MEDICINE AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

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THE last few years have afforded several reminders that English literature takes a lively, if not always a complimentary, interest in the medical profession.

The medical faddists of Shaw's "Doctor's Dilemma," who run the gamut of panaceas from antitoxin three times a day to green-gages half an hour before lunch, constitute only the mildest of satires on the profession compared to the bludgeonings of Shaw's extravagant preface; and now Mr. Robert Herrick in his latest novel, "The Healer," rises to the attack, with an indictment and a solution which are, after all, nothing more than Shaw's preface illustrated in narrative. That all physicians, high as well as low, are in some degrees quacks and hypocrites, and that the only hope of redemption for the profession lies in the abolition of private fees,—this is what Mr. Shaw has already told us to the tune of forty or fifty pages. The promptness with which Mr. Shaw's complaint has been echoed and reiterated on this side of the Atlantic gives food for thought to the philosopher, but it may well serve also to remind the student of literature of the ancient grudge of literature against medicine.

Long before Molière set the fashion, comedy was wont to burlesque the follies and satirize the foibles of the physician. In the mediæval St. George folk-plays, the doctor is already a ridiculous figure, riding in, sometimes on a hobby-horse, sometimes on the back of one of his patients, and while he boasts of his skill, bringing St. George back to life by exhibiting a bolus. Elizabethan drama constantly fell foul of him. The Doctor of Physike, who is called in to prescribe for the madness of Lady Macbeth, has at least the merit of sincerity.

> "This disease is beyond my practice. . . . .
> More needs she the divine than the physician,"

but ordinarily Shakespeare's physicians are Dr. Caiuses, good only for "the abusing of God's patience and the King's English." Ben Jonson never lets slip the opportunity to satirize the profession.

Volpone's indictment of the physician anticipates in all essential particulars the bill of complaints which Shaw draws up as a preface to the "Doctor's Dilemma." "He has no faith in physic," says Mosca of his master, Volpone:

"He does think
Most of your doctors are the greatest danger
And worse disease to escape. . . .
No sir, nor their fees
He cannot brook: he says they flay a man
Before they kill him. . . . .
And then they do it by experiment
For which the law not only doth absolve
But gives them great reward: and he is loth
To hire his death so."

But Jonson as the professional exploiter of human follies is naturally even more concerned with the quack and the magician. The latter, indeed, if we are to accept comedy as an image of the times, found himself more on the road to preferment than the legitimate physician.

"He's a rare physician, do him right," says Sir Epicure Mammon,
"An excellent Paracelsian, and has done
Strange cures with mineral physic. He deals all
With spirits, he; He will not hear a word
Of Galen, or his tedious recipes."

Similarly, Marlowe's Faustus, although through his prescriptions whole cities have already

"Escaped the plague
And thousand desperate maladies been eased,"

feels that he is still "but Faustus and a man." If "this profession were to be esteemed," then must the physician turn magician, and legitimate therapeutics give place to miracles.

It would almost seem, indeed, that the emphasis of the professional medical man upon incantations and natural magic left the field of legitimate healing open to the heroines of romance. "For I tell thee, Tristan, this wound shall be thy death, for the sword was poisoned with a deadly poison, and no leech nor leechcraft can heal thee, saving only my sister Iseult, the Queen of Ireland. She knoweth the virtues of all plants, and many secrets of healing; she can heal thee, but none other on earth can."

Nor were the fictitious royalties of romance the only rivals of

the doctors: for it will be remembered that the English kings healed for the "King's evil" from the days of Edward the Confessor to the time when Queen Anne "touched" the future great cham of literature, Samuel Johnson.

Meanwhile the devotees of surgery, to whom the privileges of magic were denied, eked out their practice with humbler expedients. In the medical schools of the middle ages the actual handling of surgery was frequently relegated to the village barber, who was usually village dentist and village musician as well. The teeth which he had drawn were not infrequently hung up at the window on lute-strings; the parti-coloured barber's pole was painted after the fashion of a surgeon's bandage, and outside of the door, to indicate his double function of barber and surgeon, hung "a copper basin on a prickant spear." "Yonder his mansion is," says Mine Host in "The Knight of the Burning Pestle," as he directs Ralph to the den of the "giant Barbaroso";

> "Lo, where the spear and copper basin are!
> Behold that string on which hangs many a tooth
> Drawn from the gentle jaw of wandering knights."

The cutbeards of Elizabethan drama are ready alike with razor, scalpel, or physic, and are also the stock intermediaries of intrigue. Even in the eighteenth century, medicine had strange bedfellows. Partridge, the almanac-maker, who describes himself as an "honest physician," was a cobbler by trade, and is characterized, in a pamphlet written in his behalf probably by the dramatist, as "an eminent practitioner in leather, physic, and astrology."

The eighteenth century with its fresh heritage from the great discovery of Harvey, with such men as Sydenham and Sir Thomas Browne to look back to, and with its own Arbuthnots, and Garths, and Akensides handing on the medical tradition of honourable accomplishment in letters, might well have portrayed the physician with respect to its creative literature; but comedy found the burlesque doctor made to its hand by Molière, accepted the stage quack as unquestioningly as it had already accepted the *miles gloriosus*, and in such comedies as Fielding's "Mock Doctor," and Cobb's "Doctor and Apothecary," out-Molière'd the master *in facetiæ* at the physician's expense; and prose fiction contented itself with the Dr. Slops, the Partridges, and the low quacks and impostors who infest the pages of Smollett.

Satirical and burlesque pictures of the physician abound in nineteenth century fiction; but Charles Reade is the only one who

seems, like Molière, to have singled them out as the special object of malevolence. His portraits are too long for transcription, but the phrases in which he hits off the foibles of the profession are often neatly turned and quotable,—as in his characterization of one doctor as a "mellifluous pleonast, who oiled his prescriptions with fresh polysyllables." In the novels of Dickens the general practitioner, even when he assumes the venerable dignity of Doctor Manette in "The Tale of Two Cities," carries his profession only as a sort of shadowy accessory. I fancy more than one physician in reading the novel must have smiled at the idea that Doctor Manette, after being rescued, aged and mentally clouded, from the oblivion of the Bastille, should have been able to "earn as much as he wanted" by the practice of his profession The surgeon, on the other hand, usually brings his profession with him into the centre of the stage, but he remains a sawbones, a comic and usually disreputable figure, of whom Bob Sawyer may stand as typical.

It is not surprising that in Dickens, with his vast canvasses, physicians are fairly numerous; but in Thackeray medicine is almost completely crowded out by the other two learned professions. One is inclined to wonder a bit at this, too, for several of Thackeray's warmest friendships were with physicians, to one of whom "Pendennis" is dedicated in words which glow with the gratitude of a convalescent recently rescued from death. And yet the practitioner in the pages of Thackeray concerning whom the present writer at least has the most lively memories, is one from the pages of that very novel, one who was most anxious to bury his professional past in oblivion, and be addressed not as Doctor, but as Squire. And this ancestral Pendennis, ex-apothecary, ex-doctor, conveniently sketched in with the kindly condescension which Thackeray sometimes allowed himself, and quite forgotten when the author gets down to the serious business of the novel, is typical of the other physicians in Thackeray. Some of them, it is true, are on a much more assured social footing than the former dispenser of salts and plasters, but all of them are there only to serve their casual turn, and the author has other game afoot than to develop these occasional functionaries into finished portraits.

Of the great Victorian novelists, it remained for George Eliot to give the profession a central place in one of her novels, and to produce a character which would be convincing alike to the physician and the layman. Lydgate, says Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, "is all over the physician, his manner, his sentiments, his modes of thought, but he stands alone in fiction." Lydgate is a wonderful

picture, not merely because his idealism and devotion, under adverse conditions, to the literature of his profession strike a responsive chord in the breast of such a physician as Dr. Mitchell, but because these traits are so melted into Lydgate's daily life that they are the man; and the study of his degeneration is precisely the study of the deterioration of his professional self under a barren and unsympathetic environment.

More recent fiction has been productive of many studies of the profession, such as Miss Jewett's "The Country Doctor," and W. D. Howells' "Dr. Breen's Practice." The last decade or two has seen also the emergence of the woman-physician as a type in fiction, but there has been nothing so comprehensive or so convincing as Lydgate since "Middlemarch" came from the press. When some novelist appears worthy to take up the pen which George Eliot laid down, an opportunity awaits him in a territory through which Kipling has blazed the way in "Marklake Witches,"—the presentation in fiction of some of the great physicians of former times, in the full stress of their epochal lives. What a "story" there would be, for example, in the career of Harvey, son of a Kentish yeoman, adviser and physician of royalty, standing in the transition moment between ancient and modern medicine, declaring his discovery of the circulation of the blood in words that have not lost their fine ring throughout the centuries: "But what remains to be said upon the quantity and source of the blood which thus passes, is of a character so novel and unheard of that I not only fear injury to myself from the envy of a few, but I tremble lest I have mankind at large for my enemies, so much doth wont and custom become a second nature. Doctrine once sown strikes deep its root, and respect for antiquity influences all men. Still the die is cast, and my trust is in my love of truth and the candour of cultivated minds."

How the historical imagination, like a highly sensitized plate, could catch and register the receding faces of that throng of sixteenth century quacks and impostors, panderers to the ancient mystery of medicine, as they peer over the line drawn by this demonstrator of the fundamental principle on which all modern knowledge of the human body rests! And with what heightened satisfaction would the reader of such a story detect in the literature of Harvey's own day the ferment of interest on the subject, which could induce the poet Donne, for example, to introduce into one of his elegiac poems the query:

> "Know'st thou how blood, which to the heart doth flow,
> Doth from one ventricle to the other go?"

or encourage Harvey's fellow-Kentishman and fellow-Cambridge student, Phineas Fletcher, to make the conception of the human body as an island bounded by streams of blood the theme of the long Spenserian poem, "The Purple Island"!

Or what a theme in Jenner's discovery of vaccination, with all the superstitious follies of the riotous crowds, who opposed a blessing so disguised; and with poor little eight-year old James Phipps preserved to history as the first subject of experiment!

And what possibilities for historical fiction, too, in some of the men whom a more ephemeral brilliance has kept in memory—Arbuthnot and his circle of wits and literary geniuses; Heberden, Dr. Johnson's "Ultimus Romanorum"; Dr. John Brown, of Edinburgh, the author of the one-time famous "Brunonian theory"; or that other Dr. John Brown to whom the world is indebted for "Rab and His Friends"; or Mark Akenside, butcher's son, poet, and physician, distinguished alike for the richness of his language and the meanness of his character, and pilloried already in the pages of "Peregrine Pickle."

Studies such as these would go far towards recompensing medicine for the scurvy treatment which literature has been disposed to accord it; but the debt of literature to medicine is too various to be readily repaid. Not the least of these obligations is the matter of vocabulary.

The essence of literature has always been the analysis and interpretation of character; and English literature, prior to the seventeenth century, borrowed from contemporary medicine a mode of thought and a system of terminology which became the universal literary language of characterization. The doctrine of humours, which Hippocrates had fashioned and which Galen had developed by means of the four elements, hot, cold, wet, and dry, established itself in English poetry from Chaucer to Milton as the regular means of portrayal of disposition, temperament, and mood. In the eighteenth century, the melancholy humour of Shakespeare's day gave place to the spleen—a general medico-literary term for the vapours, the blues—in short, for all those combinations of physical and mental discomfort which proceed from a disordered stomach and a perverted imagination. Pope's picture of the Cave of Spleen, where the Goddess

> . . . . "Sighs forever on her pensive bed,
> Pain at her side and Megrim at her head,"

is properly balanced with Matthew Green's famous prescription for the cure of the disease—

"Fling but a stone, the giant dies.
Laugh and be well."

Or again, the word nerve, after supplying the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the adjective nervous, meaning sinewy, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the same adjective, meaning easily excitable, and therefore weak, has completed the cycle by becoming the modern slang synonym for impertinence.

Meanwhile, through the crystallization of metaphors, we retain memorials of the ancient fallacies concerning the human body. "My reins," it is said in Proverbs, "shall rejoice when thy lips speak right things." "Thou thing of no bowels," says Thersites to Ajax in Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida." "Joseph made haste," we are told in Genesis, "for his bowels did yearn upon his brother"; and we find the quaint and witty divine, Thomas Fuller, describing "Bloody Bonner, that corpulent tyrant" as "full of guts but empty of bowels." We still "learn by heart," though science has long since given over the idea that the heart is the seat of memory. The same organ rests secure as the seat of pass n, though Phineas Fletcher, with classic precedent, tried to make out a case for the liver as the throne of mild affection, and Charles Lamb, in one of his most delicious passages, has at least recognized the existence of other claimants for the honour. "What authority we have," says Elia, "in history or mythology for placing the head-quarters and metropolis of god Cupid in this anatomical seat rather than in any other is not very clear; but we have got it, and it will serve as well as any other. Else we might easily imagine, upon some other system which might have prevailed for anything which our pathology knows to the contrary, a lover addressing his mistress, in perfect simplicity of feeling, 'Madam, my *liver* and fortunes are entirely at your disposal,' or putting a delicate question, 'Amanda, have you a midriff to bestow?' But custom has settled these things, and awarded the seat of sentiment to the aforesaid triangle, while its less fortunate neighbours wait at animal and anatomical distance."

Finally we have the Elizabethan, John Lyly, summing up a whole anatomy of misfits in a single sentence—"How say you, Favilla, is not love a lurcher [thief] that taketh men's stomachs away that they cannot eat, their spleen that they cannot laugh, their hearts that they cannot fight, their eyes that they cannot sleep, and leaveth nothing but livers to make nothing but lovers?"

But if English literature has incurred chance obligations in the way of borrowings from the vocabulary of the doctors, it is under a

far more considerable obligation from the direct literary contributions of the doctors themselves. From generation to generation the profession has included many who, like John Brown's ideal physician, "live in the world of letters as a freeholder," and believe that "their profession and their patients need not suffer, though their *horæ subsecivæ* are devoted occasionally to miscellaneous thinking and reading." The achievements of these men are too comprehensive to be dealt with in this brief compass, and too familiar indeed to require more than mention; but it is worth while to remember at least that Thomas Linacre, one of the great classical scholars and leaders of the English Renaissance, was the physician of Henry VIII; that Lodge, the Elizabethan novelist and poet, spent the latter part of his life in the practice of medicine; that Locke, the author of the "Essay concerning the Human Understanding," was a physician and practised privately; that some of the ablest and most eloquent prose in the language has been left to us by the physician, Sir Thomas Browne; that Garth and Akenside and Arbuthnot wrote notably in their day; that one of the best novels, two of the best comedies, and some of the best poetry in the eighteenth century, were written by the physician, Oliver Goldsmith; that one of the most prolific and vigorous novelists of the eighteenth century, Tobias Smollett, practised medicine; that one of the most beautiful and enduring of all short stories, "Rab and His Friends," was written by a physician, Dr. John Brown; that poets as diverse as Crabbe and Keats emerged from the study of medicine into the worship of the Muse; that a physician—and one of the leaders of his profession—Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, has endeared himself wherever the English language is spoken, by the grace and sympathetic humour of his poetry and essays; that one of the most successful novelists of our own day is the noted physician, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell; and that no man who writes to-day has a more practised pen and a purer style than the master-physician, Sir William Osler.

Of all these men, who have contributed with varying degrees of distinction to English literature, it is curious to observe that Dr. Holmes alone has, so to speak, superimposed his vocation upon his avocation, and keeps us constantly reminded that it is a medical man who holds the pen. Browne loved to drift into an *O Altitudo*, where the materialities of medicine would have been out of place; Goldsmith never seemed to care enough about his profession to make literary capital of it; but Holmes fashioned his medical knowledge into prose fiction, into essays, into poetry—and fashioned it

so deftly that his works constitute the immortal meeting-ground of medicine and English literature. "The universe swam in an ocean of similitudes and analogies" for Dr. Holmes; and if it was the pathologist who wrote "Elsie Venner," it was the biologist who coined the immortal similitude of the "Chambered Nautilus." What, moreover, could surpass the delightful effrontery of that passage in the "Autocrat," where the doctor discovers that the young lady is in love because her breathing becomes *thoracic*, or that other where the aspirations and passions of his youth become confused in mellow reminiscence with his first dabblings in chemistry —"orange-coloured fumes of nitrous acid and visions as bright and transient; reddening litmus-paper and blushing cheeks;—*eheu!*

'Soles occidere et redire possunt'!

but there is no reagent that will redden the faded roses of eighteen hundred and——"

There was a moment in the closing years of Dr. Holmes's life when he was compelled to balance these two things, his medical achievements and his literary creation, over against each other. It was Dr. Osler who forced the issue by writing a letter to Dr. Holmes, asking which he valued more, "the 'Essay on Puerperal Fever,' which had probably saved many more lives than any individual gynæcologist, or the 'Chambered Nautilus' which had given pleasure to so many thousands."

"I think I will not answer the question you put me," wrote Dr. Holmes in reply. "I had a savage pleasure, I confess, in handling those two professors. . . . But in writing the poem, I was filled with a better feeling—the highest state of mental exaltation and the most crystalline clairvoyance, as it seemed to me, that had ever been granted to me. . . . There is more selfish pleasure to be had out of the poem—perhaps a nobler satisfaction from the life-saving labour."

So spoke the innate modesty which always went hand in hand with the good doctor's frank liking for the things that were his. Explicitly the question remained unanswered, but who shall say that the soul of the doctor did not answer it as we should have done, or that the scales fluctuated long when medicine and literature were thus weighed in the balance?