

## Friedrich Miescher

(1844 - 1895)

Herr Miescher sat despondent in the hall,  
feasting with smart students of Basel  
who celebrated this, their passing out,  
with revelry and songs which he ought shout  
loud like the rest - had not early deafness  
robbed both voice and Hippocratic deftness.  
The noises of the party mocked his ears  
and reawakened dormant, childhood fears  
in one who cherished serving through medicine -  
as too his father and uncle had done.  
(He once had longed to be a simple priest -  
but that was barred until his yearning ceased.)  
He sat morosely, despite high status,  
and watched divide the heavy curtained wall;  
two matched teams of well-drilled, napkined waiters  
marched down the steps to fan across the hall,  
each carrying a candle in one hand.  
A vintage cork -drawn Hock was served as wine;  
they marched by stepping to the local band,  
filled glasses, then retreated, still in line.

“Schnapps is the drink for me,  
Flowing strong and flowing free,  
Warming through so gently,  
Bring more Schnapps!

“Schnapps has a glowing tone -  
It's unique, it's on its own.  
With my glass I'm not alone:  
Bring more Schnapps!

“We love its fine bouquet,  
But we'd drink it anyway -  
So we sing till close of day:  
Bring more Schnapps!

“On the Rhine with our women:  
Bisqued, flavoured pink salmon,  
Served with sauces and lemon!  
Bring more Schnapps!

“There is nothing we can't do,  
We're noble students loud and true,  
Raise your glasses to this brew -  
Bring more Schnapps!

“Basel maids are so fine,  
As are maidens from the Rhine;  
We like beer and we like wine -  
But bring more Schnapps!”

Higher they sang, till standing on the plates;  
trampled food and wine mingled, flung in grates.  
The loud banging of the heavy glasses  
and ill -distorted, raucous, drunken voices  
persuaded this young student to change tack:  
on medicine finally he turned his back.

His uncle Wilhelm wrote encouragement:

“Dear Fritz,

I cannot doubt your aptitude  
for work, and I'm certain your achievement  
will be high, if your optimistic mood  
is well maintained. Your own self confidence  
and dedication are all you require;  
not empty, foolish, over -confidence  
that cannot make mistakes - but to aspire  
to self -reliant, continuous work:  
giving of your best, you will become the best.  
Though doubts in other fields will still lurk,  
your individuality from the rest  
will be assured; so take from this good heart  
and choose your field - then set yourself apart.”

Miescher took up physiology:  
the cell nucleus he chose to study,  
and for a source of rounded nuclei  
he thought that human lymph cells he might try;  
for fetid wounds discharged too commonly.  
Bacteria on instruments swarmed free,  
as antiseptics was not yet founded  
by Lister - thus foul, sordid wounds abounded  
where the surgeon's dirty knife had been;  
and copious, oozing sores could oft be seen.  
Putrid bandages Miescher collected:  
washing out the cells he had selected,  
he studied them and took their nuclei  
apart. In acid phosphorus they were high,  
so Miescher named this nucleic acid.  
A sugar and four bases closed the lid  
on all of interest in the nucleus -  
such simple chemicals were not of use  
in formulating life its myriad form:  
but proteins in profusion seemed to swarm  
with variations in their type and length,  
which many chemists took to be life's strength.

(c) John Marr

## **References**

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*Portugal and Cohen, (1977) A Century of DNA*  
(p.6) Friedrich Miescher - b. Aug 3 1844, Basel.  
(p.8) letter from Wilhelm His to Miescher (1868)  
(p.10-12) Miescher initially chose to study the lymph cell [in pus].

(p.19) He later found a more pleasant source of nucleic acid when he examined salmon spermatozoa heads. Salmon come via Holland to the upper reaches of the Rhine to spawn; his house backed onto the Rhine, and they were readily available.

*Bronowski, J. (1973) The Ascent of Man*

(p.311) Louise Pasteur, (b.1823-) solved problem of fermentation of wine in 1865.