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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Sciatica

I suppose sciatica can be regarded as part of the neurologist's remit. Bennett is probably describing an S1 root syndrome. Many treatment options have been advanced for back pain. That used on Grigory appears remarkably successful—perhaps the fact that the secret medicine was laced with vodka had something to do with it!

Laurence Sterne, 1759, The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy gentleman

And how goes it with Thy Concubine—thy wife—and thy little ones o' both sides? And when did you hear from the old gentleman and Lady—your sister, aunt, uncle and cousins—I hope they have got better of their colds, coughs, claps, tooth-aches, fevers, stranguries, sciaticas, swellings, and sore eyes.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1880, The brothers Karamazov
And she treats Grigory with this secret medicine of hers three times a year, Sir, every time his lumbago gets so bad that he can't move, just as though he was paralyzed, Sir. Yes, Sir, three times a year. When this happens, she takes a towel, dips it in the infusion and rubs his back with it for half an hour, till it's bone dry and goes quite red and swollen. Then what's left over in the bottle she gives him to drink with a special prayer, Sir. Not all of it, though, for she leaves a drop or two over for herself, seeing as how it's such a rare occasion, Sir, and she drinks it, too. And both being strictly teetotal, Sir, they just drops off and they sleeps very soundly for a very long time. When Grigory wakes up, he's almost always well after it, but when Marfa wakes

up she always has a headache from it, Sir . . .

But quite unexpectedly Grigory woke up in the night, lay awake thinking for a moment and, though he immediately felt a sharp pain in the small of his back, sat up in bed.

Edith Wharton, 1911, Ethan Frome

"Mr Hale? Why, yes, you'll find him down home now. He ain't going to his work this forenoon. He woke up with a touch o' lumbago, and I just made him put on one of old Dr Kidder's plasters and set right up into the fire."

Arnold Bennet, 1911, Hilda Lessways

She had three genuine complaints, rheumatism, sciatica, and neuritis; they were all painful. The latest and worst was the neuritis, which had attacked her in the wrist, producing swollen joints that had to be fomented with hot water . . .

On the previous day she had been sitting on the cold new oilcloth of the topmost stairs, minutely instructing a maid in the craft of polishing banisters. And the next morning an attack of acute sciatica had supervened. For a trifling indiscretion Sarah was thus condemned to extreme physical torture. Hilda had found her rigid on the bed. She suffered the severest pain in the small of the back and all down the left leg.

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