

Ruminations of a Medical Student on Modern Days

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Serving up a platter of disturbing thoughts, grown and garnished from my salad-like experiences (green and all mixed up), my feeble mind has prompted me to take up a pen and voice my reaction to this unpalatable, but perhaps remediable platter. For every now and then, when usual lassitude gives way to a more anabolic mood, I have often wondered at events, names and stories of the earlier medical days . . . and at my own ignorance of them. This reflection is not prompted by an acute susceptibility for what some may call occult knowledge or "tea-talk". Could it be supposed that even the most loquacious would tell his prospective mother-in-law that the patron saint of piles and fistulae is Saint Fiacre; and that when Henry V ordered his soldiers to pillage Ficare's monastery near Harfleur in France, divine punishment descended upon him: he was breached by a fistula and died at thirty four. But yet, (if this can be supposed!) there is value in this "tea-talk" if the listener is afflicted with these fleshy visci called piles; the owner of this historical note has at least offered the sufferer a spiritual, therapeutic horizon, if he or she is so inclined . . . and sufferers will but smile and throw away their suppositories at Fiacre's, cured.

Disregarding whatever prompted the reflection, can it be said that the medical era of today has dampened any yearnings for knowledge of the old in medicine? Today one sits back

with the omnipotent-like surveillance of a grandmother, remarking "how things have changed". For the student this has meant a diminished view of all those diseases which were heralded into the texts with classical description by now hallowed names in medicine; his spectrum of study has expanded into new vistas that tax his time and mind, as well as the laboratories. Now this is not a howl for curriculum changes which, like Mark Twain's comment, everyone talks about in the journals but does nothing about; rather it is a museful nostalgia for the "classics" we haven't seen, or probably never will, as students. "For us guys" the change in medicine, like the fate of all endometrium, has given us the headaches and the hot flashes to the press and public. New weird diseases, in cause, idiopathic (a word getting to be as commonplace as Eisenhower's coronary artery) are being proposed to us with rapidity equalled only by the arrival of new editions of textbooks. Such oddities as "cat scratch fever", "milkman's syndrome" and "Phenylpyruvic oligophrenia" are mentioned as a few examples of diseases "now common" in general practice; consternation is particularly evoked by the collagen disorder craze . . . a disorder so mysterious that I will always meditate over the entrails of an owl before venturing it as a diagnosis. Not only are we specializing, but so are diseases today.

Perhaps it is thus through a decrease of those "traditional diseases" and a flood of these birds of paradise that we have lost interest in the old. It was with such thoughts in mind that I stood before a drab stone building on an overcast Sunday morning this past summer; this building, which lies within a quiet square of Goethe's University in Frankfurt-am-Main, houses the old laboratory in which Paul Ehrlich discovered the agent, "Salvarsan" for the treatment of syphilis. I have often accused myself of some fairly bizarre reactions and so, along with solemn awe and respect for that great name, my thoughts were of the fate of syphilis, a disease that gave material to our clinics, famous names to the history of medicine, and to heavy metal workers, employment. Little did Osler realize that a new phantom, like the one arising in the depths of simple connective tissue, would defy his axiom, "Know syphilis and you know disease, so protean are its manifestations".

Thus, it is with a yearning for the "good old days" and a disdain for the modern with its collagen disorders, et al, that the following ode for that vanishing spirochete is dedicated.

TO AN OLD PROTEAN

Gone are the days of the painless chancre
To the owner of which caused social
chagrin.

Now they bow to a protean much blanker,
Where pathology is seen in collagen.

Seldom now found are those marks of luetic,
That cough so brassy and aortic regurg;
Alas replaced by some much less poetic
That don't even start with a Saturday
splurge.

Waned has that gamma and those snail-
tracks,

And rare is the tabetic and the GPI;
Veiled by some dullards like Libman-Sacks
And a host of others unseen by the eye.

O, science has wrought an unhappy tune,
Composed from dyes and fungus growth;
Lethal to the spirochete, poor protazoon
Which now has become a clinical drought.

Here was an organism that gave us lore,
Famed by Osler, even stars on celluloid,
Had by Hunter and the downtown. . .
Now bowing to a dandy called fibrinoid.

If it wasn't for Erhlich, Fleming and Florey,
Whose labs, to our friend, provided the
sting;

We would still relive an age of glory
And to limbo with collagen, Klemper'r and
Klinge.

The curtain has fallen on a classical stage,
And the actors of Pallidum have gone to
rest;

Slow and sure brews the collagen rage
And our clinics are now shorn of luetic zest.

. . . oh can winter be far now that
strep is here?
