

**Dr. Chesterfield's letters to his son on medicine as a career / by Sir William B. Dalby.**

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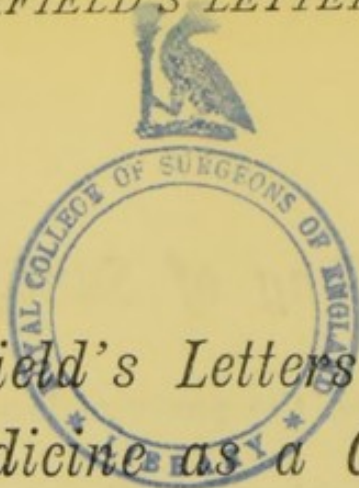
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*Dr. Chesterfield's Letters to his Son  
on Medicine as a Career.*

BY SIR WILLIAM B. DALBY.

LETTER I.

THE PHYSICIAN.

MY DEAR SON,—Now that your student days are coming to an end, you will soon have to make up your mind as to what branch of the medical profession you will follow, and this decision will have so important a bearing upon your future that I propose to devote my next five or six letters to this subject. It will require careful consideration, for when you have at length made your selection and have started on the main line, pray do not forget that you must not leave it, or you will never do any good. Looking back to the early life of those who have been failures, I find that many of them have got on to a side line and been shunted, whilst the crowd of competitors has passed on.

I will now endeavour to lay before you not only the advantages and drawbacks of the various departments, or the direction which your work is to take, but, what is of more direct importance, the qualities of mind and character which are the requisites to success in each.

You will see, as I proceed to unfold and display my little sketches, how easily you may mistake your vocation by starting in some branch for which you are absolutely unsuited. Of your qualifications for each I must leave you to judge for yourself after I have given you a sort of ordnance map for your guidance. I really do not think that it is possible to exaggerate by any description the marvellous diversities which may exist amongst those who go by the name of doctors with the public. How great are the possibilities may be imagined by reflecting for a moment that men like Ovum and Magnet are evolved out of a medical



student, no less than the doctor who dispenses a black draught from beneath the illumination of a red lamp in a bye-street off Tottenham Court Road or in the East-end of London. It would also be difficult to imagine any lives more useful than those which these two distinguished men have led, or more interesting personalities than they present; at the same time but few would be found, I presume, to aspire to the life of the slave of the lamp, however good a creature he might be. Remember, then, what a choice of careers is before you. You cannot expect to become an *Ovum* or a *Magnet*, as they are exceptional men who appear perhaps once in a century; but if your abilities are fairly good you may get into their class, so long as you are content for a few years to 'scorn delights and live laborious days.'

By the way, my dear boy, being so much engaged as I am, and living away from you so much as I am obliged to do, I am not able to estimate very well what your abilities are equal to; but I do know that they are up to the average: so, practically, you can do anything you wish if you care to work enough, and so long as you select a department in your profession for which you are adapted. Speaking broadly, you will have to choose which you are to be—a physician, a surgeon, a specialist, or a general practitioner. Naturally you will be influenced in your choice by either ambition to attain the highest position with its accompanying honours, or by the pecuniary advantages which accrue to each. You may take it for granted without any reservation that the honours are for the most part monopolised by the physicians and surgeons. Whenever this has not been the case, it has been in instances of either 'services rendered' or under very exceptional conditions. As to the pecuniary advantages, it is an amiable fiction to suppose that the most distinguished of your profession are indifferent to them, and this piece of affectation is drummed into your ears at the introductory addresses of the hospitals; but how fictitious is this sentiment will readily appear to you if you happen to be in the company of several of your calling at a time when 'all hearts are opened and all desires known;' I mean after the consumption of an excellent dinner with its accompanying good wine. Then you will find that the most severely dieting (to his patient) physician will do you uncommonly well (to use a phrase of the day), and that at the festive board which bristles with eminent medical talent, the guests eat and drink as if gout and dyspepsia were phantoms of the imagination. I say that on such occasions (and they are, my dear boy, most enjoyable) you



will hear the respective professional incomes of some absent colleague discussed with an absorbing interest that will dispel for ever the amiable delusion you may perhaps up till then have cherished. You will also notice that such discussions only take place in regard to a very select few, and for the best of all reasons, that a very large income only falls to the lot of an exclusively limited number at any given time. You may take it as pretty near the mark when I say that at the same time in London there are not more than four or five general physicians, and perhaps half a dozen surgeons, who make more than five or six thousand a year, and you may also be quite certain that each and all most thoroughly deserve it.

The length of art and the shortness of life was never better illustrated than in the career of a successful physician or surgeon who forms one of the possible dozen I have named. For the first ten years after a man becomes a physician the public never hear of him or see him, and his time is mostly taken up by his appointments at his hospital, where he is daily adding to his knowledge of disease. Then some of those whom as students he has taught, and who have come to trust and believe in him, occasionally call him into consultation; then some papers at the best of the medical societies show his profession of what he is made, and after fifteen years of work he begins to obtain some private practice. By the time he is forty he waits for his chances of a run on him—a run which never takes place until the disappearance of one of the leading few. Of physicians in London it may be said they are like horses in a race: three are placed, the rest nowhere. But a time arrives when one of the three is removed by death or retires at an advanced age, and it becomes necessary to fill his place. Who is the coming man? Who will succeed——? This is an inquiry which each doctor asks his fellow, and some two or three of the rising lights are spoken of. The answer is without doubt decided by the influential general practitioners who have large practices in the West-end of London and the provinces, and it must be confessed that they invariably make a wise selection. Indeed, with the knowledge at their command they could not well go wrong. To fill the position no doubt requires many qualities. It is not enough that the candidate for favour be an able physician; there are many such. He must be a man that in cases of difficulty can be relied upon, not only in serious or what are termed 'obscure cases' (the meaning of which is that the precise nature of the malady is not found out till after death), but a man whose



diplomacy, straightforwardness, wisdom, and knowledge of men will guide him so truly that the best is done for the patient, for the doctor in attendance, for the friends of the patient, for the public, for the medical profession, and I find myself almost adding for the Queen and country. May you, my dear son, be one of the selected if you adopt the *rôle* of the physician! You will then be a tower of strength in times of difficulty and danger. I fancy I hear you saying as you read this, What an appalling array of qualities are required for this position! Now I do not wish you to suppose that these qualities are ever all centred in one man, but some of them are sufficiently pronounced to influence the choice of the electorate. It is quite possible for any one to have noticed at some period during his life two very notable examples of what I am endeavouring to explain to you. Thus at one and the same time, so far as the fashionable portion of the London public and the newspaper-reading community in the country are concerned, there may flourish only two London physicians, and these may form a very marked contrast to each other. Both of them will be quite amongst the best that are known in regard to the knowledge of their profession, but may at first sight appear so different that one is led to wonder how they both can be so serviceable and so distinguished. The one is in no sense remarkable except that he is a sound physician, absolutely straightforward and reliable, and, beyond that he apparently has no little weaknesses, nothing more. But the other is something very much more. You cannot be in his presence without at once seeing that he is a very remarkable person—indeed, the sort of man that would have been distinguished in whatever profession he had figured. What an excellent archbishop he would have made, or indeed a general! He would have made an admirable lord chancellor, but on second thoughts his proper place would have been diplomacy. I remember one of the most brilliant diplomats of the day telling me one day that he had once been very ill and in the lowest spirits, but that when this physician came into the room, walked to his bedside and put his hand on him, he said to himself, ‘Ah! here comes the man that God Almighty has created to make me well.’ This will give you an idea of the personality of this physician. And yet, my dear friend, so complex is the character of man, so paradoxical in some of his mental attitudes as they appear to the observer, that this man raised the art of sententiousness almost to a science, and there were occasions when he left the impression that he was a consummate actor. When you are older and have



some experience of the world, you will not be surprised at unexpected aspects in men of great ability, and you will be sufficiently large-minded to make every excuse for little weaknesses in really clever people. It is the small-minded folk who love to dwell on these weak points in great men, and who forget or minimise the powerful side of their character. I beseech you in forming an estimate of men never to fall into this error, or you will at once become, in the estimation of those whose opinion is worth having, second-rate. What does it matter if a poet who writes exquisite verse is personally rather dirty? There are plenty of clean men, but a real genius is very rare.

Adieu!

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## LETTER II.

### THE PHYSICIAN—(*continued*).

MY DEAR BOY,—In my last letter you will have obtained a broad outline of the necessary qualifications which a leading physician in London must possess. I mean over and above that complete knowledge of his profession which is, of course, so absolutely indispensable that I leave it out of the question. To fill up this outline at all adequately would indeed require so long a letter that I shall not attempt it, lest you might be confused in the narrative, and I should become tedious. Even if I endeavoured to complete the picture, when you compared it with the reality it is quite possible that you would not recognise the likeness, or even that you might be struck with the contrast to the reality; for, as I explained to you, the position may be held by two, each of whom, although excellent in his way, superficially at least presents few points in common.

You will also, perhaps, put this question to yourself, Why in the world has this man been such a success? or you may know a dozen others of brilliant attainments, of even superior accomplishments, but who have been passed over, and why is this? You will reflect, Why do the dozen fail and the two succeed? My dear boy, you will not be the first by a good many who has asked himself this question, and it is a very difficult one to answer. I once heard a physician (who was one of the three) say that the only thing wanted was earnestness, and one of the ablest judges on the Bench has often declared to me that to be a great



success in any profession nothing is wanted with fair abilities beyond the two letters G O.

If there is in a man a something which, though not easy to describe, brings success, there is, you may be sure, no less a something which with others prevents it. To put it briefly, they do not possess the art of satisfying their clients, whether it be the doctor who calls them in or the patient who seeks their aid. It was once said of a late friend of mine, who held an important military appointment, and whose duty it was to receive applicants for favour and those who sought redress for grievances, he could refuse a favour so pleasantly that the applicant was almost as satisfied as if he had granted it. He was an eminently satisfactory official, for he pleased all comers alike. A successful physician must possess the art of satisfying his patients. If he cannot leave them comfortable in their bodies, he must leave them happy in their minds; they must have a clear idea of what is the matter with them; if they do not exactly know what is the nature of their disease, they must think they do, and they must be left under the impression that the very best that is possible is being done for them; they must look forward with anxiety and pleasure to seeing him again; and they must feel comfortable in their relations with their medical attendant. Ah, I hear you say as you read this, 'It is a manner.' Stuff and nonsense! it is as often as not an absence of manner. Every man has a manner of his own; it is part of himself: but this is not an assumed manner put on for the occasion; it is a natural manner which gives confidence; it is the unconscious manner of the man who knows what he is about; it is the manner which conveys the impression (and a true one) that he is taking infinite pains to find out the precise condition of his patient, and the something very definite indeed to do him good. One man will talk impressively, and another will say only a very few words, but they will be very much to the point, and all the while one man is as good as the other and a little better. Each is an artist in his own way. If you cannot acquire this indispensable art, you will fail as a physician, and, my dear boy, you will have plenty of companions and ample leisure to discover the reasons why your fellow failures have broken down in the race. By the way, before I forget it, are you fond of children? If you are not you will never understand their little ways, and be able to manage them, or examine them, or be of the least use to them. They will hate the sight of you, and their mothers will loathe you. (It is no use to pretend to be fond of



them if you are not ; they will find you out in a moment.) So, considering that children are as often ill as grown-up people, you had better at once give up all thoughts of being a doctor in any department, and become an analytical chemist or a physiologist, for if you don't like children you probably don't care for animals. At any rate, for heaven's sake don't be a doctor, for you will be a complete failure.

If you still persist after this advice, you will be like a gardener I remember, who had an antipathy to flowers and a passive toleration for vegetables and fruit. I think he ended by drinking himself to death in despair of getting employment. Here then is one very potential element against success as a physician. Some men are very intolerant of stupid and tiresome people, but the physician must be prepared to listen to a tale of woe (and very often an exceedingly long tale, too) from whatever source proceeding, and however unimportant its details, without betraying a symptom of impatience. He must give the same apparent attention to a long-winded old woman, with little or nothing the matter with her beyond eating too much and taking no exercise, that he would do to a patient who had some terrible disease that might terminate his life at any moment. Then you may say, 'He must be an actor,' and at once I reply, 'Yes,' if it means in the sense that he must give his attention when he is paid for it ; and, observe this, not infrequently his patience is rewarded, for his advice is followed and his patient gets well. It is utterly unjust to call him an actor, and so to imply dishonesty. To my mind he is far more honest than the doctor who won't take the trouble to attend, but who will take his fee without having earned it by his attention. There are some physicians of such a retiring and modest demeanour that they shuffle into a room, and, after seeing their patient, give such a hesitating opinion that nobody can make head or tail of it, and then shuffle out of the house ; yet with all this they may know their work well, have worked like slaves at their hospitals, and perhaps be great authorities on pathology. They are men of science and not men of the world. Now a successful physician must be a man of the world, and unconsciously he must adapt himself to the people he is dealing with. He should in a certain sense understand men as well as he does disease, and you will find that the successful man generally does. The best of us, however, sometimes makes a mistake ; and I once took a friend of mine—a nice, little, modest, unassuming man—to see one of the most sagacious of physicians. After examining



him very carefully, and finding that a rather alarming symptom was dependent on nothing serious, and being, I suppose, in a more than usually oracular mood, he dismissed him with an epigram and some sententious remarks about the vegetarian diet of King Nebuchadnezzar. Now it so happened that my little friend was a remarkably clever man, and on coming away from the house he observed to me that he was disappointed with the doctor. 'He took me for a fool,' he said, 'and I don't think much of a man who makes that mistake.' It was unlucky, for as a rule few people could take the measure of men better than our oracular friend.

Think over this letter and the last one, my dear boy. Then take a stroll through the streets around Cavendish Square, and you will not be surprised to read on the brass plates the names of many physicians whom the public has never heard of and probably never will hear of.

Adieu!

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### LETTER III.

#### THE SURGEON.

MY DEAR SON,—I saw — yesterday, who left you, he tells me, last week, and I gather from what he says that the effect of my last two letters to you on the province of the physician has been to decide you not to adopt that branch of your profession. You say the reason which has influenced you in coming to this determination is that you do not consider yourself provided with the several qualities which are necessary to insure your success. I dare say you are right, and I am quite sure I was right not to minimise them in any way, but to lay the whole case clearly before you. What do you say to general surgery? or, rather, What will you think when you have heard what I have to say about it?

If you have any idea of this, the sooner you pass the examination for the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons the better, for no hospital appointment of any sort will be open to you till this is done. It is the most severe and at the same time the most fair and satisfactory of any non-competitive examination in the country. No one can pass it without a very complete knowledge of anatomy, and as good a knowledge of surgery as can be acquired considering the age of the candidates.



In short, although I myself have, in addition to this, passed a great many examinations at the University, I consider the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons by far and away the best degree worth having. Without saying any more as to your hospital work, I will assume, for the sake of argument, that you have creditably filled all the minor offices at the hospital, and are on the surgical staff. I know you can use your hands pretty well, as you draw accurately and are such a good carpenter. I am so glad you took to that when you were a boy ; it will be a real help to you. So now you will only want practice to operate well, and you will get plenty of that at St. Barnabas. By the bye, it is a good thing I sent you there instead of to any other hospital, for there are many more things besides manual dexterity and a knowledge of disease that are wanted to get you into the first flight of surgeons. Now St. Barnabas is the home of oratory. I suppose Magnet's influence for so many years has brought this about. He certainly is a beautiful speaker and a charming writer : probably the most felicitous speaker on a great occasion that we have in London, and to give an address he is quite undefeated. I recollect hearing him deliver an oration which lasted exactly one hour, and it was the best thing I ever heard. It left the impression that it was absolutely spontaneous (which of course it was not, for it must have been written with infinite care after being thought out for months, and then committed to memory). It was written in pure, good, classical English, such as has not been beaten since the time of Addison. You know I am a voracious reader of English of all sorts, and exceedingly fond of hearing the best speakers, so you may take my opinion on this matter as not being in any sense exaggerated. 'But why all this talk about oratory?' you may say ; 'I am not going to be an orator ; deeds, not words, will occupy my life.' I beg your pardon, my dear boy ; your deeds will have to be supplemented by words, or rather you will require to use a good many words before your deeds are in request by the public. You will have to teach the students by word of mouth, to give lectures on many subjects. Remember this, those whom you teach and address, and to whom you lecture, will make or mar your reputation, and very properly so. You will also read papers at the various medical societies, and you will have to speak there constantly, to maintain your views, and take part in the discussions ; so there will be a good deal of talking, and talking, too, before an audience that knows all about the subject, and that is terribly critical. An audience, moreover, that will



very plainly let you know if you display any ignorance, or fall into any errors in your facts or conclusions. So you must learn to speak with ease, in well-chosen language, upon any subject which you understand thoroughly. In acquiring this useful accomplishment—and you will have constant opportunities of doing this—I beg of you not to fall into the fatal habit of speaking for the sake of speaking, unless you have something useful to contribute to the discussion. I have known many young men, and old ones too, commit this mistake, and so be regarded as bores, and not given the credit when they really did know something about what they were talking; others I have seen whom I have known to be very fair surgeons in practice, but who, when they got on their legs, hummed, and hahed, and hesitated, and floundered along till they were certainly not understandable, and barely articulate. They would have disgraced not only the Union at Cambridge, but a debating society at Eton.

There is, I think, no fear of you making such an exhibition of yourself as this at any society, or even a hospital dinner, at which latter friendly gathering I have witnessed an apparently intelligent man spend ten minutes in explaining how difficult he found it to say a few appropriate words that ought to occupy about five minutes—at St. Barnabas, however, the members of the staff take an especial pride in being able to speak well. As I said before, they follow the lead of Magnet. His clinical lectures were models of excellency, and the language in which he expresses his opinions to the friends of a patient at a consultation might almost (but this is, of course, impossible) have been carefully prepared, such well-chosen expressions does he employ. So cultivate the art of speaking before all sorts of audiences until you can speak with ease to yourself, and without affectation or tricks of manner and gesture. Learn to express your opinion in appropriate language. You must also acquire the art of writing with facility. This you can only do by constant practice. You must be a great reader of the best English authors. You will find this most necessary, for no man can write well who has not read much. A well-read man adopts quite unconsciously to himself a good style, and at once detects and corrects imperfections on reading his manuscript over before it goes to press.

I have read a good many charmingly written articles and books on surgical matters, but I have also for my sins waded through some others that have positively made me shudder. For lumbering, blundering sentences; for hideous grammatical errors;



for long paragraphs whose construction makes one almost giddy ; for the jumbling together of a number of Latinised words and a complete absence of pure English, commend me to the effusions of an illiterate surgeon.

Until, then, you can write decently, if only for the sake of your anxious father, let nothing induce you to go into print, for the reading of your literary efforts might seriously affect my health and spirits, and this, I am sure, would be a real grief to you. But, seriously, what I am telling you on the subjects of speaking and writing is very true, and you will find out by-and-by what an important influence these matters have upon your career. If you are a good surgeon to start with, you may almost talk and write yourself into either fame or oblivion.

It is the common belief that a surgeon must possess what is spoken of as an extraordinary good nerve, and you may perhaps doubt if you possess this. At the same time, you must bear in mind that in the case of a surgeon the coolness and calmness which is so admirable and necessary in an operation does not imply the possession of any remarkable personal quality, but it is the simple result of a complete knowledge of what he is doing. It is rather the natural outcome of his accurate familiarity with anatomy, and his daily habit. A trooper would require a very fine nerve to go to a masthead, or a sailor to ride an unmanageable horse across a country, but a sailor's confidence aloft is due more to a matter of habit than to any particular amount of courage. In saying this I do not wish to depreciate the calmness of the surgeon in the face of difficulties, but I may tell you quite plainly that if you haven't enough courage to be a surgeon I should be very much ashamed of you, and you would turn out to be a very poor creature whatever occupation you might follow. Still this fact remains ; and you may perhaps be interested to hear that I, who have known many good surgeons, have never seen one who has not possessed a very fine courage. In short, a very good surgeon is, in my humble opinion, a very fine fellow, and when I see (as I do see) the extraordinary achievements of modern surgery, I am very proud of belonging to a profession which has made life so much more endurable and prolonged to the human race. So, possibly, the great fascination which surgery no doubt possesses to many appeals more strongly to men of courage and determination than to those persons of more weakly constituted minds, or to those who are less vertebrate altogether.

You now, I hope, know something more than you did of what



is wanted to make a great surgeon; and if you ever hear it said of one that he owes his success to social influence or to the help of influential people, you may rely upon it (whoever says it) that it is utter rubbish. No man can possibly become great as a surgeon except from having thoroughly deserved it, and a good many deserve it who only partially succeed. You may perhaps some day have the opportunity of observing that a prince or some other illustrious personage, when he is on an operating-table, is uncommonly like a peasant, and, thank God! they both get the same excellent surgery in this our beloved country. Adieu!

*(To be continued.)*





*Dr. Chesterfield's Letters to his Son  
on Medicine as a Career.*

BY SIR WILLIAM B. DALBY.

LETTER IV.

THE SPECIALIST.

MY DEAR BOY,—I hope that you have not failed to observe the absence of any ungenerous expressions in my last three letters to you in regard to the physician and surgeon, and considering that I have been dealing with the best of them, I should be unworthy of my subject if this were not apparent. Now, in delivering an unvarnished tale, if truth compel me to sometimes criticise more severely than you might expect, you will, I am sure, understand that I have no other alternative, for I must place the position fairly before you. It is at present universally admitted by the whole medical profession, that owing to the great advancement of knowledge in certain diseases they demand so much time, not only to understand thoroughly but to acquire a facility in treating, that they must be separated from general medicine and surgery and be placed in the hands of specialists who devote their entire attention to such disorders. Diseases, for example, as they affect the skin, the eye, ear, or throat. Some will, therefore, come under the physicians, whilst others will belong to the surgeons. There are specialists and specialists, and if I added there are men and men I should not be very far wrong in illustrating by analogy the number of varieties which may exist amongst them. There was the late Sir W. Spearman, an excellent surgeon, a physiologist, a man of untiring industry, of great general culture, an honour to any profession or any country, perhaps the most successful oculist that ever lived. There are many who, like him, find that owing to the conditions of the time



there offers as it were an opening for a practitioner in a branch of surgery which he has particularly fancied. He is therefore almost forced into the position, which he finally fills to the credit of himself and his profession. Very likely he becomes even more useful than if he had practised general surgery. You might, if you had been alive at the time when he flourished, have noticed that Spearman's practice came to him (until he was almost a household word as regards the eye) by the recommendation of his own profession rather than from the public. He was, my dear son, a type of what a specialist in surgery ought to be. There were not many specialists then. At present their name is legion. Now specialties are taken up (this is the term) not only by good but by some indifferent performers. How, amidst such a multitude, are you to separate the wheat from the chaff? and if *you* have a difficulty in this respect what chance do you think have the public in making a selection? Of course a very shrewd man of the world will be able to take care of himself. He will judge of the man as a man when he sees him and hears him, but the ordinary run of the public are very much at his mercy. Do you remember what I said about the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons? I am sure that I am expressing the opinion of every surgeon, so far as England is concerned, when I say that this qualification ought to be possessed by every one who practises any branch of surgery. The F.R.C.S. should be then a necessary stamp. Those who cannot obtain this should certainly not perform upon me, and without doubt are not in the first class. The object of all these remarks is to point out to you that a good specialist must start by being a well-educated surgeon, or he will be but a very indifferent artist. Besides the requisite four letters, he should be on the staff of a general hospital. When these two necessities are complied with, you may be confident that you can't have gone very wrong in putting him into the first class. Where there are so many of them how do the gentlemen in the second class get on? My dear young friend, there are a good many ways of getting on, and some of them go down with the public, or even with some of the doctors for a short time.

A specialist is known by his writings, and when he is good his writings are quite excellent; so that I advise you to look into them, and you will soon see the difference of the good and bad. Heavens! what an addition to the literature of the country some of the bad are! Take a box of paste and pair of scissors; keep on saying, A. says this, B. says that, and so on; put a foot-note to



say where such opinions may be found; quote mostly from foreigners, but in English; give a few cases, such as Mr. X. sent to me by Dr. Y., of the town Z.; or, A. seen by me in consultation with Dr. Q., of P., had been before under a well-known specialist for months, but was getting worse: I then proceeded to do so and so, the result was so and so, and a month later I received the following letter: let the letter express great gratitude, and if the letter and the whole business remind you irresistibly of the advertisement of *Revalenta Arabica*, in which a mother-in-law, aged ninety, recovered from paralysis of twenty-five years' standing, never mind, but think what a boon the specialist and *Revalenta Arabica* might have been if they worked together! Shun as you would the devil anything like an original idea, or any detail, or even any reflection or line of thought that might lead to any fresh light upon the subject, and you now have a recipe for writing a class of literature that the world could well spare, that few people read, but which serves for the purpose of advertisement, and will do very well to quote from as 'my book on so and so.' Don't say, 'Write me down an ass,' but leave that to the gentle reader. I told you in a former letter the kind of writing which would make me ill. I really think that if this sort came from your pen it would positively kill me. Another way is by entertaining—I don't mean the agreeable dinners when a man gathers around him his professional friends, belonging to all departments of medicine, whose friendship he values. Such a meeting at dinner is delightful to men who are so engaged all day that few opportunities occur of a pleasant chat. Then the host asks his guests because he likes to see them. What I mean are matters of business, and arranged for no other purpose than to increase the host's practice: they are absolutely a bid for patronage: much the same kind of thing as if a barrister asked a number of solicitors, in the hope of getting briefs. Such entertainments have a definite object, and doctors are invited whom the giver of the feast has only seen perhaps once or twice, or even not that. They are dragged in, neck and heels, on the off chance of their sending patients. The whole thing is shocking, and a gentleman would be incapable of doing it. I have no fear that you could do anything so mean as to ask a man to dine with you with an *arrière pensée* of his bringing you business; and I should be ashamed to think that there are any doctors who would rather 'send a case' (as it is termed) to such a host, when they knew full well there are half a dozen men, not only of better attainments,



but who would treat their patients as one gentleman dealing with another, whilst in the other case it would be a gentleman treated by a tradesman. You see, these sort of specialists are very good men of business, and they would have been great successes in the haberdashery line, for which they are eminently adapted in all their thoughts and feelings. If this is so, and I hope you recognise the justice of the comparison, need you wonder that if you go a step lower down, all sorts of treatment which offer a prospect of getting fees should be practised, carefully practised no doubt, so as to present a sort of veiled quackery? flimsily veiled, perhaps, so far as those who understand the specialty are concerned, but sufficiently obscure to the vision of many who would be horrified if the veil were torn away, and there was displayed in its naked truth the guinea-pig they had unwillingly been supporting by their patronage.

I, who have spent some twenty years of active professional life in London, can recall to mind several occasions, and older men than myself could doubtless remember many more, when waves of veiled quackery have passed over the town; at one time it has been a cure for cancer, at another a so-called surgical procedure which took the form of scooping out some of the bony interior of the nose to cure some distressing nervous symptom of the ear, the head, or the tail (I forget which, but it is unimportant). In reference to this a book was written, and there was a most entertaining notice of it in a periodical which seldom reviews professional books. It said the gist of the book seemed to be that if you held a man firmly by the nose you could do anything you liked with him. It was all I could do to resist offering to the author a motto for his treatise, '*Noscitur a naso quanta sit . . .*' From motives of natural delicacy I leave out the last two words, but your recollection of the lines of the occasionally indelicate Latin poet will supply them. At another time the injection of some subtle fluid under the skin for the relief of a distressing symptom is much vaunted and puffed up. The actual forms which these vagaries take fairly astonish the ordinary mind. You would, perhaps, hardly credit that extraordinary properties have been found in the excreta of wild beasts, and that this discovery has been generously offered to a more or less grateful public. If you carefully look through the advertisements of books in even medical journals, you might suppose that a millennium (so far as disease is concerned) might be shortly expected, and that it would find this country at least very densely populated, for if we



are to believe in the promises held out in the books, all sterility will shortly disappear on the advent of a general virility. I shall never forget paying a visit to a gentleman (well known at the time in London), who excused himself for not rising from his chair by saying that he was seated on a copper-plate awaiting the daily visit of his electrical doctor, and also, no doubt, awaiting the return of the springtime of his life. He died before its arrival. These waves, however, which pass over London from time to time, do not last long. In a very few years at the least they subside and are forgotten. You may, perhaps, be surprised that they last so long. To start with, the credulity of the public is unfathomable; but the chief reason of their temporary survival is to be found in the fact that the tendency of so many diseases is towards recovery. Those who get well during the process attribute their recovery to the remedy, and talk to others about it. The recoveries are heard of, whilst those who do not recover for the most part keep it to themselves. How exactly this explains the position, was demonstrated most conclusively some years ago in the case of a famous cancer curer, who lived in Paris. All tumours which presented themselves were taken away, whether cancerous or not. Those which were cancer, of course, returned, but the benign growths did not come back, so that there remained a considerable number who believed themselves to be cured of cancer, and sent fresh customers (I cannot call them patients) to the doctor. So many ladies in London had been 'cured' that when the doctor was suffering from a mortal disease they subscribed a large sum of money to purchase his secret. It turned out to be a simple escharotic composed of powdered talc made into a paste with sulphuric acid. Can wickedness, on the one hand, and folly, on the other, get much lower?

I give you this little history of a quack (who was notorious at the time) merely to illustrate a principle, and I must now bring this letter to an end. I hope you will be able to read between the lines sufficiently to see that you may as a specialist be of enormous service to mankind, and rise into well-deserved fame; and I know you, dear boy, well enough to be sure you are incapable of showing by your conduct that you do not fully recognise the immeasurable distance between fame and notoriety. Adieu!

P.S.—I have just received your letter in which you comment on the fact that general surgery does not seem, so far as you know, to be kept in the hands of a select few in the same way as is the



private work of the physicians; and you also ask me why I make no reference to those brilliant surgeons whose operations seem to be chiefly confined to serious cases in abdominal surgery, where the patients recover completely or die. I am delighted to find that you put such pertinent questions, as it shows me you not only appreciate what I have said, but that you show an intelligent interest in and a knowledge of the subject of my letters.

I reply that in the first place there are now many surgeons so excellent that it would be exceedingly difficult to say who are the best out of some thirty or so; and, in the second place, the advance of surgery during the past few years has enormously increased the occasions on which operative interference can be usefully employed, so that more operating surgeons are really wanted. As to your second question, I included them amongst the most eminent surgeons of their time. I will now not only do this, but I will pay them this well-earned tribute of praise, by explaining to you that, by great attention to details, they have made it possible to perform feats in surgery (with comparatively little loss of life) which were some years ago so terribly fatal that they were only attempted by a few. No wonder, then, their services are in such demand that they find themselves occupied almost entirely in a branch of surgery which they may be said to have made, and are every day bringing to greater perfection. Their daily work is not only of absorbing interest, but of such a useful and life-saving character that they are a blessing to the age in which they live. You see, my dear boy, that your inquiries have kindled the enthusiasm of your cynical father. Adieu!

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## LETTER V.

### THE GENERAL PRACTITIONER.

MY DEAR BOY,—I was, in some respects, very much pleased with your last letter. It shows me that you have not only carefully considered what I have written to you, but that you have begun to observe (and, I am glad to see, intelligently) the various types of professional men so far as your own immediate surroundings will permit. At the same time I notice a want of enthusiasm in your remarks as to your prospects of a career, and a leaning towards a humdrum sort of life so long as a comfortable compe-



tency is included, rather than to the fierce strife of competition. If your chief idea is to be the possessor, in early life, of a large income and a large family (I mean, if you wish to marry whilst you are quite a young man), you had better make up your mind to devote yourself to general practice. I have not the least objection to this, and from what I know of you you ought to do very well indeed. The conditions of professional life at the present day are very different to what they were in the last generation. The old days of the subservient apothecary and the pompous physician have long since passed away. There is now no apothecary, and if there were he would no longer be subservient. The physician has ceased to be pompous. Often enough now the general practitioner is at least the equal, and sometimes the superior, of the physician or surgeon in education and culture. The ranks of the medical profession are to-day recruited from young men who have been educated at the public schools, and have taken degrees at Oxford and Cambridge. You will have noticed that in this democratic age a man takes his position in society from his personality and early surroundings, so that in regard to social standing one branch of a profession or business is as good as another. Indeed, I think a good manner and bearing are more important in the case of general than in consulting practice. This will be obvious enough to you if you consider for a moment the confidential relations which exist between a medical attendant and the family who employ him. He is at the same time a trusted adviser, a friend, and, moreover, a person who becomes acquainted with a good many family secrets which, to the credit of his class be it said, he never betrays. In times of terrible troubles he is the witness of their desolation, and his ready sympathy and kind-hearted help on such occasions is freely given. He is often, if not always, remembered with the gratitude of a lifetime. Perhaps no man makes warmer friends, but at the same time you can understand that, whilst filling a somewhat delicate position, it is of all things desirable that such confidence should be reposed in the person of one who has the instincts of a gentleman. Since you, my dear son, by your early training and excellent education have, I am happy to say, these estimable qualities, you will have a very distinct advantage over those who have been less fortunate. You will be appreciated, my dear friend, and if you know your business well, as I hope and believe you do, you will be rewarded in the West-end of London by a large and fashionable *clientèle*, with an income of some thousands



a year, and be described to all the friends and acquaintances of their distinguished circle as being 'quite charming' and 'so kind.'

You will have occasion to call in frequently a consultant, and you will be very careful to always select the very best of them, for you cannot afford to have a second-rate one. If you are ever foolish enough to commit this mistake, your patient will afterwards blame you and consult on his own account some better known professor. No wonder that you will make a good income; for if once the people 'in society' (as the cant phrase goes) take you up, they will talk about you and never let their ailing friends rest until they have sent for you. When they do, they will find you a very agreeable creature as well as a very good doctor. Bear in mind it is a very hard life. Except for a couple of hours or so when you see a few patients at home, you will be driving about till dinner-time, and even afterwards you may have to go out and see some serious cases. But you will be well paid for it, and with the exception of a very few physicians and surgeons, will make more in twenty-five years than a dozen of them put together. You may have a large family, but, except in your six weeks' autumn holiday, you will have very little time to see them. You perceive now the kind of position you will occupy as the representative of the best sort of doctor, who not only is a well-educated, agreeable creature, but knows his business exceedingly well, and lives on pleasant terms with his professional brethren. You will also have a feeling of security and independence, and so be quite above the little jealousies which are a source of great discomfort to some others who are not of quite such a good class. This division is immensely annoyed if their patients leave them for a time and consult some one else, for they regard their patients as a sort of personal property in whom they have a kind of proprietary interest that must not be disturbed by any other doctor. In short, they consider him to be a form of poacher. You, however, will not care twopence for the so-termed poacher, for you will believe this to be a free country in which anyone can employ whom they please.

Much as I dislike didactic advice, I feel constrained for once to give you a golden rule. It is never to speak ill of any of your fraternity, whatever you may think. You will do yourself no good, and it will only be thought that you are jealous. Now I wish you to be, as well as to be known to be, quite above jealousy. You don't expect every lawyer to be a good one; why should you be surprised that all doctors are not intelligent angels? There



must be a few devils amongst them as in every other class, if only to relieve the monotony of the situation. You must comfort yourself with the reflection that the devils don't last very long, for the cloven hoof is sure to peep out and be recognised. And why, I repeat, should doctors be immaculate any more than other people? The solicitor who commits forgery is occasionally met with; I once knew one myself, and he was a most popular and pleasant fellow until the exposure took place, when he disappeared from view. In like manner, it is not absolutely outside experience that a doctor has been found in this metropolis who was willing to assist an indiscreet young lady in preserving her reputation, and in so doing has rendered himself liable to a criminal prosecution. Such instances are happily very rare, and we must take the world as we find it. On the whole it is a good world, and the doctors who introduce the inhabitants into life and conduct them out of it form a very useful and good sort of class. But if we are to talk of utility and goodness, do you remember Mr. Gibson, the country doctor in Mrs. Gaskell's 'Wives and Daughters'? He is a delightful character, most truthfully and charmingly drawn by Mrs. Gaskell; a model of a man, and you cannot read the book without thinking that it is impossible to fancy a life better spent than his. And there are many like him, a comfort and a blessing to the rich and poor, beloved by all the poor around him, respected and liked by the rich, who are ready enough at times to complain of him desperately when he fails to relieve them of some incurable disorder.

I have given you the strong side, the good side, and the worst side of the trusted family doctor, but there is yet to be seen the weak side, and you know, my dear son, that we all have our weak side, which is patent enough to all but ourselves. There is, you ought to know by this time, a good deal of uncertainty about the art of medicine, and there are occasions when the most sagacious gives (as he is obliged to do) a somewhat guarded opinion—an opinion which will admit of a get-out in any event. There are some men who are always so very 'cocksure' (as you used to express it) that they can never bring themselves down to this level. They seem incapable of an expectant attitude of mind. They are so infernally confident themselves that they inspire a confidence in their patients which is not always borne out by events. It is all very well when they turn out to be right, but in the nature of things they are sometimes confoundedly wrong. I confess if I were very ill I should be a little afraid of my friend



whose events were always the greatest certainties, and when he had given me a reassuring slap on the back (which, by the way, is a habit he sometimes falls into), and had taken his departure, I should begin to think that after all he might have made a mistake. There is such a thing, you know, as the confidence of ignorance as well as the confidence that is the product of knowledge; so let me advise you to cultivate a quiet manner, or at least to avoid a boisterous one, and above all things to stick to the adage of Lincoln, and do not ever 'prophesy unless you know.' A very shrewd friend of mine, an excellent doctor, once remarked to me that if he did not know much (and he did know a good deal and underrated his knowledge) he never said anything unless he did, and as soon as possible got the help of some one else. He had an immense practice, so we may fairly suppose that his principle was a sound one. He was the very reverse of what I call a tinkering doctor. I mean the sort of man who, finding his patient suffering from some surgical affection, which, without endangering his life, is an incessant trouble and annoyance, continues to treat him for weeks and months until the long-suffering one some day, by the advice of a friend perhaps, goes to a well-known surgeon, who, by the employment of some minor operation in surgery, makes him quite comfortable and happy. You see the tinker is not big-minded enough, or he would have taken him or sent his patient to the surgeon before, and so retained his client's confidence and support. It is the men who have not much business who make these mistakes, and if they continue to make them they get less. Whatever department you eventually select, take my advice and scrupulously stick to it, or you will not be trusted, and break down eventually. Perfect confidence is a necessity for long professional life. Do you suppose that the doctors would support a surgeon who added general practice to his surgical work, or that the surgeons would support the specialist who practised general surgery? My dear son, it is not in human nature. I am advising you how to become a success, but I could tell you of many ways how to fail, and this, of course, I am terribly anxious you should run no risk of doing. Farewell!



