

# Original Articles.

## THE PHYSICIAN IN LITERATURE.\*

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Gentlemen of the New York Medical Association and Friends—I regard it a very great honor to be elected to the high position of presiding over the work of this Association for this, our annual meeting. I do not know of any other temptation which would have drawn me away from the quiet of ordinary life into an arena so public as this than the love and reverence for a profession which I have followed in an humble way for over forty years. Thanking you for this honor, I will ask your indulgence for a moment to listen to a few remarks upon the subject of "The Physician in Literature."

Almost every physician has made a place for himself in the literature of the profession. There are few who have not written something for the help of their brother practitioners, who have not described some case that has come under their care or collected statistics from some passing epidemic to give to some medical journal or to the local press for publication. The eminent physicians and surgeons of our cities, whose field for clinical work has been large, have done much to extend the literature of the profession, and there is not a doctor in the most obscure country town who cannot read lectures and papers written by specialists and thus keep up with the advancement of the profession and become acquainted with new remedies.

But while we are loading the mails with new theories of diagnosis and mechanical improvements, what does literature say of us? During ancient and medieval times the practice of medicine was so surrounded with superstition and mystery that the so called physicians were regarded either with undue reverence or held up to vulgar ridicule; and in later times the barber surgeons and ignorant leeches were objects of toleration rather than of admiration. Thus it is not strange that our earlier writers of fiction have depicted the character of the physician in a way that is revolting to the members of the profession to-day.

Le Sage, you remember, described De Sugarado, who instructed his assistant, Gil Blas, in his theories of practice. Blood letting and the value of hot water as a remedy were so firmly fixed in his mind as the true practice that he wrote a book on their use and slavishly adhered to his theories whether right or wrong.

Smollet, one of the early English novelists, being a physician himself, one would think would have depicted as his characters noble and able gentlemen, but in his "Roderick Random" he portrays the debased condition of the as-

sistant surgeons aboard the English man of war—their persecution and suffering; and selects Morgan, an ignorant Welshman, very uncleanly and vulgar in his habits, for his principal character. In his "Perigrine Pickle," the character of the English physician who accompanied Mr. Pallet and himself through Flanders was that of a pompous, ignorant crank. He it was that gave the dinner of the ancients that amused all Europe.

The characters that Charles Reade has chosen from the medical profession were all scoundrels—men signing away people's liberty by placing them in lunatic asylums, or quacks writing prescriptions for lovesick girls, thus picturing medical men either as rogues or charlatans.

Thackeray in his presentation of characters has been more fair, and the few physicians that he has admitted to his books have been described as men more in keeping with the profession as we consider it to-day.

As Charles Dickens always saw and usually described the ridiculous, we are not surprised that in "Pickwick Papers" he introduces us to a pair of "sawbones," Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen, whose slovenly manner of dressing, convivial habits and exaggerated accounts of clinical and hospital duties disgust even the tolerant Mr. Pickwick. He allows these big talking students to tell absurd stories, like that of the child who had swallowed the necklace, to which to-day no self respecting medical student would descend; still, even these fellows are an advance over the doctors described by Smollet.

Mr. Pilkins, the family physician, and Sir Parker Pepps, the specialist, who were present at the encouchment of Mrs. Dombey, in their grave and well meant advice to Mrs. Dombey to make "an effort" seem ridiculous to the physician of to-day, who is zealous in his desire to alleviate the suffering of his patients, and has many practical resources that he uses to that end. However, Dickens did not confine his descriptions of physicians to bragging students or servile practitioners. Allen Woodcourt, the physician in "Bleak House," is a man whose sterling worth and devotion to his profession compare favorably with the better class of physicians of to-day. As it is more difficult to describe adequately a sensible, thoroughbred gentleman than one full of peculiarities, this dignified, chivalrous man makes a less vivid impression on the reader's mind than the namby-pamby Dr. Chillup, who ushered "David Copperfield" into the world, but the character serves to show us that Dickens knew and appreciated what a true physician should be, and it also shows us that there were such men in England at the time he wrote "Bleak House."

Passing to the short stories, the immortal "Rab and His Friends" of Dr. John Brown gives a vivid picture of hospital life, and in a few graphic words describes students and physicians of the modern type without the humorous

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exaggeration of Dickens or the coarse realism of Smollet. The picture of the eager but sympathetic students and low voiced, skilful surgeon about the operating table where lay the beautiful, patient, old Ailie will always be a classic in the opinion of doctors.

To the physician whose lot it has been to practice in a small town, the country doctor described by Ian McLaren in "Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush" will always be an ideal. To many of us it is given to recall scenes like those described in this story; the long drives or rides in the storm, the grateful family and friends of the patient and even the faithful old horse are to many of us here to-day familiar and pleasant recollections. In this story we find, perhaps, the best description of the self sacrificing, devoted physician in all literature.

It is interesting to notice in passing that even the poets have recognized the work and worth of the physician. Shakespeare, with that skill that has made men speak of him as "the poet of all time," has introduced into the sleep walking scene of "Macbeth" a doctor who seems thoroughly modern in his manner in the sick room. He realizes fully that Lady Macbeth in her mental breakdown is disclosing secrets of a grave nature, and when he makes his report to her husband he tells him that "she's not so sick, but troubled with thick coming fancies that keep her from her rest," and when Macbeth, in unreasonable, regal command says to him, "Cure her of that," and adds:

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?"

with quiet dignity the doctor replies:  
"Therein the patient must minister to himself."  
And when Macbeth has impatiently answered:  
"Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it," and half arrogantly, half pitifully appeals to the physician again for help, the doctor closes the scene with the significant and thoroughly modern sentiment of a good physician:

"Were I from Dunsinane away and clear,  
*Profit* again should hardly draw me here."

This character of the doctor in "Macbeth" stands out as almost the only dignified and self respecting physician described in the earlier English literature, and it is gratifying to us to know that even in the sixteenth century—in those days of ignorance and superstition along the lines of medicine—there were men who possessed the true ideal of a physician's duty and dignity.

The energy and power for doing good in the world that characterizes the life of a doctor are vividly pictured by Browning in his poem entitled "An Epistle." Here the young medical practitioner describes the case of Lazarus, whom Christ raised from the dead, to his pre-

ceptor living in a distant city. He attributes the mental torpor of Lazarus to epilepsy and looks on him as a most interesting and unusual case. Browning, however, shows how much worthier, nobler and more useful is the active, keen minded physician than the dreary Lazarus, whose vision of heavenly things has unfitted him for life's work on earth.

Many more examples might be selected from literature to show how physicians as a class have been and still are regarded by the world at large, but these few, I think, show that the profession has advanced with the march of civilization, and that while the unprofessional physician or the quack is a laughingstock, the dignified, earnest physician has been revered and admired in all times.