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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Some Proustian doctors

Little comment is necessary about these extracts. They perfectly represent the insight which Proust brought into all his writings. If you do not recognise some of your colleagues here, look harder!

Marcel Proust, 1919, Remembrance of things past: within a budding grove

My suffocations having persisted long after any congestion remained that could account for them, my parents brought in a Professor Cottard. It is not enough that a physician who is called in to treat cases of this sort should be learned. Confronted with symptoms which may be those of three or four different complaints, it is in the long run his flair, his instinctive judgment, that must decide with which, despite the more or less similar appearance of them all, he has to deal. This mysterious gift does not imply any superiority in the other departments of the intellect, and a person of the utmost vulgarity, who admires the worst pictures, the worst music, who is without the slightest intellectual curiosity, may perfectly well possess it . . .

But Cottard's hesitations were brief and his prescriptions imperious: "Purges, violent and drastic purges; milk for some days, nothing but milk. No meat. No alcohol" . . . Then, as my health deteriorated, they decided to make me follow Cottard's prescriptions to the letter; in three days my "rattle" and cough had ceased, I could breathe freely . . . and we realised that this imbecile was a great physician.

Marcel Proust, 1920/21, Remembrance of things past: the Guermantes Way

I helped my grandmother into Professor E——'s lift and a moment later he came to us and took us into his consulting room. But there, pressed for time though he was, his offensive manner changed, such is the force of habit, and his habit was to be friendly, not to say playful, with his patients. Since he knew that my grandmother was a great reader, and was himself one, he devoted the first few minutes to quoting various favourite passages of poetry appropriate to the glorious summer weather. He had placed her in an armchair and himself with his back to the light so as to have a good view of her. His examination was minute and thorough, even obliging me to leave the room for a moment. He continued it after my return, then, having finished, went on, although the quarter of an hour was almost at an end, repeating various quotations to my grandmother. He even made a few jokes which were witty enough, though I should have preferred to hear them on some other occasion, but which completely reassured me by the tone of amusement in which he uttered them . . .

"Your grandmother is doomed," he said to me. "It is a stroke brought on by uraemia. In itself, uraemia is not necessarily fatal, but this case seems to be hopeless."

Marcel Proust, 1920/21, Remembrance of things past: the Guermantes Way

My father went to receive him in the drawing-room, like the actor who is next to appear on the stage. He had been sent for not to cure but, to certify, almost in a

legal capacity. Dr Dieulafoy may indeed have been a great physician, a marvellous teacher; to the several roles in which he excelled, he added another, in which he remained for forty years without a rival, a role as original as that of the confidant, the clown or the noble father, which consisted in coming to certify that a patient was *in extremis*. His name alone presaged the dignity with which he would sustain the part, and when the servant announced: "M Dieulafoy," one thought one was in a Molière play. To the dignity of his bearing was added, without being conspicuous, the liteness of a perfect figure. His exaggerated good looks were tempered by a decorum suited to distressing circumstances. In the sable majesty of his frock coat the Professor would enter the room, melancholy without affectation, uttering not one word of condolence that could have been construed as insincere, not being guilty of the slightest infringement of the rules of tact. At the foot of a deathbed it was he and not the Duc de Guermantes who was the great nobleman. Having examined my grandmother without tiring her, and with an excess of reserve which was an act of courtesy to the doctor in charge of the case, he murmured a few words to my father, and bowed respectfully to my mother, to whom I felt that father had positively to restrain himself from saying: "Professor Dieulafoy." But already the latter had turned away, not wishing to seem intrusive, and made a perfect exit, simply accepting the sealed envelope that was slipped into his hand. He did not appear to have seen it, and we ourselves were left wondering for a moment whether we had really given it to him, with such a conjurer's dexterity had he made it vanish without sacrificing one iota of the gravity—which was if anything accentuated—of the eminent consultant in his long frock coat with its silk lapels, his noble features engraved with the most dignified commiseration.

Marcel Proust, 1921/22, Remembrance of things past: cities of the plain

He attached great importance of never being mistaken in his diagnoses . . . The reader may perhaps remember that, immediately after my grandmother's stroke, I had taken her to see him, on the afternoon when he was having all his decorations stitched to his coat . . . The mistakes made by doctors are innumerable. They err habitually on the side of optimism as to treatment, of pessimism as to the outcome . . . Doctors (we do not here include them all, of course, and make a mental reservation of certain admirable exceptions) are in general more displeased, more irritated by the invalidation of their verdicts than pleased by their execution . . .

Owing to the circumstances of my grandmother's death, the subject interested me, and I had recently read in a book by a great specialist that perspiration was injurious to the kidneys by discharging through the skin something whose proper outlet was elsewhere . . . I did not mention this to Dr E——, but of his own accord he said to me: "The advantage of this very hot weather in which perspiration is abundant is that the kidney is correspondingly relieved." Medicine is not an exact science.

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