Response at the Testimonial Dinner Given Him on His Seventy-First Birthday, at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York City

By Dr. William Bradley Coley, '84

American and foreign leaders in the medical profession joined on January 12 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York in a seventy-first birthday testimonial dinner to Dr. William B. Coley, '84, who retired January 1 after forty years as attending surgeon at the Memorial Hospital in New York City. Among the 350 guests were five '84 men: Bishop Edward Huntington Coley, of Utica, New York; Dr. Ellsworth Eliot and Dr. Alexander Lambert, both of New York City, and Leonard M. Daggett and Dean-Emeritus Frederick S. Jones, of New Haven. Dean Jones made a personal tribute to Dr. Coley with reminiscences of his early days at Yale, and speeches were made by Dr. John M. T. Finney, head of the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Dr. Charles H. Mayo of Rochester, Dr. George D. Stewart of New York, and Dr. James Ewing, Director of the Memorial Hospital. The latter particularly referred to Dr. Coley's work in cancer, "in certain types of which he had effectuated miraculous cures in substantial numbers all over the world." His original serum treatment for these types of cancer has attracted great attention and is being followed extensively today. Dr. Coley's fine response to these introductory speeches follows:

Mr. Toastmaster, my Colleagues, and Friends: This is an unusual occasion; the most important tribute that has ever been paid me in my long professional life. And the question comes to my mind: What have I done to deserve it?

Samuel Gross, one of the greatest American surgeons and founder of the American Surgical Association, once said: "The only genius I possess is the genius of industry. The position which I have attained in my profession has been achieved by hard work—by no special intellectual endowment, by no special gifts of God, and by no special favor from man; but by my own unaided efforts continued steadily and persistently through a long series of years during which a kind Providence afforded me sound health, lofty ambition, and unflinching fidelity to my profession."

In my own case, among the special gifts from God I would put heredity first, and environment or opportunity second. In the matter of environment, I was fortunate in the many opportunities that have come to me: First, the privilege of entering Yale in 1880, in the Class of '84, at a time when the student had the advantage of the discipline of concentrating on a few subjects instead of the multiplicity of subjects that came with the optional system adopted a generation later. I learned something from the great teachers of that day, Noah Porter, Dean Wright, and Thomas Seymour; but the man who had the greatest influence upon me was William Graham Sumner, who was one of the greatest teachers that Yale has ever produced. He taught me how to think, and his sturdy independence was a great stimulant to self-reliance. As I look back on the four years at Yale, I feel that the friendships formed and the daily contacts with the men of '84 were of greater value than what I gained in the classroom. I am especially gratified that one of the distinguished members of '84, Dean Jones, is among the speakers this evening, and that four other likewise distinguished members, Dr. Alexander Lambert, Leonard M. Daggett, Dr. Ellsworth Eliot, and Bishop Coley, have found it possible to be with us.

After leaving Yale, I was obliged to teach Latin and Greek for two years in Portland, Oregon, in order to get the means with which to continue my medical studies at the Harvard Medical School. Again I was favored by Fortune in taking up the study of Medicine or Surgery at the most opportune time in a thousand years—that time when the older surgery, with the high mortality from infection, was just beginning to be replaced by the surgery based on Lister's discovery: antisepsis. When I first attended the surgical clinics at the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1886, the older surgery was still in vogue. I saw the distinguished surgeons of the day, Dr. Charles A. Porter, Dr. J. Collins Warren, and Dr. Maurice H. Richardson, clothed in Prince Albert coats that were spotted with the blood of many patients and from the lapels of which were suspended silk ligatures. While Lister first brought out his new method of antisepsis in 1867, it took twenty years to persuade the profession at large of its great value. The last to acknowledge its merits were his own intimate colleagues, so that it was not until 1887 or 1888 that the method was adopted in the leading hospitals of America.

Ether, which had been discovered by an American dentist of the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1846, and which was rightly regarded as one of the miraculous discoveries in Medicine, at first proved to be a surgical catastrophe. Before the discovery of anaesthesia, very few operations were performed, and these were operations of necessity. After the discovery of ether, the number of operations increased enormously. Abdominal operations especially, which hitherto had never been attempted, became a routine procedure. The mortality following these operations increased at an alarming rate, especially in the crowded wards of the large city hospitals. The mortality following amputations in military surgery rose to 75 per cent; that in civil hospitals to 38 per cent. Hospital gangrene and erysipelas became so rife that the boards of governors of some of the hospitals in England voted to tear down the entire buildings and to erect new ones. No one had the slightest idea of how to prevent or control these infections.

Then in the early Sixties came the great discoveries of Pasteur, who proved that infections were caused by minute organisms or germs which could be cultured and examined under the microscope. Lister, quickly realizing that here at last was the solution of the great problem of infections, at once took steps to prevent these organisms from gaining access to wounds, or to destroy them by antiseptics if they had already gained access. This was the origin of the great discovery that revolutionized surgery and transformed the hospitals—many of which were looked upon as pest houses—once more into institutions of healing. It is a great privilege to have seen this great truth of antisepsis and to have played some minor part in the great advances in surgery during the past forty-four years.

The operation for appendicitis was first performed while I was a student at the Harvard Medical School, and it was largely due to the classical paper of Dr. Reginald Fitz, Professor of Pathology of the Harvard Medical School, published in the American Journal of Medical