

CYRANO DE BERGERAC'S OPINION OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

By CHARLES GREENE CUMSTON, M. D., Boston, Mass.

It is evident, from his letter entitled *Contre les Médecins*, that Cyrano de Bergerac was ill-disposed towards the medical profession. Such feeling was not new in his day, because the predecessors of the immortal Molière, during the period from 1650, *Le Médecin Volant*, to 1673, *Le Malade Imaginaire*, were dealing terrible blows at the "learned body" and, with Cyrano, endeavored to destroy the Gothic prejudices, and fought against the ancient blind and obstinate schools which were opposed to the progress of science.

The physicians cast discredit upon themselves by calling each other impostors and charlatans. Scarron, Barclay, La Fontaine, Boileau, La Bruyère continued the struggle against the profession; so did the author of *Valesiana*. "Can it be that one questions what great national and social interest there may be in having placed physicians and medicine in this pillory of satire, after having witnessed the insanity, both grotesque and criminal, of the doctrines and practice then in

vogue? Can it be that one does not detect the inspiration of a sentiment of humanity and the accomplishment of a patriotic duty in this enterprise of public salubrity by ridicule?" In Cyrano's letter *Contre les Médecins* the intent is not only the act of a man who runs down a half-vanquished enemy, but a courageous attack of a libertine who makes himself the auxiliary of common sense. He was condemned and "just as criminals preach to the people from the gallows," he wished to speak to the youth of his day. *Et nunc erudimini!* He fell into the hands of *Dr. Tant Mieux*, and "from being in good health, he dies . . . Admire the effrontery of my executioner; the more I feel the disease increasing which he causes by his medicines, and the more I complain of some new symptom, the more he evinces his joy and dresses my wounds with nothing more than a '*Tant mieux.*' When I tell him that I had fallen into a lethargic syncope which lasted for an hour, he replies that it is a good sign. When he sees me in the clutches of a flux of

blood which tears me asunder: 'Good,' says he, 'that is equal to a bleeding!' When I complain of feeling like an icicle which involves all my limbs, he laughs, assuring me that he well knew that his remedies would extinguish this great fire. Sometimes even when, like Death, I cannot speak, I hear him say to those about me who are in tears on account of my serious condition: "Poor fools that you are, do you not perceive that it is the fever which is near its close?" What a fine art is medicine and how simple to practice! "What honors and riches it brings to those who cultivate it!" If the patient escapes, "the recovery is attributed to potent remedies"; and "if he dies, everyone says that he (the physician) is a clever man and had said it would occur."

Consequently, according to Cyrano we should all become physicians "so as to put under the earth those who have placed us there." A horrible and fatal profession, and to dream that one has met one of it "is capable of producing fever." "Whether it is a tertian or quartan," these clever fencers deliver us to the clergy, who chant over our cadavers. And he ends his satire by chasing away his "graduated Demon." *Vade retro, Satanas*, that is to say, remember that the reform undertaken by Bacon in the sciences, each year gains ground, that Descartes has dethroned Aristotle and that he can say of science: *Nos descendants grossiront ce dépôt qui doit s'augmenter d'âge en âge!* . . . and to those dangerous ignorants will succeed the marvelous savers of the poor human race.

I will now transcribe the letter *in extenso*, as it is little known to medical historians and, as a document, cannot be devoid of interest.

MONSIEUR,

Puisque je suis condamné (mais ce n'est que du Médecin, dont j'appellerai plus aisément que d'un arrêt prévôtal), vous voulez bien que, de même que des criminels qui prêchent le peuple quand ils sont sur l'échelle, moi qui suis entre les mains du Bourreau, je fasse aussi des remontrances à la jeunesse. La Fièvre et la Drogueur me tiennent le poignard sur la gorge avec tant de rigueur, que j'espère d'eux qu'ils ne souffriront pas que mon discours vous puisse ennuyer. Il ne laisse pas, Monsieur le Gradué, de me dire que ce ne sera rien, et proteste cependant à tout le monde que, sans miracle, je n'en puis relever. Leurs présages, toutefois, encore que funestes, ne m'alarment guère; car je connois assez que la souplesse de leur art les oblige de condamner tous leurs malades à la mort, afin que, si quelqu'un en échappe, on attribue la guérison aux puissans remèdes qu'ils ont; et, s'il meurt, chacun s'écrie que c'est un habil homme et qu'il avait bien dit. Mais admirez l'effronterie de mon Bourreau: plus je sens empirer le mal qu'il me cause par ses remèdes, et plus je me plains d'un nouvel accident, plus il témoigne s'en réjouir et ne me pense d'autre chose que d'un *Tant Mieux!* Quand je lui raconte que je suis tombé dans un syncope léthargique qui m'a duré près d'une heure, il répond que c'est bon signe. Quand il me voit entre les ongles d'un flux de sang qui me déchire: "Bon!" dit-il, "cela vaudra une saignée!" Quand je m'attriste de sentir comme un glaçon qui me gagne toutes les extrémités, il rit, en m'assurant qu'il le savoit bien, que ses remèdes éteindraient ce grand feu. Quelquefois même que, semblable à la Mort, je ne puis parler, je l'entends s'écrier aux miens qui pleurent de me voir à l'extrémité: "Pauvres nigauds que vous êtes, ne voyez-vous pas que c'est la fièvre qui tire aux abois?" Voilà comme ce traître me berce; et

cependant, à force de me bien porter, je me meurs. Je n'ignore pas que j'ai grand tort d'avoir réclamé mes ennemis à mon secours. Mais quoi? pouvois-je deviner que ceux dont la science fait profession de guérir l'emploieraient tout entière à me tuer? car, hélas! c'est ici la première fois que je suis tombé dans la fosse; et vous le devez croire, puisque si j'y avais passé quelque autre fois, je ne serois plus en état de m'en plaindre. Pour moi, je conseille aux foibles Lutteurs, afin de se venger de ceux qui les ont renversés, de se faire Médecins, car je les assure qu'ils mettront en terre ceux qui les y avoient mis. En vérité, je pense que de songer seulement, quand on dort, qu'on rencontre un Médecin, c'est capable de donner la fièvre. A voir leurs animaux étiques, affublés d'un long drap mortuaire, soutenir immobilement leur immobile maître, ne semble-t-il pas qu'une bière ou la Parque c'est mise à calfourchon, et ne peut-on pas prendre leur houssine pour le guidon de la Mort, puisqu'elle sert à conduire son Lieutenant? C'est pour cela sans doute que la Police leur a condamné de monter sur des mules et non pas sur des cauales, de peur que la race des gradués venant à croître, il n'y eût à la fin plus de bourreaux que de patients. Oh! quel contentement j'aurois d'anatomiser leurs mules, ces pauvres mules qui n'ont jamais senti d'aiguillon, ni dedans, ni dessus la chair, parce que les éperons et les bottes sont des superfuités que l'esprit délicat de la Faculté ne sauroit digérer! Ces Messieurs se gouvernent avec tant de scrupule, qu'ils font même observer à ces pauvres bêtes (parce qu'elles sont leurs domestiques) des jeûnes plus rigoureux que ceux des Ninivites, et quantité de très-longes, dont le Rituel ne s'étoit point souvenu: ils leur attachent, par les diètes, la peau tout à cru dessus les os, et ne nous traitent pas mieux, nous qui les payons bien; car ces Docteurs morfondus, ces Médecins de neige, ne nous font manger que de la galée. Enfin, tous leurs discours sont si froids, que je ne trouve qu'une différence entre eux et les peuples du Nord, c'est que les Norwégiens ont toujours les mules. Ils sont tellement ennemis de la chaleur, qu'ils n'ont pas sitôt connu dans un malade quelque chose de tiède, que, comme si ce corps étoit un Mont-Gibel,* les voila tous occupés à saigner, à clistériser, à noyer ce pauvre estomac dans le séné, la casse, la tisane, et à débilitier la vie pour débilitier, disent-ils, ce feu qui prend nourriture, tant qu'il rencontre de la matière; de sorte que, si la main tout expresse de Dieu les fait rejamber vers le monde, ils l'attribuent aussitôt à la vertu de réfrigératifs dont ils ont assoupi cet incendie. Ils nous dérobent la chaleur et l'énergie de l'être qui est au sang: ainsi, pour avoir été trop saignés, nos Ames, en s'envolant, servent de volant aux palettes de leurs chirurgiens. Eh bien, Monsieur, que vous en semble? Après cela, n'avons-nous pas grand tort de nous plaindre de ce qu'ils demandent dix pistoles pour une maladie de huit jours? N'est-ce pas une cure à bon marché où il n'y a point de charge d'âmes? Mais confrontez un peu, je vous prie, la ressemblance qu'il y a entre le procédé des Drogueurs et le procédé d'un Criminel. Le Médecin, ayant considéré les urines, interroge le patient sur la selle, le condamne; le Chirurgien le bande et l'Apothicaire décharge son coup par derrière. Les affigés même, qui pensent avoir besoin de leur chicane, n'en font pas grande estime. A peine sont-ils entrés dans la chambre, qu'on tire la langue au Médecin, on tourne le cul à l'Apothicaire et l'on tend le poing au Barbier. Il est vrai qu'ils s'en vengent de bonne sorte: il en coûte toujours au Ralleur le cimetière. J'ai remarqué que tout ce qu'il y a de funeste aux Enfers est compris au nombre de trois: on y voit trois fleuves, trois chiens, trois juges, trois Parques, trois Gerions, trois Hécates, trois Gorgones, trois Furies. Les fléaux dont Dieu se sert à punir les hommes sont divisés aussi par trois: la peste, la guerre et la faim; le monde, la chair et le diable; la foudre, le tonnerre et l'éclair; la saignée, la médecine et le lavement. Enfin, trois sortes de gens sont envoyés au monde tout exprès pour martyriser

* Popular name for Etna.

l'homme pendant la vie: l'Avocat tourmente la bourse, le Médecin le corps, et le Théologien l'âme. Encore ils s'en vantent, nos Ecuyers à mules! car, comme un jour le mien entroît dans ma chambre, sans autre explication, je ne lui fis que dire: *Combien?* L'impudent meurtrier, qui comprit aussitôt que je lui demandois le nombre de ses homicides, empoignant sa grosse barbe, me répondit: "*Autant!* Je n'en fais point, continua-t-il, la petite bouche, et, pour vous montrer que nous apprenons aussi bien que nous nous exerçons, de même qu'eux, toute nôtre vie, sur la tierce et sur la quarte." La reflexion que je fis sur l'innocence effrontée de ce personnage fut que si les autres disoient moins, ils en font bien autant; que celui-là se contentoit de tuer, et que ses comarades joignoient au meurtre la trahison; que, qui voudroit écrire les voyages d'un Médecin, on ne pourroit pas les compter par les épitaphes de sa Paroisse, et qu'enfin, si la fièvre nous attaque, le Médecin nous tue et le Prêtre en chante. Mais ce seroit peu à Madame la Faculté d'envoyer nos corps au sépulcre, si elle n'attentoit sur notre âme. Le Chirurgien enrageroit, plutôt qu'avec sa charpie tous les blessés qui font naufrage entre ses mains ne fussent trouvés morts couchés avec leurs tentes.* Concluons donc, Monsieur, que tantôt ils envoient et la Mort et sa faux ensevelles dans un grain de mandragore, tantôt liquifiée dans le canon d'une seringue, tantôt sur la pointe d'une lancette; que, tantôt, avec un juillet, ils nous font mourir en octobre, et qu'enfin ils sont accoutumés d'envelopper leurs venins dans de si beaux termes, que dernièrement je pensois que le mien m'eût obtenu du Roi une Abbaye commendataire, quand il m'assura qu'il m'alloit donner un Bénéfice de ventre. Oh! qu'alors j'eusse été réjoui si j'eusse pu trouver à le battre par équivoque, comme fit une Villageoise à qui un de ces Bateleurs demandant si elle avoit du pouls, elle lui répondit avec force soufflets et force égratignures, qu'il étoit un sot, et qu'en toute sa vie elle n'avoit jamais eu ni poux ni puces! Mais leurs crimes sont trop grands pour ne les punir qu'avec des équivoques; citons-les en justice de la part des Trépassés. Entre tous les humains, ils ne trouveront pas un Avocat; il n'y aura Juge qui n'en convainque quelqu'un d'avoir tué son père; et, parmi toutes les pratiques qu'ils ont couchées au cimetière, il n'y aura pas une tête qui ne leur grince les dents. Que les pussent-elles dévorer! Il ne faudriat pas craindre que les larmes qu'on jetteroit de leur perte fissent grossir les rivières: on ne pleure, aux trépas de ces gens-là, que de ce qu'ils ont trop vécu. Ils sont tellement aimés, qu'on trouve bon tout ce qui vient d'eux, même jusqu'à leur mort; comme s'ils étoient d'autres Messies, ils meurent aussi bien que Dieu pour le salut des hommes. Mais, bons Dieux! n'est-ce pas encore là mon mauvais Ange qui s'approche? Oh! c'est lui-même! je le connois à sa soutane. *Vade retro, Satanas!* Champagne, apportez-moi le bénitier. Démon gradué, je te renonce! Oh! l'effronté Satan! Ne me viens-tu pas encore donner quelque aposume? Misericorde! C'est un Diable huguenot, il ne se soucie point de l'eau bénite! Encore, si j'avois des poigns assez roides pour former un casse-museau; mais, hélas! ce qu'il m'a fait avaler c'est si bien tourné en ma substance, qu'à force d'user de consommés, je suis tout consommé moi-même. Venez donc vite à mon secours, ou vous allez perdre,

Monsieur,

Votre plus fidèle Serviteur

D. C. D. B.

TRANSLATION.

[SIR,

Since I am condemned (but only so by the physician, from whom I can appeal more easily than from a prevotal judgment) you wish me, being in the hands of my executioner, to address

* A pun: *tente*, which is pronounced *tante*, is the name given to lint (charpie) used by surgeons in dressing wounds. It was inserted into the wound.

the youth as criminals do the people when on the scaffold. Fever and the Druggier hold a dagger over my throat with such rigor, that I hope they will not permit my discourse to weary you. Monsieur the Graduate does not cease to tell me that it is nothing and never the less, protests to everyone, that unless some miracle occurs, I may never get up. However, their foreboding, although sombre, hardly alarms me, for I know well that the cunning of their art forces them to condemn all their patients to death, so that should some escape, the cure will be attributed to the powerful remedies employed, and, if one dies, everyone says what a clever man he (the physician) was and how truly he had spoken. But please admire the impudence of my executioner; the more my affection increases by the use of his remedies, and the more I complain of some new symptom, the more he manifests his pleasure and only dresses my wounds with a "*So much the better!*" When I tell him that that I have had a lethargic syncope which lasted nearly an hour, he replies that it is a good sign. When he sees me in the clutches of a flux of blood which tears me to pieces: "Good, says he, that is equal to a bleeding." When I sadly tell him that I feel like an icicle which involves my limbs, he laughs, assuring me that he well knew it, that his remedies will extinguish this great fire. Sometimes even, when like Death, I cannot speak, I hear him tell those about me who weep for my serious condition: "Poor fools that you are, do you not see that it is the end of the fever?" Thus does this traitor treat me; and, never the less, in spite of being well, I kill myself. I am fully aware that I am wrong in having called my enemies to my aid. But now! could I have suspected that those who's science professes to cure, would employ it for killing me? because, alas! this is the first time that I have fallen into the ditch, and so you must think, because had I been there before, I should now be in no condition to complain. I advise all feeble strugglers, in order to avenge themselves upon those who have overturned them, to become physicians, because I can assure them that they can put under ground those that have put them there. In truth, I think that to even dream that one has met a physician, is quite enough to give one a fever. To see their lank animals, covered with a long mortuary cloths, motionlessly supporting their motionless master, would it not seem that a coffin or the Parca had straddled them, and not to mistake their switch for the guide to Death, since it serves to conduct its Lieutenant? It is for this reason, undoubtedly, that the Police have ordered them to ride on mules and not on horses, for fear that the race of graduates by increasing, there would at length be more executioners than patients. Oh! how happy would I be to dissect their mules, these poor mules who have never felt the spur, neither within nor over their flesh, because spurs and boots are superfluities that the delicate mind of the Faculty could never digest! These Gentlemen govern themselves with so great a scruple, that they even oblige these poor beasts (because they are their servants) to resort to fasts more rigorous than those of the Ninivites, which the Ritual had quite forgotten; by diet, they attach their skin to their bones, and do not treat us, who pay them well, any better; because these Doctors who strike a chill into one, these Physicians of snow, only allow us to eat frost. Then again, their discourse is so cold, that I find only one difference between them and the Northern people, and that is that the Norwegians always have chill-blains on the heels while they always have their heels on the mules. They are such enemies of heat, that just as soon as they have discovered something tepid in a patient, that, as if this body was an Etna, there they are bleeding, giving enemata, drowning this poor stomach in senna, cassia, diet drinks, and debilitating life in order to debilitate, say they, this fire which takes nourishment wherever there is matter (that is, food for it); so that, if the hand of God expressly makes them return to earth they at once attribute it to the virtue of their refrigerating drugs by which they have extinguished the conflagration. From us they remove the heat and

energy of the being which is in the blood and thus, for having been bled too much, our souls flit off, serving as shuttle-cocks to the pallets of their surgeons. Well, Sir, what do you think? After this, are we not very wrong to complain when they ask ten pistols for a disease which lasts eight days? Is not this a cheap cure where there is no charge of souls? But compare a little, I beg of you, the resemblance there is between the procedures of the Druggers and those of a Criminal. The Physician, having considered the urine, questions the patient as to his stools and condemns him; the Surgeon bandages him and the Apothecary discharges his shot in the back sides. Even the afflicted, who think they have need of their cavilling, hold them in small estimation. Hardly have they entered the room, than one sticks his tongue out at the Physician, the back sides are turned to the Apothecary and the flat is offered to the Barber. It is true that they thoroughly avenge themselves; the cemetery is the price paid by the Jester. I have noted that all that is fatal in Hell is comprised in the number three; there are three rivers, three dogs, three judges, three Fates, three Gerions, three Hecates, three Gorgons, three Furies. The plagues which God employs to punish man are also divided by threes: The plague, war and hunger; the earth, the flesh and the devil; the thunderbolt, thunder and lightning; bleeding, purgatives and enemata. Lastly, three kinds of people are put upon earth expressly for martyring man during his life: The lawyer torments the pocket-book, the Physician the body and the Theologian the soul. And they brag about it, our mule-mounted Squires! because, one day when mine entered the room, without other explanation, I only said: "*How many!*" The impudent murderer, who understood at once that I asked him the number of his homicides, stroking his big beard, replied: "*So much!* I commit none," continued he, playing the difficult, "and to show you that we learn quite as well as Fencers, the art of killing, we like them, exercise our entire life on tertian and quartan fever." The reflexion that I made on the impudent innocence of this person was that if others said less they did quite as much; that this one contented himself with killing and that his comrades joined treason with murder; that he who would write the travels of a Physician could not count them by the number of epitaphs in his Parish, and that, lastly, if fever attacks us the Physician kills us and the Priest sings of it. But it would be little for Madame la Faculté to send our bodies to burial if she did not involve our souls. The Surgeon would be angry, rather than with his lint, all the wounded who are wrecked by his hands were not found dead and lying with their tents. Let us conclude, Sir, that, at times they send both Death and his scythe buried in a grain of mandrake, at others liquified in the barrel of a syringe, and still again at the point of the lancet; that sometimes with a July, they make us die in October, and that they are accustomed to surround their poisons in such fine terms that, lately, I thought that my physician would have obtained for me a commendatory Abbey from the King, when he assured me that he was about to give me a privilege of the belly. Oh! then would I have rejoiced could I have but found the means to combat him by equivocation, as did the peasant woman to whom one of these jugglers asked if she had a pulse, when she replied by numerous blows and scratches that he was a fool and that in all her life she had never had either lice or flees! * But their crimes are too great to be punished only by equivocation; let us bring them to justice on behalf of the Dead. Among all the living they will not find a single Lawyer; there is not a Judge who will not convict some one of them of having killed his father; and among all the clients that they have placed in the grave yard, there is not a single skull which does not grind his teeth. Could they but devour them! It is not to be feared that the tears shed for them at

their death would make large rivers: one only cries at their death because they lived too long. They are so beloved, that everything done by them, even their death, is good; as if they were other Messiahs, they die just as God did, for the salvation of men. But, great Gods! Is not my bad Angel approaching again? Oh! 't's he himself! I know him by his cassock. *Vade retro, Satanas!* Champagne, bring me the holy-water basin. Graduate Demon, I renounce thee! Oh! impudent Satan! Comest thee again to give me another medicinal decoction? *Misericorde!* It is a hugenot Devil who cares nothing for holy water! Again, if I only had fists sufficiently strong for a break-snout; but, alas! what he made me swallow has so well turned within my substance, that from using consommés I am myself completely consumed. Come then, quickly to my rescue or you will lose

Sir,

Your most faithful Servant

D. C. D. B.]

Comment is quite unnecessary. Cyrano has set forth in the above lines the consensus of public opinion regarding the faculty of medicine of Paris. As an illustration of the narrow-mindedness of its members, it is enough to say that Harvey's discovery of the circulation was not admitted by that body until some twenty years later. The ancient authors were alone considered, and not until the caustic satire of Molière had wrought its good work, did the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen disappear and the great truths fast coming to light were accepted.

* By comparing the French, one will see the play on the pronunciation of *pouls* and *poux*.