? or lest I be poor and steal and take the name of my God in vain."

Our friend had that prayer answered in his early home, and he reaped the uses of it.

IV. I should not feel that I had given a complete account of his beginnings, and the influence thereof in shaping his future, unless I mentioned the natural scenery in which his boyhood was spent. And I feel urged to this the more expressly because he himself made a good deal of it. He was a lover of Nature from his youth. It was one of the best recreations of his manhood to commune with her. I have been with him on certain sightly spots, and heard him discourse of the fascinating prospects spread out before our eyes, in a way that told how delightedly the springs of his life were fed from these sources. As he grew older he more and more recurred to the hills and woods and streams, and the circling seasons, and the many rustic experiences, of his native Granby; and during the weeks of his long dying he was much there, and I noticed that any little report I might make to him of the state of things out of doors, of the splendid day, or of the down-falling gentle rain, or whatever, seemed to go into his mind in a sweet and reviving way—and sometimes all day long

he would have the window of his sick room open so that he might hear the soft music of the rain.

I know from my own experience what it is to have had a childhood abroad in God's open world. There is strength in it. And there is peace. And there is sanity. And when one is tired or sorrowful I am not sure that there is anything to be compared to it. Precious forever are the ministries of personal fellowship, and the loves in the midst of which we live and breathe; but not less than they, and in some respects greater than they, are the many ministries of the visible world in its countless moods and phases. It sympathizes with us but speaks not. It has a language for our every earnest emotion. It is beautiful and vivacious and sparkling and noisy, and all that, at times, but it is never otherwise than serious—at any rate it is never frivolous and thin. Underneath whatever sparkle or roystering, it is easy to hear a flow of grave-mindedness, like the gravity of God. And you can detect also I think the vast affectionateness of God. I can never shake off the feeling that back of this large reposeful geniality of Nature in which I so often rest my weariness and calm my anxieties and all the sorrows of the mind, there stands a being, whose child I am, whose love is my eternal security, and whose heart plays itself continually forth in these things which I see; in the rising sun which speaks to my fresh and joyful feeling, in the descending sun which speaks to my more chastened mood, in the wide white desolation of Winter which strikes an answering chord in my heart, in the green affluence of Summer to which also, and as naturally, I respond, in the grave-voiced ocean, ever speaking and ever solemn, and in the sighing of the pines as though the Spirit of the Ocean were abroad in the forest, in the mystery of the night and the silence of the stars, in the rush of streams, in the great

sweep of horizon lines, in the awful splendor and purity of heaven-illumined skies, in Autumnal harvests and Autumnal fadings—Oh! it is all wonderful, and all dear, and all curiously adjusted to our diverse necessity, and all vocal with the name of God.

Pardon this digression, but I yielded for a moment to the drift of the theme; and yet I have not wandered far from that which is really my subject. Every word of what I have said would be eagerly affirmed by him whom we remember this day. I cannot trace in his character the influence of the scenery of his country home as distinctly as I could trace the face-marks of his mother in his face, or the features of her godliness in his piety, but I may all the same assert, with absolute confidence, that the special landscape of his youth, and the whole round of visible things in which his youth had its setting, were a distinct contribution to his growth, a part of the balance and the wholesome health of his mind, one of the reasons that he never resorted to exciting and gross pleasures—a divine force in fact, entirely congruous and co-efficient with the efforts of his loving, praying, longing, mother.

V. Looking one step farther into his home surroundings, I observe, in addition to the ordinary facilities for a common education in the district school-house, the presence close at hand, that is only a few rods from his father's house, of an academy which he attended almost as soon as he passed out from under the tuition of his mother. Here he had his first taste of the higher studies. Here were generated his first desires for a full education. Here, I judge, college began to be thought of as a possible thing. And here a departure for college at last was made practically sure.

I mention this, not to dwell upon it, but only because it is one of the explanations of his after course, and his

after-self, and because I would remark that if our children in any great numbers are to be thoroughly educated, they must be stimulated, first of all to be sure by the common school established at their very doors, but next—and quite as much—by higher institutions not far away. Great universities are necessary, but it will not do to mass everything in a few splendid universities, located at a long distance from three-quarters of the people. No, there must be a college in every state, one or more; and an academy in every town; so that boys and girls who have impulse in them may have the means of gratifying it, and boys and girls who have no impulse, may be waked up by the magnetism of high grade schools right before their eyes, and the magnetism too of their more aspiring comrades who are flocking into those schools and leaving them alone and ashamed. I shall always recollect with gratitude the near academy where I got my first hold on Latin and Greek, and the higher mathematics. I did not know that I could go to college—certainly I had no intention about it—but let a boy once begin to take in the characteristic college studies, and the college longings are likely to come along in due time.

I have now given you what I suppose to be a true explanation of that man whom we came to know as Dr. Wilcox, who passed his whole professional life among us, and last Monday afternoon was carried to his burial in the midst of our praises and our tears. I have mentioned the forces which conspired to fashion him, and caused him to be just the boy that he was when, at sixteen years of age, he went forth from the home nest never to return for any considerable stay. This first outgoing of his was to Westfield, Massachusetts, for purposes of study at an institution there. He spent a year or more in that place, and then after a little delay at home he went to Wilbra-

ham, where he also tarried a year or more. It was there that I met him, in what seems to me now a dreamy and pathetic long ago. I was no intimate of his but I remember him, and he is to me an integral part of that beautiful time. I hear him recite. I see his face. I recollect how the sun used to strike upon it sometimes as he sat there in the afternoon recitations. How amazing memory is, and how bereaved we should be without her.

It has been a fascination to me to read some of his letters written to his friends at home during those Westfield and Wilbraham days, and strive in that way to get at the heart and the mind of that youth whom I then knew only by the sight of my eyes. The letters are not remarkable but they very plainly portray him.

They show that he was, even thus early, well-grounded in Christian principle. Indeed his character was curiously like the character which he displayed as we knew him during his Hartford years. I never knew an instance where a whole life had more moral and intellectual unity than his. He struck the key of his entire career in the first distinct and settled note that sounded from him back there in Granby, and in the schools. Frequently a boy at first gives little sign of what he is to become. Frequently a young life goes on by crises and cataclysms. Very frequently young men in college make sudden new departures that last forever. Their minds are unfolding. The surge of the world's free thought strikes them with an irresistible stroke. They are thrown into fermentations. The teachings of their childhood do not seem to them as they did. Settled things get unsettled in them. They break from all their old moorings, perchance, and go adrift. They are filled with wonderings and anxieties, and with agonies, may be. And God only knows on what coast they will bring up, or whether they will not be afloat

and wandering and wondering for years. Oh! how many men have a story of that sort to tell. But not so Wilcox, I say. I have sought in vain for any such tremendous turning point in his career. God, and mother, and home, and heredity, gave him such a strong start that he never went into any divergencies. Not more normally and beautifully does an oak unfold from an acorn, energetically refusing all along to be anything other than exactly the oak which it started to be, than Wilcox, the man, developed from Wilcox, the child. A life thus ordered is less piquant and amazing and thrilling, and less possible to be drawn out into an interesting memoir, than some others; but it is full of safety, and full of the beauty of law; yea, it has in it the very orderliness of God.

But I must hasten in my story.

His days immediately preparatory to college, I repeat, were well-principled. It is plain that he could not be relied on for student larks and disorders. He was temperate. He was full of conscientious labor. He was prone to moral meditation. He kept a watch on his own heart and naturally inclined to self-rebuke. He was sedate and reserved. Whatever his love might be, he spoke of it but little. He began his letters, Dear Father, or Dear Mother, and ended them, Your affectionate son, but midway he was far from profuse. There was ten times more of moral remark in what he said than of love-talk. And yet evidently home was the anchor ground of his heart. Underneath his reserve there was that which the people at home could trust.

No doubt he was a Christian at that time. Such a home embosoming as he had had made that sure. I notice though an absence of all inquiry in his mind, whether he was a Christian or not. And he was so conscientious,

and had been so educated in the self-scrutinizing New England habit, that I wonder a little at that. There was self-scrutiny enough—almost too much by and by—but the particular question, “Am I Christian?” I do not think I have once met in all his correspondence which I have seen. All he seemed to be after, was daily right living. About that he often wrote. He asked his father and mother to pray for him on that point. He often questioned whether his religious influence over others was all that it ought to be. He expressed his interest in the religious ongoings of his native town, and on one occasion suggested that he might assist the building of the new church then in progress there, by selling fancy articles in the village where he was at school.

That was the type of person he was while at school, and when he passed on into college he was precisely the same, only more pronounced and mature. He felt there the stress of a life more urgent and more perilous than he had before known; and it is good to see the square-cut and inbred, instinctive, integrity with which he adjusted himself to the new situation. He began to keep a religious diary, and he made it largely a record of penitences and fresh resolutions, and not much a record of enjoyments. If he got dull under a dull preacher in the college chapel, he did not charge much upon the preacher, but a great deal upon his evil heart. He was always after that evil heart, and it makes one a little sad to read of his struggles and his failures. Still the diary shows the serious and resolute bent of his mind. In fact everything showed it. He took a letter from his church at home (which he had entered not far from his sixteenth year) to the church in college, because he felt it necessary, he said, that all Christian students should show their colors; and because he felt a moral insecurity in his surroundings then, such as

he had not been accustomed to. He spoke a good deal of his religious concern for other people—especially for his fellow students—and seemed to be cultivating himself in that direction. He had spells of thinking that perhaps he ought to be a Christian minister, instead of a physician, which last the drift of his own thought, and the drift of the family foreordination, had decided he should be.

And so the years went round; and in the summer of 1850 Yale sent him forth with her honorable name upon him, as conscientious a son as she ever had, a diligent and good scholar, whom it was her pleasure to call to a professorship in her faculty of medicine eventually, a blameless man who was to carry her gracious academical degree, then conferred, for thirty-one years, untarnished before all men. May the old college live forever and give us innumerable generations of such.

At this point, if he had had as much money as some, he would have gone straight along into his medical studies, I suppose; but if he had, he would not have gone to Easton in this State and taught as principal of an academy there for three years, proving himself a teacher of much more than usual fitness for his work; and if he had not gone to Easton, he would not have met in the classes there the girl who would eventually become his wife, the mother of his precious children, his unalterable friend, counsellor, and stay for nearly thirty years, his ministering one through his weeks of final suffering, and the one by whose hand he should hold as he sunk away in death. What regrets he had as he started away from New Haven to that detention and delay in the Academy, I have not heard; but how little regret he has now I can easily imagine. How little do we know what is best for us! “The night is mother of the day,” “The Winter of the Spring,” and evermore it is happening that delay is divinest furtherance.

After these three years of teaching he took the round of medical studies at Yale, graduating in the fore-front of his class; and then with his young wife he put forth into the unknown world of active life. He spent a year in the Cherokee nation, whither he was led by special circumstances, teaching and practicing his profession; and running through an experience to which he was wont to refer ever after with much interest. Coming East again, as he had intended when he went out, he made a little survey of two or three places in this State, with reference to settlement, but at last located in Hartford in the year 1857. And here he has been. Here his working life has been spent, here he died, here he sleeps, here his example shines, here his memory remains, in this church, in many grateful homes, in the city at large, and in his broken household.

What he has been here and what he has done is known to all. He has had the customary many-hued life of man. In his profession he has made an unquestionable success. Conscientious, studious, prudent, patient, and persistent, faithful, perceptive, with good natural faculties well-trained, honorable, moral, religious; a man of whom I heard one of his patrons say, years ago, that he was the one whom he wanted to be with him when he was dying; how could it be avoided that he should succeed? And, now that he had reached the maturity of his powers, would that God could have left him with us a few years longer.

Passing to other departments of his life, he has had his joys, and he has had his sorrows. Children were born to him and children passed away—one at life's very beginning, one after twelve months, and one after twelve years. In an honorable age, ten years ago, his father left him; last Spring his mother followed; and at different intervals

three of his brothers have gone. So the old home of our friend in the country yonder is not what it was. The little feet of long ago have wandered forth and far. The little voices are gone forever. In scattered graves the dear ones lie, some near the homestead, one in the northern wilderness in some spot unknown, one now on our hill of the dead to the southward of us, an ideal spot, withdrawn from the city's noise, high, and off-looking, and heaven-bedewed; on earth (as is fitting), but almost in the sky; one here, one there, one yonder, I say.

“Parted thus they sleep who played
Beneath the same green tree,
Whose voices mingled as they prayed,
Around one parent knee.”

Thus runs our checkered life. Thus ran our brother his appointed career. By these majestic providences was his soul ripened for the sky. In solemn acceptance of God's judgments, as also in grateful acceptance of his gifts, Dr. Wilcox grew in grace and strength and tenderness till the end came.

And what of that end? On that let not our words be too many. And yet why should I hesitate to speak of it? It was like his life. His physical trial at the last was great. And at moments his mental trial was considerable, and he spoke then exactly after the manner of his old college diary. He reviewed his life with great scrutiny. He discussed the reality of his own piety. Despite his extreme bodily weakness his mind was argumentative and acute in handling his own spiritual case; and no mere plausibilities of comfort would be received by him. We all wished that his diseased self-inspection (for that is just what it was) would get itself away, and leave that faithful soul to his life-long rest in God. And it did. It never stayed long. And it never got in at all, excepting

when the body was especially distempered, sleepless, and dragging. What cared we who stood by, for these passing clouds? Nothing—absolutely—except as they tried him. No life like his ever ended otherwise than in the bosom of God. And that is where he now is—as he joyfully expected to be.

There let him rest. Rest, tired body, with the earth your mother. Rest, O spirit, with God, and with your children, and with your early kindred; with the mother who bore you and the father whom you loved, and those all who went before you into the world of spirits. Rest from your anxieties concerning those you left behind. Life will try them as it tried you, but your God is their God, and they follow on towards you. Every year shall bring them nearer. Every sorrow they bear shall tell off one stroke more of their appointed discipline. And in some not remote to-morrow, in some place we know not where, in some manner we know not how, ministered unto by we know not whom, (but by hands as tender as those that ministered unto you, we hope;) these your beloved shall be set free of mortality even as you were, and with you and with the innumerable spirits of the just, under the smile of God, they shall wait, and look for the glory of the resurrection. Amen.



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Author

Burton, N. J.

The beloved
physician (Wilcox,

Call no. Lucian Sumner)

Biography

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