

GEORGE ELIOT AS A MEDICAL NOVELIST.

SINCE George Eliot's death, the usual posthumous accession of fame has come to her. Every magazine of literary pretension has contained its article, more or less discriminating, in regard to her. Many of these notices have dwelt at length upon the accuracy with which she described the daily lives and emotions of the different classes of people of whom she wrote. Her stories of clerical life were at first considered evidently the work of a clergyman. Her country scenes in her early stories were so faithful a description of the village in which she had passed her girlhood that the place was recognized, and it seemed absolutely certain that they were written by some resident. A man was fixed upon as the only possible author, and seems to have been himself persuaded by his friends that perhaps he was in some mysterious way the writer of the stories in question. It is claimed that a practical carpenter can find no fault with Adam Bede; his work is as well described as if done by a man bred to the bench; and of Daniel Deronda it is said that it shows a fullness of knowledge in regard to the Jews which even a Hebrew of the Hebrews might envy but scarcely hope to excel.

The crowd of notices of this singularly gifted woman have already nearly ceased, and we have watched in vain for some similarly appreciative remarks upon her medical characters. The industry with which she studied Jewish history and clerical character must have been almost equaled by the fidelity with which she applied herself to medical history and traditions.

It is natural, perhaps, that the faithfulness of her medical portraits should be less widely appreciated than others, but so far as the present writer has seen, it has been entirely unmentioned. Leaving out of view other characters, Middlemarch is the story of a physician, young, enthusiastic, proud, and self-reliant, well educated in his profession, but with little practical knowledge of the ways of getting bread and butter. His small inheritance nearly exhausted by the expenses of a Parisian education, he is dependent upon his profession while bent upon doing many things, highly praiseworthy from a scientific point of view, but not specially calculated to secure a good income. He goes into a country town where he excites the jealousy and hatred of the older practitioners, adds to his burdens by a marriage that proves ungenial, becomes involved in suspicion over a case that terminates unfortunately, and ignominiously fails. Many of the

matters involved are so purely English that it is hardly possible for an American to judge of them, but the young doctor's experience, on the whole, contains much that is common in the life of most young physicians who are obliged to make their own way in the world.

Now, doctors figure in novels frequently enough, though they are generally the dimmest of shadows so far as their professional character is concerned, and many an otherwise good novel is completely spoiled for a medical reader by the author's exhibition of profound ignorance of everything pertaining to medicine except popular superstitions. The really good physicians of novels, with whom the living physician sympathizes, might almost be counted on the fingers.

George Eliot's Dr. Lydgate talks and acts as a medical man would do; he makes grave mistakes in dealing with brother-practitioners and ignorant patients, but they are natural mistakes for an untried physician of his temper, and the medical reader finds nothing improbable. Lydgate is undoubtedly, something of a prig, fond of comparing himself with great men whose lives are landmarks in medical history; ambitious above all to contribute something toward enlarging and strengthening the firm scientific basis of his profession, and to do so he would "keep away from the range of London intrigues, jealousies, and social truckling, and win celebrity, however slowly, as Jenner had done, by the independent value of his work."

Authors seldom attempt to follow physicians in their intercourse with their fellow-practitioners, for medical etiquette is a fearful thing to the laity, even at the present day. Lydgate's first complication with a medical brother is too matter-of-fact to be a work of the imagination. Fred. Vincy, ailing for a few days, called in his regular attendant, Mr. Wrench, who found no well-marked symptoms, made general remarks about his being run down, and departed, sending round later certain powders, whose contents proved black and drastic. Next day the patient sat and shivered by the fire, and was evidently worse. Mr. Wrench, not appearing, was summoned, and was found to be away in a neighboring village; piqued at the neglect, and anxious about her boy, Mrs. Vincy discusses the propriety of calling in another physician, and finally calls Dr. Lydgate. Dr. Lydgate listened to the mother's story, a narration in which Mrs. Vincy insisted on every point of minor importance, especially upon what Mr. Wrench had said and what he had not said, and on examination of the patient found little difficulty in recognizing typhoid fever. He promised to write to the regular attendant, and, at the request of the mother, to meet him in the evening. The family was an important one, and he was naturally anxious to make a good impression, and, worse yet, he had seen Louis, and followed his demonstrations of the difference between typhus and typhoid, and, naturally felt somewhat superior to his elder brother on the subject; his manner in consequence was not specially conciliatory; the impolitic words of the self-important father, who was elated with recent political success, complicated the situation, and the sensitive

Dr. Wrench declined further attendance. Lydgate, with many regrets, but with a clear conscience, entered upon the full charge of the case, and at the same time upon troubles which ceased only with life itself.

It is by no means our desire to follow the course of Lydgate's series of mistakes and misfortunes, but simply to express our admiration of the genius that created him, and our appreciation of the sympathy manifested for the trials of a high-minded physician, and of the difficulties that beset his path.

It is perhaps needless to say that the story is a sad one, George Eliot's books have always an element of sadness; the picture of Lydgate's failure is so forcible and so life-like, it might so well be the biography of an actual physician, that one reads it with a feeling of actual bitterness.

The study bestowed upon the medical portion of the book we have already alluded to; it must have been prodigious, to borrow Dominic Sampson's favorite expression,—study of books, very evidently, but study of men also. It is evident that she had at some time in her life opportunities of watching very closely the sayings and doings, and even the manner of thought, of medical men.

Undoubtedly much of this study was done during the five years that intervened between the production of Felix Holt and Middlemarch. It was evidently, however, much more than a magnificent piece of cram. Much of her insight into the peculiarities of country practitioners was, without much doubt, the result of her girlish observation in her native town. Her study of physicians also included their patients and their afflicted families. The sympathizing relatives of one of Dr. Lydgate's patients afford Milner Fothergill a text for a long dissertation on nurses in one of his entertaining letters from England.

Many of the wise sayings might well be quoted; we have room only for a single quotation, which reads like a commentary on recent events: "Beware of too great readiness at explanation; it multiplies the sources of mistake, lengthening the sum for reckoners sure to go wrong," and "Even Lydgate's proud outspokenness was checked by the discernment that it was as useless to fight against the interpretations of ignorance as to whip the fog."

It is by no means the intention to add a moral, but the story of a faithful but unsuccessful life is fittingly closed by the closing words of the story originally applied to other characters of the book, "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."