

Doctors

By G. K. Chesterton

DOCTORS are a very valuable and reputable class which has very properly and rightly been pelted, kicked, thrashed, jumped on, jeered at and generally made to look an utter fool ever since the dawn of human intelligence. I repeat in all seriousness "very rightly and properly". For if doctors, had not been kicked, thrashed, jumped on and jeered at at every opportunity, by this time they would not be reputable, but disreputable; and not valuable, but very dangerous. This is a principle in human history that seems to me strangely neglected. Any one who is given, for whatever reason, an uncommon privilege and authority ought to have a hell of a time: And I say with a deep and abiding thankfulness and a generous admiration of the energy of the human brethren, that he generally does. All healthy nations

exist in a state of partial civil war. The greatest of American writers, who was also the greatest American democrat, has expressed, in one of his famous phrases, this sacred suspicion. "Ready to rise," wrote Walt Whitman, "against the never-ending audacity of elected persons." That is a very deep and real thrust against representative government; perhaps the only thrust that has been made against its real difficulties in dealing with human nature. But the principle applies as well to any other kind of government: spirited subjects or citizens will stand anything in a king except comfort. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown; and a jolly good job, too. The school-boy cannot have his cake and eat it: why should the prince have his crown and forget it? I have always thought aristocracy a sort of flowering weed, weakening the order and plan

of any human garden. But I can understand the right kind of monarchy; and I can understand the right kind of republic. The right kind of republic is one where the guillotine is going pretty briskly; especially for the more successful and prosperous republicans. The right kind of monarchy is one where everybody goes about with the permanent conviction that the king can do no right.

You may suggest that all this is irrelevant to the subject of doctors. You may be right. It is not, however, so irrelevant as it seems to those whose reading has broken their shins in an obstacle race of irrelevant paragraphs, who have never known a clear scent, or been in at the death of an idea. It is true of doctors, as it is of kings, vergers, game-keepers and all persons entrusted with temporary but needful authority, that they must be laughed at. If you do not laugh at them they will die—or they live, which is worse. There must be a reaction of ridicule against anything which pretends, even for a moment, to be more than a man. All wise doctors have known this, from Sir Thomas Browne to Oliver Wendell Holmes: that is why they, and all wise doctors, talked to us about their own affairs or families, so as to consolidate a platform of equality and human nature, on which their domination shall appear less abrupt. Sometimes, I think, they invent old patients by the cemeteryful, solely in order that the thought of them may put the new patient entirely at his ease. As I have said, the judicious medical practitioner is well aware of his powerful and rather unpopular privileges: and they are powerful and unpopular. The doctor is the only kind of tyrant who almost always has his victim at a disadvantage. He does

not come and torture his victim: but his victim has generally been tortured before he comes. With all other sorts of superiority, even the most brutal, the superiority of guns or the less Christian superiority of guineas, there is a considerable probability of the two parties fighting each other, man to man, if only by accident. But for the man without health there can be nothing so healthy as duelling or murder. The sick man cannot jump from his bed, shoot his medical adviser dead in the style of Booth, and jump out of his bedroom window shouting "*Sic Semper Tyrannis!*" The sick man cannot say to the four demure nurses assembled round his bed, in the style

of Henry of Anjou, "Is there none among these cowards who will rid me of this turbulent doctor?" Some prince of the eighteenth century (German, I should think, by the cast of mind) said, in answer to a warning against artillery: "Did you ever hear of a cannon-ball that killed an emperor?" I do not know the rest of the story. I should think it ended with his head being knocked off by a cannon-ball; and his followers having a difficulty in discovering which was which. But the ordinary patient is at the opposite extreme from that position; so far from thinking that he could not be killed by a cannon-ball, he knows he is in the position in which

any man can be killed with a pill. The domination of the doctor, therefore, is a real though an accidental thing. That is why all the good doctors realize it. That is why all the bad doctors must be made to realize it.

That is also why I rejoice that my own low trade, the trade of letters, has, from the very beginning of time, made itself as pestilently and provocatively offensive to the medical profession as it could. In hundreds upon hundreds of satires, the literary satirist absolutely refused to distinguish between the doctor and the quack. Chaucer, who was as charitable as Santa Claus, could not help making
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his doctor the least human of his characters; and with the Revival of Learning and the rise of the whole modern world, the doctors' position in literature grew worse and worse. It is curious that the coldest, most detached, most modern intellects made game of medicine most: Molière, Butler, Swift, all specially satirized physical science. It is still more curious that they all speak of it as an ancient superstition; as Chaucer says, his doctor could

Speak of physic and of surgery,
For he was grounded in astronomy.

But all this perennial effort was justified. It was justified in order to keep one powerful and admirable profession in its place. By the very nature of his business the doctor was prone to become the hypnotist and the humbug. His continual control of the temporarily strong over the temporarily weak was really an institution which required resistance. There lay in it possibilities of spiritual triumph, which are far more horrible to a healthy mind than mere seduction or

abortion. And all the great scribes and satirists from the beginning who have made a jest of doctors have not been trying to put them in the pillory as impostors; but rather to save them from being burned at the stake as wizards.