

The Confessions of a Physician.

There is a period in the practice of every physician when he is baffled by the mystery of disease. At such a time he feels so helpless in the face of nature's forces that he asks himself: "Am I, after all, fitted for my profession?" No physician is so pride-stricken or blasphemous as to believe that he can always heal the sick. But every contact with cases which he is unable to diagnose or to treat as they should be treated. This is a crisis in the life of a physician. If he is a weak man he will succumb; if he is a strong man he will fight it out. In any event, there is a mighty struggle going on in that man's mind and upon his decision rests his whole future.

I say this mental battle occurs in the life of every physician, in order that the allegation may be applied to the medical profession in the most general manner. If you pin me down closely and say that, while I am correct, there are still notable exceptions to the rule, I will, for the sake of argument, accept the amendment. I think I am generous, though, when I say that there is not more than one exception among every thousand physicians. This fact, which must appear so startling to the laity, is my chief justification for placing upon record a fragmentary story of some things that are supposed to be carefully guarded within college walls, consultation rooms and the sick chamber.

Men who enter the sacred precincts of medicine are supposed to have a vocation for this noblest of all professions. Is it really true? I do not mean by the question to intimate that all the men who select medicine as their life work are ruled by sordid motives. Heaven forbid! Many are attracted by the opportunities for benefitting their fellowmen; others are led by the allurements which are presented to the student of science; others still like the dignity and respectability inseparable from the profession, and finally, most of us regard it as an excellent way of making money. But, as I have said, the very great majority finally reach a point where they wonder if they are really fitted for the profession.

I fervently hope that the time may come when a real vocation for medicine will be the first requisite demanded before a student can begin his studies. It should be a matter for prayerful consideration. I can illustrate what I am trying to explain by saying that it should be something akin to the state of mind demanded by the Catholic hierarchy before they will consent to permit an applicant to enter upon his divinity studies.

I can begin my own story by saying that I never at any time had a "vocation" for medicine. But it was the fond desire of my parents that I should one day attach "M.D." to my name. When my profession was decided upon I interposed no objection. I received my authority to practise in the shape of a very small diploma with a very large seal. I had my photograph taken in a group with my classmates, all of us attired in gowns and wearing mortar-board hats.

After that solemn ceremony was over we were turned loose on an unsuspecting world. I hung out my shingle and had a long and weary wait for patients. They wouldn't come to me, and professional etiquette forbade my looking for them. One of the objections urged against me was my youth. I waited on, satisfied that time would remedy this fault. My money, however, gave out before I had acquired years enough to satisfy the carping critics. I realized that the time had arrived for sound business methods.

My first step was to call on a druggist in my neighborhood, and gently insinuate my desire for a little practice. "But you have some patients?" he asked, in a brisk tone. "Oh, yes; a few," I replied. "But scarcely enough to talk about." "Well," he said, with the tradesman's laugh, "I had no way of discovering that you had any."

"What do you mean?" I asked, perplexed at his tone. "I mean," he responded, frankly, "that none of your prescriptions ever come here."

"Well," I said, weakly, "I can't help that."

"Oh, yes, you can," was the blunt rejoinder; "you can instruct them to come to me."

There is no need to continue the dialogue further. I remained with him for an hour, and before I left I had made an arrangement by which he was to pay me 25 per cent. on

the gross amount received from all prescriptions sent to his store by me. I also agreed to pay him 25 per cent. on all money received from patients sent by him to me. My ears tingled a little at the thought of the sordid arrangements, but only for a little time. His arguments satisfied me. He said they all did it; it was simply a game of "you tickle me and I'll tickle you."

After that I paid \$500 in installments for the privilege of being the official physician of one of the largest hotels in my native city. Whenever a guest was taken sick in the hotel I was sent for as the hotel physician. I can assure you that I made the patients, who were generally well-to-do persons, pay me handsome fees. The installments of my \$500 purchase money for the practice had to be paid. And, anyway, business is business.

A colleague of mine, who boasted the ownership of a horse and carriage, used to drive at breakneck speed through the principal streets of the town in which he resided. The neighbors all said: "What a tremendous practice that young doctor has. He scarcely takes time to eat his meals." It was all a ruse, but it inspired confidence in the people and finally they did flock to him.

So I resolved to "get busy." One morning I took the curtains off my parlor window and determined to be my own laundryman, for that day at least. Just at that awkward time two patients came in, one after the other—the first I had in ten days. My coat was off, my sleeves rolled up and I was deep in my work. What was I to do? Why, turn the incident to advantage, of course. So wiping my hands quickly, I opened the door slightly and said: "Pardon me for a few minutes. I am busy with an operation."

Then I closed the door and resumed my operation, which was certainly important to me. When it was concluded and I had removed all evidence of my crime, I opened the side door, as if dismissing a patient, and said in a loud tone:—

"Now walk very slowly. Don't exert yourself unnecessarily. Good-by."

I walked down the hallway and opened and closed the front door with a bang. Quickly regaining my office, I opened the sliding door and cried out distinctly:—

"Next, please!"

A special opportunity comes in the life of every physician, which, if swiftly seized and securely held, leads to a good practice. My opportunity, all things considered, came sooner than I expected. A street car turning a corner and giving a sudden lurch threw a well-dressed, elderly gentleman into the street. The usual crowd surrounded him and the usual voice cried out:—

"Is there a doctor present?"

But the usual number of physicians did not step forward, and I felt it my duty to push away through the crowd and proclaim my profession. I compelled the gaping spectators to fall back and gave the injured man air. Then I tore off his collar and tie and opened his shirt front. After that I administered a stimulant. The man, who had been in a faint, revived at once.

Thus far I had been successful. A further examination showed that the man had broken his right arm. I directed that he be removed to his home.

"This is my home right here," he said, in a feeble voice, indicating a handsome brownstone house only a few yards away.

He was carefully carried to his room, and then the first crisis in my career confronted me. I was a medical and not a surgical doctor; and while in common with others of my profession, I possessed an elementary knowledge of all the branches of the healing art, I felt some doubt about my ability successfully to set this particular broken arm, which presented unusual difficulties dismaying to my small experience. However, it would never do to yield to such misgivings in the presence of the patient. Assuming my most pleasing manner, I said:

"Perhaps you have a family physician and would like to have him take charge of this case."

This was a command and a query. I obeyed the command and ignored the query. The job was a hard one, but it was not to be compared with the mental struggle that I underwent. Suppose I should bungle the case and lame the man for life. This and a score of similar thoughts flashed through my mind. I realized that confidence—assurance, if you will—was necessary, and I nerved

myself up to it so well that my work was completed without a flaw. I received a handsome fee and more free advertising than any young man of my age in our town. The papers spoke of my skill, and my distinguished patient informed all of his friends that I was a wonder. Little did they dream of the nervous trepidation with which I approached a task which was to bring me so much unearned praise.

One of my most valuable experiences was in a hospital. If I do say it myself, I performed some good work there, and gained information that could not be learned from the text books. The best thing I learned was the importance of decision in emergencies. One night, while I was on duty, a nurse came to me with blanched face and whitened lips to say that she had accidentally given the wrong medicines to two patients. I rushed to their bedsides, and found that the mistake was likely to prove doubly fatal. Both cases required the instant use of the stomach pump.

Two men were dying from poisoning, and there was only one stomach pump in the room.

What was I to do? What could I do? Simply operate on the man nearest to me. The nurse ran for assistance and another stomach pump.

But it was too late. I saved the man I operated on. The other died. On another occasion I received a request to call on an old patient who was afraid she was taking scarlet fever. I responded at once. The patient was one of two elderly sisters whom I had attended for many years. I greeted her in the sitting room, and noted the pulse while in the act of shaking hands with her. By some witty remarks I contrived to make her laugh, which enabled me to see her tongue. Then I said in a playful tone:

"If you will get me a glass, I will treat you to some of my patent soda water."

She did so. I put a tablet in the water, and she drank it.

I want you to know that I take pride in my original methods. I try to educate my patients to like and not to dread the visits of the doctor. In this case all of my work had been done without the direct knowledge of the patient and I felt very good over it. So I bade my patient good-by with extreme cheerfulness. She looked surprised, and then said:

"Of course, you will come up stairs and see my sister?"

"Not to-day," I said. "Give her my respects."

"Why," she said, looking mystified and startled, "how strangely you talk."

"Strangely?" I echoed. "Why?"

"Because I sent for you to prescribe for my sister and you decline to see her."

It flashed over my mind in an instant. I had prescribed for the wrong sister. I was entirely too clever! Fortunately, no harm was done. The medicine given the well woman was simply to head off possible fever and could do no harm. I was too mortified to confess my mistake, and, after giving the right medicine to the right woman, I left the house.

One day a wealthy Chicago man came to me to be cured of heart disease. He had fainted in his office and thought he was surely going to die. A hasty examination convinced me that his heart was all right and that he was troubled with an acute and peculiar form of indigestion. He would not believe that. Should I tell him and be laughed at for my pains?

My conscience, my tact and my judgment were in a turmoil. But the habit of quick decision, which I had acquired in the hospital—and the saving grace that helps a man who tries to be as honest as circumstances will allow—came to my aid. "My dear sir," I said, emphatically, "whatever trouble you have with your heart originates in your stomach. And the trouble in your stomach originates in your mouth. And the trouble in your mouth originates in too much whiskey and tobacco."

That pleasing glow of honor satisfied, which follows every deed of duty done, spread all over me. I felt like curing him for the glory of the profession. But my patient was determined upon diagnosing his own case—and paying high for it.

"Stomach, Hades!" he rejoined, and his face turned white with anger. "Look here: I have been to seven other medical jackasses, who knew about as much as you do. I've got heart disease. If you want to cure me, you can, and I can afford to pay you. But if you are going to load me up with bread bills and charge me one dollar a visit, I'll drop the whole lunatic asylum of physicians and cure myself."

If he attempted to cure himself he would be a dead man within six months.

"This is a remarkable case," I

said, very slowly and very gravely. "In all of my experience with disease I have never come across anything exactly like this."

This was perfectly true. But it alarmed the money king. There was just the suspicion of a tremor in his voice as he asked:

"Do you think there is any hope for me?"

"Yes," I replied drawing out the vowel of that simple word in the most painful and reluctant manner. "Yes; if you will subscribe to my conditions."

"What are they?" he asked anxiously. "That you will place yourself unreservedly in my charge—that you will follow my directions to the letter."

"I'll do that! I'll do that!" he cried out with eagerness that was truly laughable.

But I was not through with him. I sat down at my desk, sighed pensively, and gazed through the open window.

"I do not know," I said, speaking again with that professional slowness and exactness. "I do not know whether I should undertake this case."

"Why not?" he exclaimed, in some alarm.

"Because it will take up so much of my time—and my time, you know, is very valuable."

"So is my life," he interrupted, with a feeble attempt at humor.

"Very valuable," I continued without a change of muscle and as if I had not heard the interruption. "I may have to see you twice a day for several weeks."

"How much do you want?" he asked, excitedly, as if eager that I should not get away from him.

"The true physician," I said, "has no price. I will cure you first; you can pay me afterward."

"How would \$500 do?" he asked.

"Sir!" I said, in a voice that was absolutely meaningless.

It might have meant that the amount was entirely too much, or that it was ridiculously low.

"I will give you \$1,000!" he shouted, with the air of a man at a public auction.

I cured him in a month and received \$1,000 for it.

Did I do right or wrong? I leave you to decide.

One night I was called in to see a little child suffering from malignant diphtheria. It was a bad case. I did not think she would last until morning. From all of the conditions I can say now that I would have been justified in leaving that child to its fate. Did I? Not at all. I was affected by the violent grief of the mother and I remained at the bedside of the tiny sufferer all that night and all the next day. I did not do it for financial reasons. The family was poor. I did not do it for fame, for this is the first time it has been mentioned, and even now it is told anonymously. I liked the child. I acted from motives of pure humanity.

This little incident brought me in contact with an extraordinary young physician. Smallpox was epidemic in the city, and most of the doctors, who could do so with a show of decency, shirked smallpox duty.

Some of them said that they were not feeling well; others said they had families of their own to consider, and a few were honest enough to say that they were afraid of the disease and did not propose to take any risks.

The young physician I speak of, filled with lofty ideas of duty, determined to devote himself entirely to smallpox practice. He took all the precautions that were counselled by science and human reason, but otherwise he was absolutely fearless. He used to vaccinate himself every other week, and as the siege lasted nearly three months, his arms were almost covered with scars and scabs from the virus. He did wonders for humanity. He waited on poor and rich alike. If they had no money he looked for no compensation. Where they had, he expected a fee in proportion to his work. He saved many lives. It is such men, and they are too rare, who ennoble the profession.

It is a profession whose days are made of diplomacy and whose nights are composed of crises. There is always a high duty calling, and there is usually a mere human man trying to respond. Had I possessed in the beginning the vocation for my profession which belonged to my friend, who built a great career upon the foundation of a smallpox epidemic, I should long ere this have been either famous or dead. Such fame comes to a Jenner; such death comes to a Damien, who, if he had not been a priest, would have been a physician. All that I would say is that the physician should possess the intellect of a Jenner and the heart of a Damien.

As for me, I am a doctor, practicing medicine.—The New York Independent.

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common, 23rd August.

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