

The Osler Medical Library : a tribute, July 12th, 1919 / by J.Y.W. MacAlister.

Contributors

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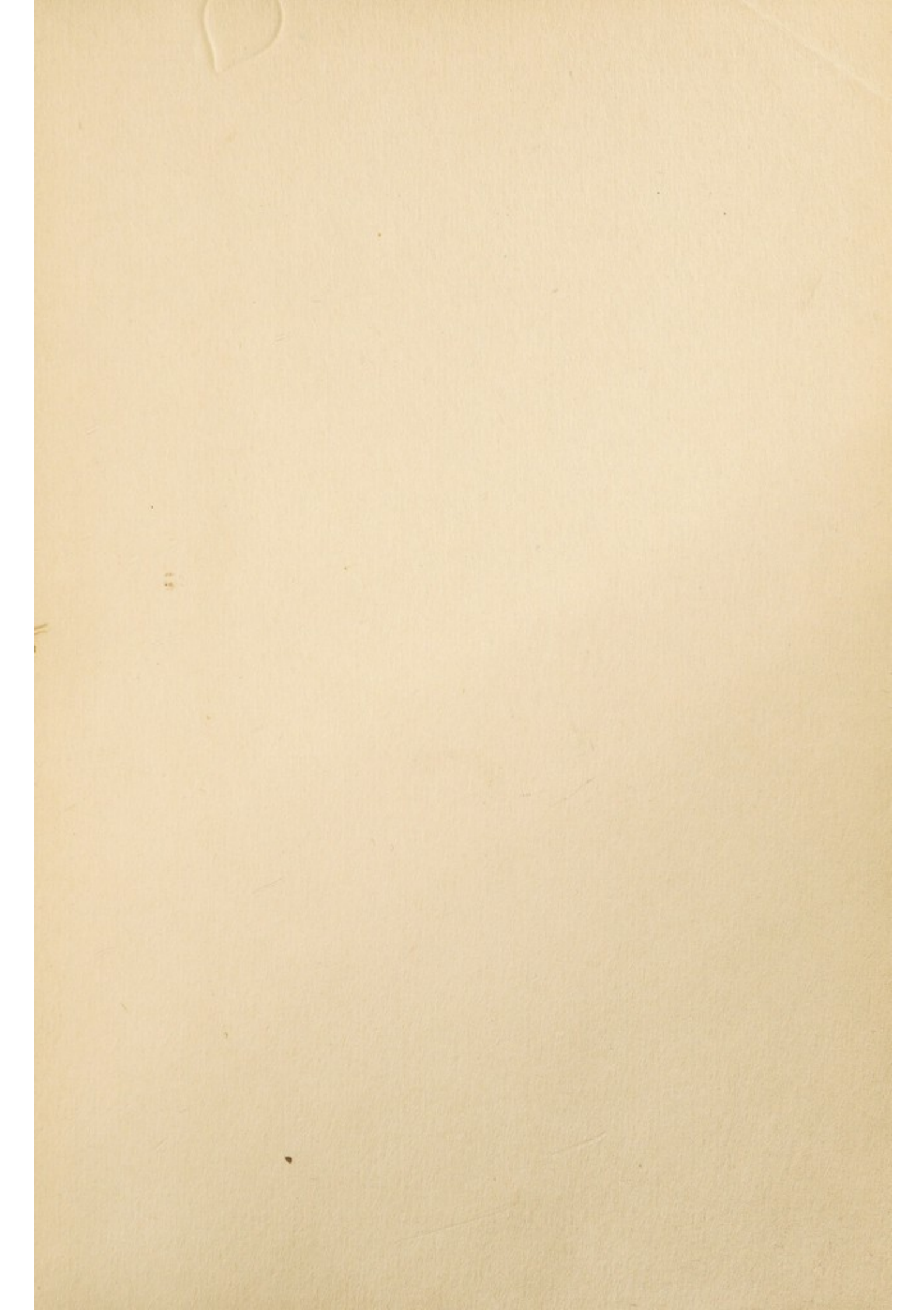
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~~BZP. (Oslp)~~



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To my old friend Henry S. Wallcome
J. Y. W. Macalister

The
Osler Medical Library

(A Tribute)

July 12th, 1919

BY

J. Y. W. MACALISTER



The
Osler Medical Library

(A Tribute)

July 12th, 1919

BY

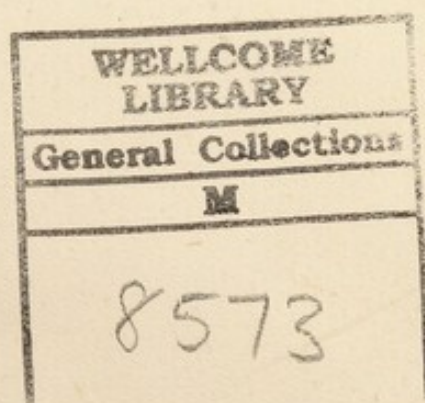
J. Y. W. MACALISTER

OSLER, Sir William [1849-1919]

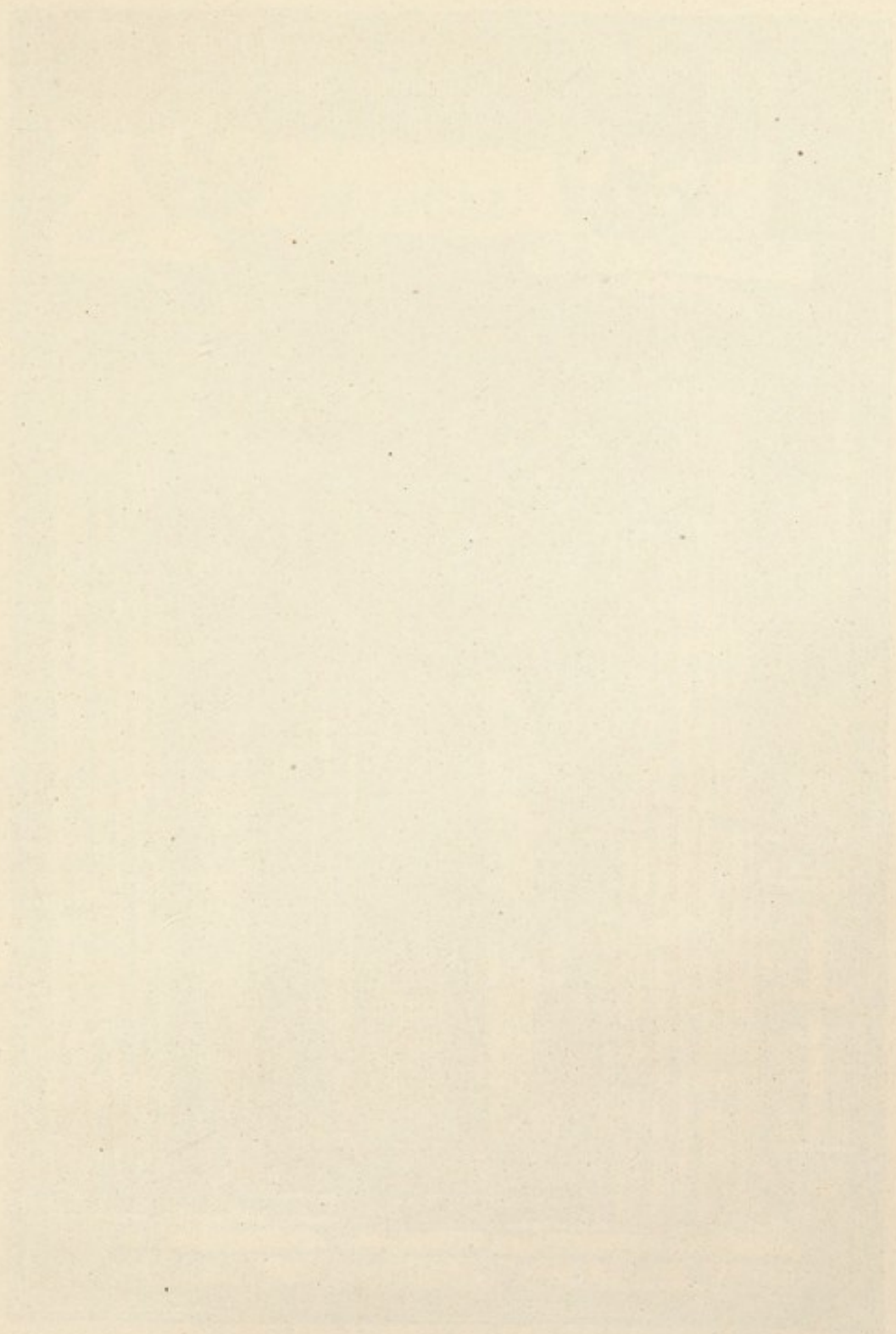
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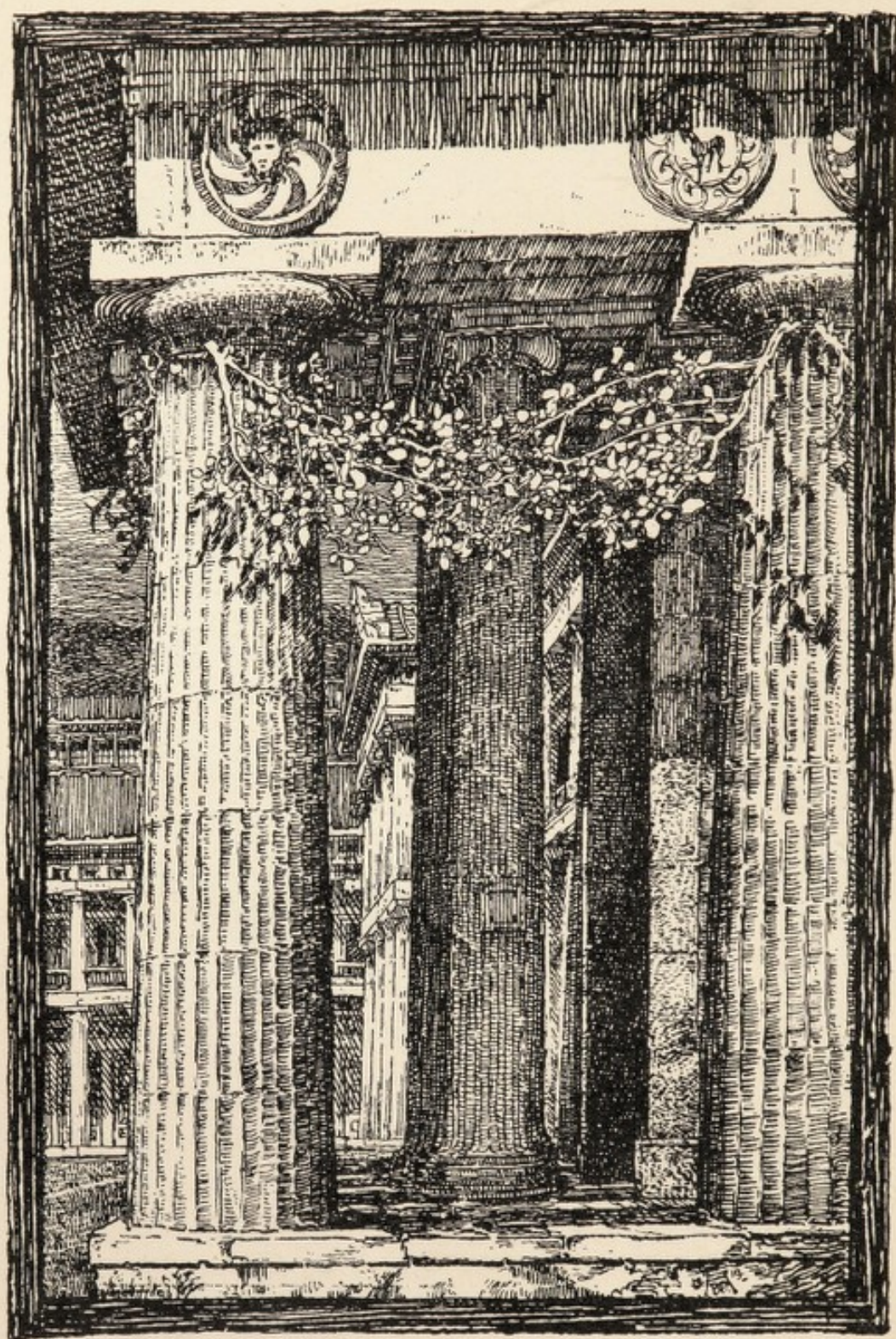


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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

1911



THE OSLER MEDICAL LIBRARY

‘AN ARCHITECT’S DREAM’

By BERESFORD PITE, M.A., F.R.I.B.A.

‘The portico of a magnificent building which seemed strangely familiar and yet I could not recall where or when I had seen it.’

THE OSLER MEDICAL LIBRARY.

THE other day I was 'assisting' at the unveiling of a fine cast of the famous 'Hope Asklepios,' which now provides a noble decoration for the Principal Reading Room in the Library of the Royal Society of Medicine. Making the necessary arrangements, and the time occupied by the ceremony, made such a hole in official hours that I had to take home with me a larger batch of proof than usual, and, as frequently happens, the interest of the work made me forget time and space, and it was only on rising to rekindle a cold pipe that I discovered it was nearly 2 a.m., so I put aside my proofs, relit my pipe and sat down for a little quiet thinking before going to bed.

A sudden ring of the telephone brought back memories of raids and night calls, but on going to the instrument I heard a voice that I thought familiar but could not identify, 'You are wanted at once at the Osler Library. The Committee has adjourned until you can come, and we are sending up one of the staff cars for you.' I murmured something about the lateness of the hour, and said I should be ready. In a few minutes a haughty-looking chauffeur drove up, helped me in, put a magnificent fur rug over my knees, for the night was cold, and drove off in the direction of the Regent's Park. He stopped at a lodge gate which gave entrance to

4 THE OSLER MEDICAL LIBRARY.

a large enclosure, and pulled up at the portico of a magnificent building which seemed strangely familiar and yet I could not recall where or when I had seen it.

It was built in the form of a quadrangle, with a great open courtyard in the centre, in which was a noble marble statue. At first I thought I recognised it as the 'Hope Asklepios,' but going closer I was startled to observe that while in every other respect it was a copy of the Asklepios, the face was that of our revered friend and teacher William Osler. Everything was so strange that I did not at the time even think it odd that on gazing at his face, his characteristic smile which we all love, was a *living* smile, and I could have sworn that one of those wonderful eyes solemnly winked at me.

I suddenly found by my side an elderly gentleman who introduced himself as the Bibliothecarius-in-chief, and with grave dignity welcomed me on my first visit to the great Institution of which he was proud to be the head, and proudest of all because it realised the ideals of that great benefactor Osler.

'And yet,' he added, 'the realisation of the scheme is in some respects entirely due to yourself, and I have been deputed by the Committee to take you over the entire building and invite any criticisms you may have to make before the ceremonial opening.'

It all seemed curiously puzzling and yet somehow 'all right,' and I told him how delighted I was, but that if Osler were pleased it was not likely I would be able to suggest any improvements.

He began by asking me to observe the stately Greek architecture, cleverly adapted in the matter of windows, lighting and ventilation to meet modern demands. He then led the way inside to a great circular entrance hall, lighted from the top of a lofty dome which reminded me of the Pantheon at Rome. There was only one light, at the top, which at first seemed too small for such a vast hall, and yet illuminated the whole space perfectly. I guessed the opening was covered in by glass as a concession to English weather, but it was so cleverly done that it seemed to be open, and my guide explained to me that at night the light was equally good, provided from outside by a powerful searchlight.

In the spaces between the corridors opening out of the central hall there were numerous marble statues, which my guide informed me had been provided by the greatest artists of all the civilised nations that had contributed in any way to the advancement of Medicine, and pointed out with particular pride the latest gift which had been received from the King of the Hedjaz,—a noble image of Avicenna, the work of a young Arab sculptor, who, he assured me, would very soon be recognised as one of the greatest artists the world had ever known. To my surprise and delight I recognised effigies not only of the past, but of some of the present Masters of Medicine. Of course Aesculapius, Hippocrates, Galen and Celsus were there; down the ages with Harvey and the Hunters to Lister, Pasteur, and, as my guide explained, by the special request of Osler, living men who had

6 THE OSLER MEDICAL LIBRARY.

done most for the History of Medicine, such as Norman Moore, who was figured as presenting his monumental 'History of St. Bartholomew's,' D'Arcy Power, Raymond Crawford, Cumston and the indefatigable Singer.

My guide, taking out his watch, remarked that we should just be in time for breakfast with the staff, and led the way to the Refectory, which I found to be a noble room with a southern aspect, set out with long tables where many of the staff were already seated, and, in spite of the tempting meal set before them, were already engaged either in earnest conversation or disputation, and my guide explained to me that the rule of the house was that the members of the staff, with himself, took their meals together as in this way they could discuss questions and difficulties without trenching on the time devoted to their official duties. 'An excellent plan,' I said, 'and I suppose you preside?' 'No,' he replied, 'I just take my place here or there among the members of my staff, and I find it does not in any way interfere with discipline to be on the friendliest terms with even the humblest, and encourage them to bring all their difficulties before me. I often find that I get valuable suggestions from even the youngest.'

'Now sit down,' said he, 'and "partake" of a good breakfast.' In spite of the shock I suffered at hearing him use the vile verb, I accepted his invitation. 'For,' said he, 'you will want all your strength before the day is out if you are to see everything.' (Later I discovered an explanation, if not an excuse, for my learned friend's language,

for in the course of our talk I found he was a regular and diligent reader of the 'Daily Mail.') So I 'partook' of a very excellent breakfast and announced myself ready to follow him to the bitter end.

Leaving the refectory he led me downstairs to what he called the upper basement, the lower basement being reserved for machinery. 'Machinery!' I said, 'what do you want with machinery in a Library?' 'We have our engines for various purposes, for working printing presses, lifts and everything else requiring power,' and with that he led me into the compositors' room, which, in spite of being in the basement, was a well-lighted and well-ventilated apartment, where I found compositors busy filling up formes from written copies of catalogue slips.

'We find it much cheaper in every sense of the word to print our catalogue cards, and certainly an enormous economy of time for our readers and searchers. In the usual card catalogues there is one principal entry which contains the full description of a book, while the numerous cross-references are limited to "See so and so." We print as many copies of the principal entry as we think necessary and then write a short heading on each of the cards to be distributed through the rest of the alphabet for cross-reference, so that the searcher, on finding any cross-reference, at the same time gets all necessary details. If these cards had to be sent out to a printer much valuable time would be lost, whereas by the "Osler" method an hour after a book is received cards with full descriptions can be placed

8 THE OSLER MEDICAL LIBRARY.

in our catalogue. When the cards for the day are printed off, clichés of them are made and stored away in proper order until the time comes when they can be used for printing a great General Catalogue.'

In the next apartment were the printing machines, and I asked whether their noise did not disturb the readers upstairs. 'No,' said my guide, 'we have safeguarded ourselves against that, for the architects have interposed double floors packed so that when you go upstairs you will find there is not the slightest sound to be heard but occasionally a slight vibration which is not in the least disturbing.'

From there he led me to the bindery, of which he seemed to be just as proud as he was of his printing works. 'No book ever leaves the house except to go to a reader. "A stitch in time saves nine" is nowhere so true as in a library, where a loose leaf or cover neglected often means the destruction of the book, so whenever a book shows the slightest signs of disrepair it is sent down here at once and dealt with by skilled workmen, who know how to repair a book without spoiling it. In the next room the actual binding work is done by men specially trained in binding books *for library use*—a very different art from that of the ordinary trade binder. I should allow no one to pass as a qualified librarian who had not a practical knowledge of binding. I don't mean to say that he should be skilled enough to do the work himself, but he should know how instantly to detect bad workmanship. There is no reason why a man should not be a scholar and yet have a practical

knowledge of the arts connected with his work. He may be a student of Lamb and know him by heart, and yet should know better than to bind his books in sheepskin, and, while properly despising "rogues in buckram," should know how excellent a covering is buckram for what we call "upper-shelf books," i.e. books which we must have but which are rarely referred to.

'By doing all this work inside we practically enrich our Library, for is it not an impoverishment, although a temporary one, to have books away at the binders for a month, two months, or even sometimes three months? And here in the case of a single copy of a book which may be at the bindery, if it is an important matter for our reader to see the book at once he is conducted down here, and under the watchful eye of the workman, is allowed to look through the book he desires, which as a rule serves his turn. If he must have the book for a longer time, the binder's slip is marked "urgent," and very rarely has he to wait more than three days before he receives it.'

I noticed an extraordinary number of tubes attached to the upper part of the walls and almost covering the ceiling of the basement. Some of them were about two or three inches in diameter, others much larger. I concluded these were in some way connected with ventilation, but my guide, noticing my curiosity, explained they were pneumatic tubes for all kinds of purposes. The smallest ones were for the instantaneous passage of messages from one department to another. These messages were written, enclosed in a small leathern cylinder,

and flashed—literally flashed—from one end of the building to the other, and so contrived that they were released and dropped out almost on the desk of the official for whom they were intended. The larger tubes were used for books up to a limited size. By this means instead of waiting for an hour or even longer for a book, as is usual in the largest libraries, with the help of the house telephones and pneumatic tubes a reader could be sitting down before his book within five minutes of entering the building, however remote the book may have been from his table.

Beyond the bindery, and next to the engine room, there was a great installation of electric plant. 'We believe in having two strings to our bow in every important essential, and we cannot run the risk of a breakdown of the municipal supply, and so we produce our own current and find it on the whole economical, while we have provided against a breakdown of our own plant by having an alternative connection with the City plant, only to be turned on if our own breaks down. Here we have the power required for every other purpose, including warming, for we decided not to run the risk, however remote, of our galleries and shelves being flooded by bursting pipes if we warmed the building by hot water or steam, and the radiators, you will observe, throughout the building are all heated by electricity, while in the offices of our staff the cheerier electric stove is installed. Current for lifts, telephones, working of the pneumatic engines, and in fact everything requiring power, is provided here.' I expressed my admiration, but ventured a criticism:

‘You appear to have taken every possible precaution against fire, and yet some of the worst fires have taken place in so-called fire-proof buildings, for even if there are no open fires in a building, an accidental spark from the electric plant, or a short circuit, encouraged by such excellent fuel as furniture, wooden shelves, etc., soon provides a bonfire.’ My guide smiled and said, ‘I am glad you mentioned that; otherwise I might have taken it so much for granted as to have forgotten to mention that the whole of our furniture and carpets are fireproof—a very simple and inexpensive process—and when we go upstairs you will see why we do not dread fire for our bookshelves.’

As he turned to lead me to the upper regions I observed a large trolley full of books emerging from one of the lift doors, and I remarked, ‘I suppose these are going to the Bindery.’ ‘Oh dear me no! They don’t need binding, they are going to the dusting room.’ ‘Dusting room!’ I exclaimed, ‘what do you mean?’ ‘I will show you. In discussing the plans for our building with our great Chief, he said, “Can you not contrive some way of getting rid of that infernal nuisance (you know the vigour of his language), the annual closing down of the Library for cleaning?” It practically means that a library is rendered useless for one and sometimes two months in the year, or at any rate a great part of it is, and to me it has always seemed that the “cleaning” would be honestly defined as “shifting the dirt from one place to another.” The last time I ventured into the Bodleian when this work was going on I

thought at first it must be on fire and that the thick fog I tried to peer through was smoke, but I was reassured "It is only dust; we are dusting the books and shelves!"

'Well, we took the matter "into avizandum," as our friends in the north say, and this is the result. We don't intend ever to close the Library for cleaning. The cleaning goes on day by day and every day, in regular rotation. The books are lifted gently (so as not to disturb the dust) from the shelves and placed on one of these noiseless rubber-wheeled trolleys, conveyed to a lift and brought down here by the cleaning staff, while others during their absence wipe down the shelves with a preparation which holds the dust and leaves the shelf perfectly clean. Come into the dusting room.'

We followed the trolley, and I found myself walking nearly ankle-deep in moist sawdust. The expert cleaners seized the books one at a time, and holding the fore-edges tightly, sprinkled the tops with clean damp sawdust, which immediately licked up the dust and was thrown on the ground, when the book was then carefully dusted clean with cloths containing a preparation, which not only cleaned them, but, I was assured, acted as a preservative to the binding. When all were cleaned they were restored to their place on the trolley and carried back to the shelves.

We accompanied the trolley on the lift and were carried to the main library room, a magnificent, well-lighted apartment, shelved all round the walls and with projecting cases in the old-fashioned style,

forming little bays to give nervous readers an opportunity of doing their work in modified isolation. The shelving seemed of oak, but my guide asked me to examine it more closely, and I found the whole of the shelving, both shelves and uprights, was formed of steel, so artistically enamelled that unless actually handled it appeared to be of fine grained oak.

My guide went forward to one of the bays, and, stretching out his hands underneath one of the shelves, lifted it and the books together and laid it on the reading table, and then showed me how by a cunning invention the shelves, while quite safely fixed when in position, could, by touching a couple of springs at the ends, be instantly released and thus enable space to be economised to the minutest degree. The tables were of the same material as the shelves, and the oaken chairs, designed for comfort, but yet artistically, were, as he explained to me, absolutely fireproof.

My guide explained that this room, called the General, or Main Library, was the largest, and for the general reader, the favourite room. The other rooms, to which he proposed to lead me presently, were for special study, for the use of readers engaged on research, or themselves writing books, and for whom it was desirable to have a certain amount of seclusion, and their books kept together.

The general lighting was by reflected light thrown by powerful lamps against the white ceiling, by which a delightfully equal light diffused through every corner of the room, while on each reading table I saw there was a separate shaded

electric lamp provided with current through a cunning attachment to the pedestal.

‘How do you classify your books?’ I asked. ‘We don’t classify them. You can’t classify a Medical Library without doing more harm than good. If all medical books were monographs it could be done and probably would be useful; but when you remember under how many subjects medical books might be looked for, you will recognise that to classify them under one subject would be hiding them in all the others. Therefore, we find that for practical purposes, both as regards economy of space and quickness of service, it is better to shelve the books chronologically and according to size. This means that our Library begins with the earliest books, which are in the remoter parts of the Library, and so we march down through the ages, and the books published during the last ten years are the most accessible, and the book last received is the last one on the shelves. We depend for our classification on the catalogue in which a reference should be found to any particular book, under every subject with which it deals.’ I noticed on the larger tables bulky volumes that looked like atlases, and on turning them over found they were filled with original drawings of all kinds—pathological, anatomical, surgical and bacteriological. ‘Ah,’ said my guide, ‘that is a feature of which we are rather proud. Beautiful and valuable drawings are constantly being made for authors, to illustrate their books and papers published in Transactions, etc., and for the most part, these were destroyed, or at least wasted. Some authors might

keep them for a while, but sooner or later they found their way to the dust-bin. Now, we have a clerk who, as soon as any particularly good drawing is published, writes to the author and begs him to let us have the original for preservation and display. They are then mounted in these albums with a reference to the paper or book for which they were prepared and are duly entered in our index. No reproduction of a good drawing can ever equal the original, if only for the reason that as a rule they have necessarily to be reduced; and we find our collection immensely appreciated and in constant use. You will see that there is some attempt at classification in these albums. One album will be devoted to drawings of the surgery or anatomy of the thorax, another to the bacteriology of a particular disease, and so on. Sometimes the author will not part with his drawings, and in that case we get the loan of them and make full size permanent photographs of them to mount in our albums. When our photographer is not busy with such work, he fills in his time by photographing from perfect copies illustrations and sometimes title-pages to enable us to make good imperfect copies of our rarer treasures; and we have even been able in this way to produce wonderfully good complete copies of unique books and manuscripts, which can only be found in older libraries.'

'What are those type-written folios I see displayed on that desk?' 'Let us look at them,' said the Chief, 'as that, too, is a feature of which we are rather proud. In a library like this, men are constantly looking up references in connection with their

own work, compiling bibliographies, so essential an adjunct to any good medical book. Formerly, this work done, we saw the last of it when their sheets were taken away for the printer; and so we offered to present all such workers with a fair typed copy of their work on condition that they allowed us to keep a duplicate, and in this way we have secured many hundreds of valuable bibliographies, which are preserved here for the use of ourselves and our readers.'

We walked on to the adjoining room, equally lofty and equally handsome but smaller, and this I found to be a Reference Library from which, my guide explained, no book was ever allowed to be removed except to the Bindery. 'Not under any circumstances,' he said, 'for we regard it as essential that there should be a copy of every important book *always available*. In the practice of Medicine and Surgery, "next week" or even "to-morrow" should never be heard in a Library. Where life or human suffering is the price to be paid for delay, there must be none, and therefore a sudden demand for any book likely to be required must be instantly answered.

'Without our Reference Library another of our departments would be handicapped if not impossible. One of the items in Osler's prescription ran, "Make the Library as useful to the worker in Timbuċtoo and Tierra del Fuego as to the man who lives round the corner." I wrote him, "excellent idea, but how?" He wired back, "Oh, *you* know—quite simple—I'm busy."

'So we had to work it out. We invite our readers abroad and at a distance to keep us informed

as to their lines of work or research. Their names are registered and classified—and every month we send them a “Bulletin” containing references and abstracts of all that has been published on their subject during the previous month. If they want more, they write to the head of our Abstracting Department, and copies and abstracts of articles in books or journals (translated when necessary) are despatched without delay. One of our correspondents lately wrote, in the preface of an epoch-marking book which he had written on the slopes of the Andes, that our help had made it easier for him than if he had been living in London, for he had been saved the time he would have had to spend in making his own researches in the Library!’

‘But,’ I said, ‘all this must cost a fabulous amount. The running expenses alone must equal those of a township. You must have an enormous number of members who pay a high subscription.’ ‘Members,’ he answered, almost indignantly, ‘our members, as you call them, include every qualified man and woman throughout the civilized world. Once on a Register a man or a woman is entitled to the best we can do for them without any subscription.’ ‘Ah, you are a State Department?’ ‘No, we are absolutely untrammelled. I thought you knew the origin of the scheme. You remember that twenty years ago Osler celebrated his seventieth birthday and now, although by the kalendar, ninety, he seems determined to prove that a man is not too old at a hundred. The whole civilized world, on the approach of his seventieth birthday, wanted to celebrate it in a way really worthy of their hero,

and many meetings and long discussions were held on the best way of doing it. Carnefeller got to hear of it and summoned the Testimonial Committee to meet him; brushed all their suggestions on one side and said, "The only sane way of celebrating Osler's biological palinode is by erecting a Library which will realize all his ideals, and if you will carry it out I will provide the dollars," and here he handed a cheque to the Chairman and left us. On examining it we found the cheque was signed in blank, and in the course of a few minutes it was filled up with such a sum as would cover the most ambitious scheme, with a sufficient margin for a liberal endowment and, just in case of accidents, promptly banked.'

'The *body* is wonderful,' I said, 'and your mechanical part seems to be as perfect as could be devised. But what about the *soul*—the *intellect* of this wonderful *body*?' 'I was hoping you would come to that,' said my guide, 'I am the Chief, but I don't pretend to be either the soul or the intellect of such an institution as this. The Chief should be before all things an administrator, and a business man, or the whole institution will suffer. We have in all, at present, twelve librarians, each of whom is supreme in his own department, and I verily believe each is the greatest living authority on the subject he deals with.' 'But how can you get men of such attainments to accept such positions? For while I am sure that the matter of salaries is dealt with as liberally as everything else in this wonderful institution, men of such attainments would probably be earning princely incomes

by the practice of their profession.' 'No, you are quite wrong. You will find in every profession men who are by temperament students rather than practitioners, and who would rather work for a modest competence in extending their knowledge than in the practice of their profession, and this is notably so in that of Medicine. And so we have here, for example, a man who has, perhaps, a better knowledge of Anatomy than all the Professors put together, but he is happier here adding to and administering our anatomical collection, than he would be if he held the most important Professorship. He has no faculty for teaching and knows it; but raise any abstruse point in Anatomy with him, and he will at once, without consulting any Index or Catalogue, place before you the answer to your question. It is the same with our Surgical Librarian. When he inadvertently removed the second kidney, leaving an overlooked forceps in its place, he decided that the practice of surgery was not his forte, and his love for and wide knowledge of the literature of the subject brought him to us. And so it is with each of the others. They have not exactly a free hand in their departments, for some of them would spend all our available income on their own; but they come to me with their lists of desiderata and I decide, having in view the necessity of a fair balance between one department and another. We are in constant communication, in addition to the practice of taking our meals together in the Refectory. And each has his own room, connected by telephone with mine. We make great use of the telephone.' At this moment

I saw one of the assistants on a high ladder perilously balancing some heavy volumes, and before I realised the danger boy, books and ladder fell with a crash towards me.—When I came to myself, I heard the telephone ringing, started up and found I was in my own chair by my own fireside, and rushed to the telephone. ‘Hello! Is that Mayfair 3721?’ ‘No, wrong number!’









