

SKETCH OF ABÛL-WALID MOHAMMED IBN-AHMED
IBN-MOHAMMED IBN-ROSHD (COMMONLY CALLED
AVERROËS).

By GEORGE JACKSON FISHER, M. D.

DANTE tells us that when he descended into the infernal regions, on arriving at limbo, which is the first and favored circle of hell, where the good and virtuous are permitted to reside, having been excluded from the bliss of paradise from neglect of baptism, he found "a sapient throng," with Aristotle, "the Master"—

"Seated amid the philosophic train";

and, when a little more he raised his brow, he "spied"

" . . . Hippocrates,
Galenus, Avicen, and him who made
That commentary vast, Averroës."*

It is of this vast commentator and renowned Saracenic physician that I now propose briefly to write. Averroës flourished, without a doubt, in the twelfth century; there is, however, no inconsiderable amount of uncertainty and discrepancy among authorities concerning the precise time of his birth, some placing it as early as the year 1126, others as late as 1198. The same confusion exists as to the date of his death, ranging it from 1198 to 1225. The dates (1126-1198) are believed to be as nearly accurate as can be determined at this time. By this assumption it appears that Averroës attained the age of seventy-two years. He was of an ancient and noble family, being the son of the high-priest and chief judge of Cordova, the beautiful capital city of Andalusia, in Spain. Cordova was the place of his nativity.

Leo Africanus informs us ("De Vir. Arab.," p. 280) that Averroës commenced the study of philosophy, when he was but a youth, under the celebrated Thophail, or Ibn-Tofail (Abubacer), who is the author of the noted metaphysical tale "Hai Ebn Yochdan." An English translation of this elegant story was published by Professor Ockley, of Cambridge, in London in 1711. It is not unlikely that the extreme admiration which Averroës always entertained for the writings of Aristotle was inspired by the enthusiastic teachings of Ibn-Tofail. His unbounded admiration of Aristotle amounted to a profound reverence, for thus we find Averroës asserting that "the doctrine of Aristotle is the perfection of truth, and his understanding attained the utmost limit of human ability; so that it might be truly said of him that he was created and given to the world by Divine Providence, that we

* "Inferno," Vision, Hell, canto iv.

might see in him how much it is possible for man to know." Averroës devoted a great portion of his life to literary pursuits, but chiefly to his chosen task of expounding the doctrines of his favorite author. A printed edition of his works, in ten large folio volumes, furnishes ample testimony of the extent of his labors, and fully justifies the cognomen of "The Commentator," and of Dante's expression "that commentary vast." He was also styled "the soul of Aristotle."

It has been said that he wrote his medical treatises for the purpose of reconciling the doctrines of Galen with the philosophy of Aristotle; for it is evident that his estimation of the medical philosopher of Pergamus was only second in degree to the almost veneration which he entertained for the philosopher of Alexandria.

It is not within the compass or purpose of this sketch to furnish the reader with even a brief summary of the peculiar characteristics of the metaphysical doctrines which constitute what has been termed Averroism, or to give an account of its wide-spread influence throughout Europe, and particularly during three entire centuries in the universities of Northern Italy. I will merely state that Padua became the seat and center of "Averroist Aristotelianism," and that Petrus de Apono, about the year 1300, became a famous expositor of these doctrines in their relation to medicine, and an equally noted example of heterodoxy in matters of faith; so much so that his effigy was burned in the public market-place by the executioner, at the command of the Inquisitors. Though for ages both Aristotle and Averroës were regarded as the supreme masters of the science of proof, yet their teachings were considered inimical to the requirements of religious faith; their disciples were called derisively "the people of demonstration." Later on, Erasmus and others poured out the vials of their contempt on scholastic barbarism with its "impious and thrice-accursed Averroës."

To return to his personal history. Averroës lived not long after Avenzoar, whom he calls "admirable, glorious, the treasure of all knowledge," and the most supreme in physic from Galen to his own time. Averroës was personally acquainted with the sons of Avenzoar. He was a great student. It is said that, under the most approved teachers of his time, he mastered theology, jurisprudence, mathematics, philosophy, and medicine. He flourished at a time when the Moslem caliphate in Spain had attained its maximum splendor, and such as had only been excelled by the ancient Oriental glories of Arabia and Persia. Cordova was the Bagdad of the Occident. Averroës worshiped in great and magnificent mosques, attended schools and colleges of erudition and renown, consulted libraries vast in extent, rich and rare in quality; walked large hospitals, whose cases supplied ample illustrations of all the mortal ills to which our poor humanity is subject; and, having been introduced by Ibn-Tofail, the philosophic vizier of Jusuf, to that prince, he possessed every requisite qualification and influence to insure success and distinction in life. Averroës,

being master of the Melekitic law, was appointed *cadi* of Seville in the year 1169, and for a quarter of a century occupied his time in similar offices in Cordova, Seville, and Morocco, belonging at the same time to the court of the reigning monarch Jusuf Almansur, who, it is said, was fond of engaging him in philosophic discussions in relation to the Islam faith.

The profound acquirements which he had made in all departments of learning, and particularly in scholastic philosophy, by which the name of Averroës had become famous, eventually resulted in his almost total ruin. He was accused of heresy, and his teachings were declared to be inimical to Moslem faith.

The charges were signed by a hundred witnesses, who testified that they had listened to heresies uttered from his own lips. The Caliph's fears of the populace, in a matter so vital to their religious belief, overpowered his love for Averroës, and drove him to rigid measures. He confiscated his property, deprived him of honors, offices, and emoluments, and banished him to a place outside the walls of Cordova, there to dwell with the Jews and other outcasts in the suburbs. Africanus goes on to say that the boys used to watch the opportunity of his going up to the city, at the hour of prayers, to pelt him with mud and stones. Such was the force of the fanatical indignation against poor Averroës, that everywhere he was subjected to the jeers and insults of a bigoted populace. All this occurred about the year 1195, at which time a general effort was made to destroy all liberal culture in Andalusia, reserving only such practical branches as would prove most useful to the people, including medicine, surgery, mathematics, and astronomy.

From all these misfortunes, ignominy, and degradation he at length escaped, and betook himself to Fez, whither he was soon pursued, arrested, and committed to prison. The royal council could not agree concerning the issue of his fate. Instant death was demanded by some, while others insisted on permitting him to live, and extorting from him a public recantation of his errors. The final decision was that he should be led out bareheaded, at the hour of prayer, and placed on the upper step at the entrance of the mosque, that every one as he passed in might have an opportunity of showing his holy wrath and indignation by spitting in the heretic's face. It is said that this contemptible treatment was submitted to with stoical indifference. When the service was ended, the judge and officers of the court came forward and listened to a public confession of his alleged heresies. Averroës was then permitted to return to Cordova, where he entered in privacy, and remained in poverty, rags, and wretchedness; scorned, neglected, with none for associates but the most degraded classes of society. Great, indeed, was the fall of Averroës! The limbo of Dante must at last have proved to him a paradise indeed!

This poor philosopher had not yet reached the end of his eventful

life. Owing to the misrule of his successor in the regency of Morocco, the discontented people earnestly petitioned the ruler of the Faithful to restore their former governor, whose mildness and wisdom had secured to them so high a degree of prosperity and so many blessings. After much deliberation Averroës was restored to freedom, reinstated in his positions of honor, where his moral virtues, his amiability, his justice, and his humanity, were exercised to the advantage of his fellow-beings. He secured the love, the applause, the admiration, and gratitude of the people over whom he ruled, and we are told that happiness gilded the evening of his days, his sun sank gently beneath an unclouded horizon, and his memory was a radiant halo, not unlike the roseate twilight that sometimes lingers along the western sky, the charming influence of which can only be felt and contemplated with emotions of grateful delight. And thus it was that Averroës closed his eventful life in the year of grace 1198, being but about a twelve-month previous to the death of his patron Almansur, with whom the political power of the Moslems terminated, as did the study of the liberal sciences with the death of Averroës.

He was evidently a man of dignity, rectitude, and nobility; a wise and humane judge; a devoted student; a profound scholar; and, though surrounded by the luxuries of a royal court, yet simple, temperate, almost rigidly abstemious in his mode of life.

As a medical writer Averroës was the author of two works which are still extant; one being the "Koulyyath," or "Kulliyyat," which is better known as the "Colliget" or "Summary"; the other is a commentary on the medical poem or *cantica* of Avicenna. The "Colliget," which is his principal work, was dedicated to Abdelech, the Miramamolin of Morocco, and contains a digest of the whole science of medicine, being divided into seven books. It contains but little that is original, though we find him speaking of his own experiences. He is said to be the first to state that small-pox occurs in the human constitution but once in a lifetime. His anatomy is copied entirely from Galen. His commentary on the *cantica* of Avicenna was considered to be the best introduction to medicine that had ever appeared.

Some time ago I picked up a curious little duodecimo entitled "Averroëana," being a transcript of several letters from "Averroës, an Arabian philosopher at Corduba, in Spain, to Metrodorus, a young Grecian nobleman, student at Athens," in the years 1149 and 1150. Also "several letters from Pythagoras to the King of India," etc., etc. "The whole containing matters highly philosophical, physiological, Pythagorical, and medicinal. The work having been long concealed, is now put into English for the benefit of mankind, and the rectification of learned mistakes." London, 1695.

P. Grinau tells us, in his prefatory letter, that his friend Petit, who had for many years resided in Andalusia, gave him the book, which he says was written by Averroës's own hand, and that it had

long lain in the library of a certain nobleman in Andalusia. It deals with many curious physiological questions, and furnishes proof that Averroës was a practicing physician. Space will not permit me to make extracts from the work, though, in passing, it may be mentioned that he speaks of his own experiments and experiences; for example, he discourses at length on the value of milk in the treatment of pulmonary consumption.

The library of the Escorial in Spain still contains in manuscript among its treasures the greater part of the writings of Averroës, particularly those on jurisprudence, astronomy, essays on special logical subjects, and his criticisms on Avicenna and Alfarabius. Other manuscripts are preserved in European libraries. The Latin editions of the works of Averroës have been very numerous. The first appeared at Padua in 1472; about fifty were published at Venice, the best known being that by the Juntas in 1552-'53, in ten folio volumes. During the century from 1480 to 1580 no less than one hundred editions were issued. This fact attests the exalted estimation in which his works were held. None were ever printed in Arabic. The "Colliget" was first printed in 1482, at Venice, in folio; also in 1490, 1492, 1497, 1514, 1542, and 1552. The commentary on the "Canticles" of Avicenna were printed in nearly as many editions, and often with the "Colliget."

Should the reader desire to know more of the philosophy and theology of Averroës, he may be gratified by consulting either or both of the following treatises: Renan, "Averrhoès et l'Averrhoïsme," Paris, 1852; and Müller, "Philosophie und Theologie von Averrhoës" Munich 1859.

What authority there may have been for the portrait of Averroës by Raphael, now in the Vatican, I am quite unable to state. The writer has a fine old print, on a folio sheet, of this portrait, engraved by P. Fianza. It is done in bold pen-and-ink-like strokes, being an Arabian head covered with a massive turban, a face of earnest but fierce expression, more suggestive of a Bedouin chief than of a profound philosopher.

The frontispiece in the present number of the "Monthly" is a reduced copy of this rare engraving.



*AVERROËS. Philosophe Grabe Aristotélicien, disciple d'Avicenne, auteur de molti Trattati di Filosofia, e di Medicina
sculp. nel Secolo di Giacomo d'Oronzo Grasse di Raffaele nel Vaticano F. Piloni del. et inc.*

AVERROËS.