

THE DOCTORS OF FICTION<sup>1</sup>

C. JEFF MILLER, M.D., F.A.C.S., NEW ORLEANS

IT would be a work of supererogation, Gentlemen of the College of Surgeons, for me to repeat at this Convocation the things which have been so ably said at other Convocations by my predecessors in this high office. It is quite unnecessary for me to recount to you the ideals and achievements of this organization, for you know them as well as I. It is equally unnecessary for me to urge the newly admitted Fellows of the College to bear those ideals always in mind throughout their professional lives; the fact of their application for Fellowship is sufficient evidence of their desire and endeavor to be guided by them. And so I shall pass over these themes, and in the time at my disposal tonight I shall ask you to consider with me a subject which is far from scientific, yet which I think cannot fail to be of interest to physicians, and to the friends of physicians whom we gladly welcome to this assembly, the subject of the doctor as he is conceived by the novelist.

Five or six years ago a writer of no mean ability, the son of a physician, I believe, in the course of a series of criticisms directed at various aspects of American civilization, paid his respects to the medical profession in a book called *Arrowsmith*. It is, as you know, the story of a vulgar, cynical, disappointed, altogether unworthy young doctor who finally, after various unsuccessful attempts at various branches of medicine, retires to the New England woods, where, so we are led to believe, he is to save his soul by devotion to pure science. Just why he should acquire merit by that particular performance is not quite clear. Those of you who have read the book will probably agree with me that it is very doubtful whether a person of his essential defects of character is likely to win salvation anywhere. Certainly there is nothing in the New England woods, or in pure science either, which can of itself cleanse and purify a person of fundamental unworthiness.

Now this protagonist, who is anything but a hero himself, is surrounded by a group of physicians of his own kind. In the dozens of doctors who crowd the pages of the book there is scarcely one who is not a hypocrite, a scoundrel, a vulgarian, an ignoramus, or worse. There is scarcely one who does not debase his profession and himself. All the grossness of medical life, all the littleness and meanness of college and hospital

and profession—and no one denies that they do exist—are depicted with a harsh vindictiveness that overreaches itself and is as unconvincing as it is in the similar studies of Bernard Shaw, Maarten Maartens, and Robert Herrick. This group of authors, you will recall, labors under the conviction that to earn one's bread by the healing of the sick is to sell one's soul for hire; it believes that only by a return to nature and by state control of medicine can the purging of the profession be achieved.

As a matter of fact, *Arrowsmith* and other books like it are no more a picture of medical life than *What Price Glory* is a picture of the War. There are unworthy men in the ranks of medicine, just as there are in the ranks of the Army, but surely they are not all gathered together into one spot. There are also worthy men. Dramatic heightening is a legitimate literary device, but when one undertakes to present a cross section of life, an obligation rests upon one to be honorable about it, and it seems reasonable to assume that amid so many, some few must be at least gentlemen. Yet no one, reading *Arrowsmith* and its like, would think that honor and decency, courtesy and kindness, self-sacrifice and courage, existed among physicians, as they do in full measure.

It is a curious thing that so few novels in which doctors appear present them as they really are, for surely no profession offers the novelist more material in the way of tragedy or comedy, or in the lights and shadows of life. In many novels physicians are little more than lay figures. They are labelled "M.D.," as Weir Mitchell points out, and they are frequently very pleasant people, but they have none of the characteristics of their profession, and they might equally well be lawyers or manufacturers or business men. Even the ambulance surgeons, who arrive with verve and dash and at exactly the right moment, are a colorless crew, and as for the coroners and their assistants—whose name is legion in this day of countless detective stories—most of them are egregious asses.

I have a distinct aversion to a certain group of physicians of fiction, perhaps because I have such an antipathy to their prototypes whom I number among my acquaintances. Their profession is written all over them, and they are persons of tremendous responsibilities. In fact, they never

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do anything simple. They perform operations of the utmost gravity, preferably on their lifelong enemies, in which they acquire septicæmia or something similar, and generally perish of it, though the said enemy always recovers. They remove portions of the human anatomy—frequently those which are anatomically impossible of removal—just before it is too late. They staunch hæmorrhages which would have ended fatally in a split second more. They assume charge in epidemics of cholera and yellow fever, and they meet grave emergencies in countless numbers and always with unrivalled skill and wisdom. But they never by any chance take care of trivial ailments, for the characters of novels would never by any chance so far forget themselves as to have trivial ailments.

The obstetricians of this group annoy me most profoundly. As a former practitioner of that specialty I know, romancers to the contrary, that the occasions are extremely few on which one emerges from the parturient chamber, pale with anxiety and covered with blood, to gasp in trembling tones to the anguished husband, who is equally pale but minus the blood, that it is a question of the mother's life or the child's. I likewise know that when such occasions are met with in real life, far from being romantic, they are merely unmistakable evidence that somebody has been very incompetent indeed.

Finally, there is the group of physicians who are simply too good to be true. These paragons are as unlike human beings in their virtues as Arrowsmith and his associates are in their vices. They are more than sweet, they are saccharine, and one turns from them surfeited with goodness and secretly longing for a little wholesome badness.

I digress to remark that one could scarcely expect realistic physicians to walk the wards of the hospitals of the average novelist's imagination. If such institutions really existed, with their informal management and total lack of discipline, especially among the nursing staff, the death rate in them would be beyond all bounds. It has always been a source of wonder to me that a woman, herself a nurse, could perpetrate a story with as many glaring inaccuracies as Mrs. Rinehart has achieved in *K*, though I grant you that one must be stony-hearted indeed to pick flaws in her spotless hero and his impossible predicament.

The first physician who crosses the pages of English literature appears not in a novel, but in one of the great poems of the world. I have in mind that Doctor of Physick who made his way

with the other Canterbury Pilgrims across England from the Tabard Inn that sweet April morning nearly six hundred years ago. He was a proper man, almost a prelate in the eyes of mine Host Bailly. Indeed, that gentleman was so overcome by the tragic story he told that he must demand at once a merry tale from the Pardoner, lest his sadness overcome him and he need the physician's drugs to set him up in health again. The Physician's personal appearance must have been exquisite, for he was clad in fine silken garments of red and blue. And his skill must have been superhuman, for he knew the causes of all illnesses and could heal them all by natural magic and the Bible, as well as by the aid of astronomy, in which he was so well versed that he could tell his patient's prospects from the stars. Withal, he and the Apothecary understood each other from the beginning, and one wonders, though perhaps the thought is unworthy, how much this friendship had to do with the gold which the Physician had won in the plague years and upon whose safekeeping he set so much store.

Four centuries later Smollett, one of the first English novelists and himself a physician of sorts, put many physicians into his books, but they are a sorry group, and one almost wishes that he had not described them so vividly as they buy and sell their patients, as they ply for trade like the scullers at Hungerford Stairs, and as they debase their profession to their own unworthy ends. Ignorant, coarse, and cruel, they may be lifelike, indeed they are undoubtedly representative of the doctors of the day, but as Mr. Mantilini would say, they are "démition unpleasant."

A more agreeable eighteenth century physician is the famous Dr. Slop, "the scientific operator," who manages to get Tristram Shandy into the world, albeit with a broken nose, after one hundred pages of travail. Mrs. Shandy, you will remember, was most anxious to be delivered of her child by a midwife, particularly as the said lady was in need of "a friendly lift;" having been left a widow at forty-seven, with three or four small children, she elected midwifery as her career, on the principle, still in vogue, of personal necessity rather than personal fitness. But Dr. Slop, in spite of her pathetic situation, gets the case, and he appears on the scene with his squat figure and sesquipedalian belly, but minus his obstetric equipment, which, unlike many zealous accoucheurs of this modern age, he has left at home. While the instruments of salvation and deliverance are being fetched, he enters into

conversation with Mrs. Shandy, pointing out to her that cesarean section is a sure guarantee that one's child will be a genius. Mrs. Shandy, wiser than many of her modern sisters, indicates that she will chance having a less bright child, and Dr. Slop the diplomat explains that he was merely admiring what he knew it was to no purpose to propose. Finally the instruments are brought, so tightly tied into the bag by the zealous Obadiah that the lady almost dies before they can be extricated, and the delivery is effected with excitement if not with skill. The "vile instruments" crush the bridge of the infant's nose, a false one is made and fitted, and amid the "splenetic cordiality" of Dr. Slop and Susannah, Tristram is christened, though unfortunately with the wrong name. Mr. Shandy, of course, was the best obstetrician of them all—you remember his sage advice to the scientific operator, "Stay thy obstetric hand, return it safe to thy bosom to keep it warm."

The physicians of a century ago seem an eternity removed from our day, perhaps because the ailments they treated were so astonishingly unlike those we encounter now. What migratory inflammations there were then, and how disconcerting it must have been to check them in the chest only to have them break out in the brain. How dangerous night air was, and how quickly it could bring about a fatal issue, especially after surgery. How easily emotion caused tuberculosis or brain fever, and with what remarkable speed it precipitated labor. What a nuisance the relatives must have been, with their hysterics and their swoons. What an equal nuisance the nurses must have been, for their sensibilities were so strong that treatments were frequently halted while they were assisted to totter from the room, overcome by their feelings. What dreadfully protracted agonies the death beds were, and in what painstaking detail the patients were told that the end was to be expected and just how it was going to occur. Small wonder that even the dynamic Dr. Sampson, the famous advocate of the chronothermal theory of disease, which, as everyone knows, is based on unity, periodicity, and rhythm, is quite submerged under the weight of the pathology he must relieve.

There are many physicians in Dickens, but the portrait of none of them equals the matchless characterization of Sairey Gamp, most terrible and most delightful of nurses. Harold Skimpole was educated for medicine, among other things, but since he was a mere child in point of weights and measures—as well as in point of anything else that involved responsibility—he had never

been able to prescribe with the requisite accuracy of detail, not to mention the fact that he usually couldn't come when summoned. Over his less pleasant traits it would be charitable to draw a veil. Richard Carstone took up medicine, I fear as too many are still taking it up, because it would do as well as anything else, but for my own part I am grateful that he did. Otherwise we might not meet Mr. Bayham Badger, whose surgical abilities fade into utter insignificance beside the delightful fact that he was the third husband of Mrs. Bayham Badger, and inordinately proud of having been preceded in her affections by those two distinguished gentlemen, Captain Swosser of the Royal Navy and Professor Dingo of European reputation. Dr. Parker Peps, who officiates at the closing scenes of poor Mrs. Dombey's life, in company with the insignificant Mr. Pilkins, is so accustomed to association with the nobility and so used to assisting at the increase of great families that invariably, wherever he is, he takes a leaf out of Mr. Weg's book and "drops into" titles. Another obstetrician of merit is the family physician of the Kenwigs, Mr. Lumbey, who has brought them all into the world from Morleena on down, and whose clientele is so prolific that he must even forego shaving.

Mr. Chillip, meekest of his sex, who moved as silently as the ghost in Hamlet and who came into a room sidewise to take up less space, we remember best sitting on the dark, draughty stairs whither he had fled to escape the piercing glare and the terrifying words of that martinet, Miss Betsy Trotwood. There is that unspeakable "pair o' sawbones," to quote Mr. Samuel Weller, Bob Sawyer and Benjamin Allen, whose sporting tendencies stick out all over them, who entertain their guests with case reports and who enliven the breakfast table with practical experiences in anatomy, on the principle that there is nothing like a good dissection to give one an appetite. The bottle is their unfailing recourse, they resort to the most ingenious expedients to create the illusion of a large and responsible practice, and Bob Sawyer doses his patients with calomel when other drugs happen to be out of stock and he lacks the wherewithal to replace them.

There are many others: the fashionable physician who misunderstood Mr. Merdle's case so thoroughly that the poor gentleman finally cut his throat; the filthy Dr. Haggage of the Marshalsea; the family physician of the Chuzzlewits, who pretends at the funeral not to know the undertaker, though he gives him many a bit of trade; and the dozen odd who enter with creaking boots and ticking watches and pompous

demeanor, and who are so omniscient that they invariably prescribe for their patients exactly what their lay attendants have just given them, and who naturally win considerable fame by so doing. As to the physicians who are worthy of their calling, I recall only two, Dr. Manette and Allan Woodcourt, and, like most of Dickens' heroes, they are not nearly as interesting as his villains.

One of the most famous physicians of fiction was created by the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, himself a physician, who, as he put it, abandoned practice because practice abandoned him. Dr. Watson is Greek chorus to that superman, Sherlock Holmes, for whom, as somebody says, he serves as a conductor of light, though not himself luminous. For luminous he certainly is not. He makes suggestions only to have them knocked down, he asks questions only to have his ignorance exposed, and when left to investigate anything himself, he omits no possible errors. But his lack of intuition makes Holmes' brilliancy the more scintillating, his reverent worship creates in us the same illusion, and without the blundering admiration of "My dear Watson" the whole edifice would fall. What sort of physician he was we are left to guess, and in his rôle of Boswell his practice must have been sadly full of interruptions, but one cannot help agreeing with Benet's paraphrase of Chesterton's delightful remark about Sairey Gamp, that he would rather die under the ministrations of Dr. Watson, with the chance of hearing a good story while he was doing it, than be saved by a more aseptic practitioner.

Austin Freeman has created a Sherlock Holmes up-to-date in Dr. Thorndike, and a Dr. Watson up-to-date in his satellite, Dr. Jervis. Dr. Thorndike is a super-detective, a physician versed in medical jurisprudence as well as in everything else on earth, for his knowledge is rather more marvellous than Holmes' own. He needs Dr. Jervis for contrast, but it might be added that his rebukes to his special *fidus Achates* are administered in a rather more delicate manner than are Holmes' devastating criticisms, though their effect is precisely the same.

The women physicians of fiction are mercifully few, for they are most of them thoroughly unconvincing ladies. Dr. Zay, Dr. Breen, Dr. Anna Prince, and Dr. Lurida Vincent were all depicted in the days when women were first battering at the doors of medicine, and they must have furnished excellent arguments against the admission to the ranks of any others of their sex, for more unprepossessing creatures it would not be possible

to imagine. In fact, I know of only one woman doctor whom I should be willing to have around me if I should be hapless enough to need such services. She is Dr. Jean Gordon, the young Scotch assistant of Dr. Luke Serocold, and her womanly competence is sharply etched against the background of her impossible predecessors.

There is a group of young physicians drawn by physicians for whom literature had a stronger lure than medicine, which includes Stark Munro, Philip Carey, Kit Sorrell, Christopher Hazzard, and Edwin Ingleby. Most of them are excellently presented, but for the classic illustration of their kind we must go back many years, to Philip Lydgate of *Middlemarch*. Certainly he is typical of all the bright young men who begin their practice with ideals, and who find, as Paget says, that practice is the breaking of dreams. He began with dreams and visions, he ended without a single illusion, and a failure in his own eyes, though a success in the eyes of the world, because he had not done what he once meant to do. Sir William Osler was so impressed by the part his silly wife played in his career that he often reverts to it, warning his students to pick their mates carefully, and not too soon, to keep their affections on ice, and never, if they would be wise, to sport with Amaryllis in the shade.

Most of the realistic physicians of fiction have been painted by laymen and not by physicians. One of them is Anthony Trollope's Dr. Thorne, apothecary as well as physician, as all doctors, he says, would be if they consulted their own dignity less and the comfort of their patients more. Noble ladies with imaginary ailments often found him unsympathetic, but no poor woman lying on a bed of sickness ever thought him rough, and he is a great contrast to Dr. Fillgrave, who sat with dignity in his carriage and stepped with dignity up the front steps, but who did not have much ability beyond that, in spite of having persuaded the countryside that no one could die respectably without him. Dr. James Winter is a very delightful physician in *Round the Red Lamp*, who prefers inoculation to vaccination, who would practice bleeding freely except for public opinion, who regards chloroform as a dangerous innovation and the stethoscope as a new-fangled toy—though he is willing to carry one out of deference to his patients, since he is deaf and cannot hear out of it anyway. In spite of his whims he has the healing touch, because, unlike many scientifically trained physicians, he uses his hand and eye. There is Peter Harding, M.D., who in his letters from the Corner of Harley St. paints for us a charming picture of a physician and

who, Sinclair Lewis and his ilk to the contrary, manages to be happy and successful in his work because he loves his profession and is full of warm humanity and common sense.

There is Willy King, as real a personage as old Dr. Lavendar himself and quite as kindly a one. I have not read the chronicles of old Chester in years, but I seem to see him now in his ramshackle gig—was he described as chubby or do I merely imagine that he was? He was handicapped in his ministrations by the fact that he had been known to most of his patients since babyhood, and it is hard to receive castor oil from the hands of somebody to whom you once administered a spanking. And he was handicapped even more by his commonsense Martha, whose favorite occupation was to tell him and everybody else who would listen “flatly and frankly” what she thought of them, though his honest goodness would never let him admit her limitations.

I have a special fondness for Dr. Luke Serocold, G.P., the central character of Helen Ashton's novel, which has recently received the dubious distinction of being chosen as the Book of the Month. It was written by a former medical student, in answer to her husband's challenge that a whole book could not possibly be written about one day in the life of a doctor, and a most excellent answer it is. It runs the gamut of emotion, it ranges from birth to death, and it has at once the tremendous excitement and the everlasting monotony of detail that every day in a doctor's life holds. Dr. Serocold is a physician of the old school, trained in clinical rather than in scientific medicine, schooled to meet the emergencies of a country practice, sensitive to the spiritual as well as to the physical needs of his people. Every house, as he passes it, suggests an old patient or an episode of his practice, and he muses, as he goes on his way through the village streets, on the riddle of life and the secret of medicine, the solution of which is that since one cannot hope to cure people, the best one can do is to try to relieve them.

The most perfect antidote to the school of Arrowsmith is found in men like Dr. Serocold, and even more in men like Dr. William MacLure of the town of Drumtochty. Because his practice extended up and down the Glen, through rivers and over mountains, he had little time for reading and none for travelling, but he did what he could to keep up with the new medicine. He had not the grace of appearance, but the scars on his face and his body were honorable scars, got in the service of his people, and men are given the Victoria Cross for them in another line

of endeavor. His clothing was nondescript, but when those breeks from which the checks were nearly gone were seen at the door, one knew that if human power could save a life, that life would be saved, for the sight of him put fresh courage into sinking hearts. He carried the heaviest weight of all his people, for he strove with death for them and he bore all their sorrows in his own heart, but he was too modest to realize that he had gathered more love than any other man in the Glen. As he had lived, so he died, withdrawn and still, in his ears the stammering prayer of his old friend Drumsheugh, “Almighty God . . . dinna be hard on Weelum MacLure, for he's no been hard wi' onybody in Drumtochty. . . . Be kind tae him as he's been tae us a' for forty year. . . . Mind the fouk he's helpit. . . . the weemen an' bairnies. . . . and give him a welcome hame, for he's sair needin't after a' his wark. Amen.” With the words of the Shepherd's Psalm on his lips, and the dream of his mother's kiss, he fell asleep, and “the peace on his face was of one who rested from his labors.”

You remember the end of the tale, I am sure, the simple burial service in the snowdrifts, with his own people about him to do him the honor and show him the love they had always borne for him, though perhaps they had seldom expressed it in his life. You remember the shepherds in their blacks, the Laird of the Glen uncovered, the cynic Jamie Souttar with tears on his face, the women and children weeping quietly as the little procession went by. You remember the minister's prayer, “That we might have grace to live as this man had done from youth to old age, not for himself but for others, and that we might be followed to our grave by somewhat of ‘that love wherewith we mourn this day thy servant departed.’” And so the Glen laid him to rest, this man who had served it for more than forty years with a devotion that knew no reserve, with a kindliness that never faltered.

I began this rambling paper, Gentlemen of the College, with the story of a callous and cynical physician whose ideal, if such a person can be said to have an ideal, was devotion to pure science. I close it with the story of a simple-hearted, kindly doctor, untrained in the new efficiency, whose ideal was service to his people. I have no moral to point, but it has crossed my mind as I wrote that perhaps it would be well for us to remember, since we are of the new day in medicine, that when they come to pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, it is not upon the Arrowsmiths but upon the William MacLures that men and women would cast their burdens.