NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

More doctors

The Medical profession comes off rather badly in these extracts, using whatever skills they possess for personal gain rather than for the benefit of their patients. Venality and cynicism have not disappeared from the profession although I suspect that cynicism is now more directed at the management structure of the service rather than at the humble patient. After a surfeit of neurological outpatient clinics, I suspect some neurologists would share Dr Weinrock’s sentiments!

Charles Lamb, 1823, Essays. Amicus Redivivus

Monoculus—for so in default of catching his true name, I choose to designate the medical gentleman who now appeared—is a grave, middle-aged person, who without having studied at the college or truckled to the pedantry of a diploma, hath employed a great portion of his valuable time in experimental processes upon the bodies of unfortunate fellow-creatures, in which the vital spark, to mere vulgar thinking, would seem extinct, and lost for ever. He omitted no occasion of obstructing his services, from a case of common surfeit—suffocation to the ignobler obstructions, sometimes induced by a too wilful application of the plant cannabis. Outwardly but though he declineth not altogether these drier extractions, his occupation tendeth for the most part to water-practice; for the convenience of which, he hath judiciously fixed his quarters near the grand repository of the stream mentioned, where, day and night, from his little watch-tower, at the Middleton’s-Head, he listenneth to detect the wrecks of drowned mortality, partly, as he saith to be upon the spot—and partly, because the liquids which he useth to prescribe to himself and his patients, on these distressing occasions, are ordinary more conveniently to be found at these common hostelries than in the shops and phials of the apothecaries.

Herman Melville, 1851, Moby Dick

“Oh! A great watch, and very dietetically severe, is Dr Burger. (Burger, you dog, laugh out! why don’t ye? You know you’re a precious jolly rascal.) But, heave ahead, boy, I’d rather be killed by you than kept alive by any other man.”

Thomas Hardy, 1886, The Mayor of Casterbridge

Henchard, who treated her kindly, except in moments of irritation, sent at once for the richest, busiest doctor, whom he supposed to be the best.

Thomas Hardy, 1887, The woodlanders

Mr Fitzpiers entered the sick chamber as a doctor is wont to do on such occasions and pre-eminently when the room is that of the humble cottager; looking round towards the patient with a preoccupied gaze which so plainly reveals that he has well-nigh forgotten all about the case and the circumstances since he dismissed them from his mind at his last exit from the same apartment.

M V Hughes, 1934, A London child of the 1870s

The doctor himself was a dear. He saw us through all our infectious diseases and coughs, curing most of our ailments more by jollity than physic. He was specially fond of me because as he frequently said, he had saved my life. I had almost gone with measles, and when hope had practically departed he ordered champagne. I was only six years old, but I remember that champagne, and my father bringing it to me in his shirt-sleeves that hot summer evening. The very word “champagne”, connected as it was with festivity, and my father’s face all smiles, put new life into me, and gave me kick enough to pull through.

Henry Green, 1939, Party going

“What did he do?” she echoed, “why, what do doctors do? Of course he got his fee, Robert paid him, but you know what they are; he went away again; she might die for all he cared.”

Thomas Mann, 1954, Confessions of Felix Krull: confidence man

This unworthy disciple of Aesculapius was both stupid and ambitious and had achieved his title through personal influence, exploitation of wine-house acquaintances, and the receipt of patronage; he was always going to Wiesbaden to advance his interests with the authorities. Most indicative to me was the fact that he did not receive the patients who came to his waiting-room in the order in which they arrived, but took the more influential first, letting the humbler sit and wait. His manner towards the former class was obsequious, towards the latter harsh and cynical, indicating often that he did not believe in their complaints.

Joseph Heller, 1979, Good as gold

“I wouldn’t take you, Bruce,” Dr Weinrock answered with frankness. “Oh, I would never take on a patient who really needed help. I don’t enjoy being around sick people.”