

The Bookshelf

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THE recent "flu" epidemic and a holiday spent uncomfortably in bed provided a long awaited opportunity to do some reading. Two books were kindly loaned to the patient which made the hours pass quickly. One was the "Life and Times of Rembrandt" by Hendrik Van Loon, a book which is enjoying a new wave of popularity because of the recent motion picture on the life of this great artist. The other was "Gone With The Wind", a reputed best seller and Margaret Mitchell's first brain-child. Both books are replete with items of interest to members of the medical profession and reflect upon the customs of the age. There is nothing, perhaps, that cannot be found in any good "History of Medicine," but appearing as they do hidden away in fiction and biography, they are seen in a new light. This, therefore, is not a review. It is merely my purpose to abstract a few of the interesting passages dealing with this theme.

The "Life of Rembrandt" takes in the period, roughly, from 1606 to 1669, and is supposed to have been written by one Joannis Van Loon who had the title of Doctor Medicinæ and Chirurgion in Extraordinary. Hendrik Willem Van Loon who edited the book with notes, emendations and critical observations calls himself the doctor's great-great-grandson, nine times removed.

The medical course in the year 1642 bore but a slight resemblance to that familiar to us. There were difficulties other than examinations. With regard to dissection in the city of Amsterdam, "The clergy of course did not wholly approve of our efforts, but the fact that our laboratories were situated in rooms that had previously belonged to one of those amateur clubs which had caused so much scandal to the pious citizens of the town made them regard us, their successors, a little more leniently than they might have done otherwise."

The curriculum consisted of lectures and demonstrations covering the greater part of two years. In the year mentioned above Van Loon had been asked to talk on certain problems of physiology which at that moment held the center of the stage. He states: "When I was quite a young student I remember how one day the lecturer who explained Galen to us had made a few sneering remarks about a certain Englishman called Harvey or some such name who had undertaken to prove that the blood in the human body was in a state of constant flux and not stationary as we had always held so far. The learned professor had grown very funny about the famous 'circulator' who seemed to have discovered certain peculiarities of the human body which had remained a secret to all the famous medical investigators of ancient times. . . . All of us had loudly applauded our dear teacher when he continued to be witty at the expense of his British colleague." "But once mentioned, the idea would not die down. Some claimed that Aristotle had already drawn attention to this

fact and others said that the eminent Doctor Servetus, burned at the stake by orders of John Calvin almost a century before (on account of some difference of opinion about the Holy Trinity), had also been of this opinion, though I was never able to get hold of the books in which he had tried to prove his point. But in the year 1628 this fellow Harvey had finally published his new theory in a book devoted exclusively to this subject and every medical man had read it or at least parts of it and for the last fifteen years our profession had been openly divided into 'circulators' and 'anti-circulators.'" The search for truth was not made easy even in the good old days.

In Leyden in the year 1617, "The entire faculty consisted of only three professors, one who taught botany (for the benefit of future apothecaries), one who gave instruction in anatomy for the future surgeons, and one who was supposed to hold clinical demonstrations to supplement the theoretical knowledge which the future doctors were supposed to gather from their text-books on medicine. Unfortunately at the time I registered, the plague had just visited Leyden and had killed more than one fifth of the total number of inhabitants, among them the professor of therapeutics and the professor of anatomy; and the regents, for reasons of economy, had not yet decided upon their successors. But as it was felt that we should not be left in complete idleness, the dean of the theological faculty was asked to lecture to us upon the medicine of the ancient Hebrews."

We learn, too, that Rembrandt's maid suffered from hysteria which is "a mysterious affliction of the womb already mentioned by Galen and uncommon in females of her age. For days at a time she would be perfectly normal and then suddenly without the slightest provocation, she would break into a fit of frenzied anger, would smash plates and dishes, would pull the clothes off her back and in other ways would make herself thoroughly detestable." An interesting commentary on the environment which produced some of the world's best known paintings.

Very early in his career Doctor Van Loon's altruistic motives stimulated a search for some substance which would deaden pain and permit operations to be performed with the patient unconscious. Cutting for the stone was common and usually "a hideous performance, with the victim fastened to a rough wooden plank and screaming his head off like a pig that was being butchered." Hasheesh came to the attention of our kindly doctor. This was the resin from the Asiatic hemp, *Cannabis Indica*. The dried leaves were smoked and a stupor soon resulted. "I found several of my colleagues among the surgeons willing to cooperate with me, but the majority of them turned against me as one man. They denounced me as a meddler and innovator and quack and absolutely refused to listen to me or attend one of my operations during which the patient has been put into a state of coma by means of the fumes of *Cannabis sativa*. In the end they even objected to my using the operating room of the hospital for my 'childish experiments', getting it all messed up with the smell of that filthy Indian manure, as one of the learned leeches expressed himself, and when I paid no attention to their objections they went to the Town Hall

and petitioned Their Lordships that they forbid me to perform any further operations with the help of that 'pagan and nauseating drug'.

As a result Van Loon was forced to build his own hospital where he carried on his researches successfully for a short time until tragedy appeared on the scene. Rembrandt's maid and mistress had been in labor three days and suffered so terribly that she tried to throw herself out of the window. Finally, the doctor administered the hemp extract which worked well. Unfortunately the dry-nurse soon told the neighbors and "a week later the Reverend Zebediah preached his famous sermon on 'Childbearing without God's curse.' And two weeks later the whole town knew about the scandalous and blasphemous proceedings that went on in the hospital of this 'libertine and Armenian who pretended to be wiser than God'. . . . Two days later, during the middle of the night, a mob of several hundred men and women, proceeding very quietly and very orderly as if they obeyed a single will, suddenly broke into the hospital, carried the eighteen patients they found there out into the street and then set fire to the premises, disappearing in as quiet and orderly a fashion as they had arrived." Thus ingloriously ended some of the earliest experiments on anaesthetics. Freedom from pain was delayed two centuries.

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"Gone With The Wind" takes us back to a very interesting period of American history, namely, the four years of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era immediately following. It provides easy reading, holding one's attention from start to finish. The locale and background are faithfully reproduced in rich and vigorous language and there are several excellent character studies. From a medical point of view the period precedes Lister and antiseptics, but has already witnessed the introduction of inhalation anaesthetics.

In this fratricidal strife the North was at a great advantage since it had the power which comes with natural resources, and factories for converting these into death-dealing instruments. Most of the wheat growing was also done in the North. The South, on the other hand, was agricultural and confined its efforts to cotton raising and slavery. Consequently when the Union fleet had effectively bottled up all the Southern ports, the Confederate soldiers were dependent for food, munitions and medical supplies on blockade runners who at their best could bring in only small quantities at a time from foreign countries at exorbitant rates. Thus privation was added to the ordinary horrors of warfare.

Little wonder that Scarlett felt the way she did during the siege of Atlanta. "Yes, she was sick of the hospital, the foul smells, the lice, the aching, unwashed bodies. If there had ever been any novelty and romance about nursing, that had worn off a year ago. Besides, these men wounded in the retreat were not so attractive as the earlier ones had been. . . . Moreover, many of them were dying, dying swiftly, silently, having little strength left to combat the blood poisoning, gangrene, typhoid and pneumonia which had set in before they could reach Atlanta and a doctor." "The day was hot and the flies came in the open windows in swarms, fat and lazy flies that broke the spirits of the men as pain could not. The

tide of smells and pain rose and rose about her. Perspiration soaked through her freshly starched dress as she followed Dr. Meade about, a basin in her hand. Oh, the nausea of standing by the doctor, trying not to vomit when his bright knife cut into mortifying flesh. And oh, the horror of hearing the screams from the operating ward where amputations were going on! And the sick, helpless sense of pity at the sight of tense, white faces of mangled men waiting for the doctor to get to them, men whose ears were filled with screams, men waiting for the dreadful words: 'I'm sorry, my boy, but that hand will have to come off. Yes, yes, I know; but look, see those red streaks? It'll have to come off.'"

"Chloroform was so scarce now it was used only for the worst amputations and opium was a precious thing, used only to ease the dying out of life, not the living out of pain. There was no quinine and no iodine at all."

Typhoid was prevalent as one would expect. The disease itself was usually diagnosed without difficulty but treatment must have been sorely inadequate and more harmful than beneficial. The following paragraph shows why. "The room where Suellen and Carreen lay mumbling and tossing on the same bed stank vilely with the smell of the twisted rag burning in a saucer of bacon fat, which provided the only light. When Scarlett first opened the door the thick atmosphere of the room, with all windows closed and the air reeking with sick-room odors, medicine smells and stinking grease, almost made her faint. Doctors might say that fresh air was fatal in a sick room but if she were to sit here she must have air or die. She opened the three windows, bringing in the smell of oak leaves and earth, but the fresh air could do little toward dispelling the sickening odors which had accumulated for weeks in this close room."

Soldiers of all times have always had more than one enemy to combat. The human foe was one he could understand, for, after all, did he not fight with the same weapons? But there were also other enemies in the form of germs and parasites. Victory over these brought few medals and less glory. "Old and young, talkative and taciturn, rich planter and sallow Cracker, they all had two things in common, lice and dysentery. The Confederate soldier was so accustomed to his verminous state he did not give it a thought and scratched unconcernedly even in the presence of ladies. As for dysentery—"the bloody flux", as the ladies delicately called it—it seemed to have spared no one from private to general. Four years of half-starvation, four years of rations which were coarse or green or half-putrefied, had done its work with them and every soldier who stopped at Tara was either just recovering or was actively suffering from it. 'Dey ain' a soun' set of bowels in de whole Confedrut ahmy', observed Mammy darkly as she sweated over the fire, brewing a bitter concoction of black-berry roots which was Ellen's sovereign remedy for such afflictions. 'It's mah notion dat 'twarn't de Yankees whut beat our gempmum. 'Twuz dey own innards. Kain no gempmum fight wid his bowels tuhnin' ter water.'"

The reader is reminded that the excerpts quoted represent a minor aspect of the books and that the first is essentially a biography of Rembrandt while the second is an historical novel of note. Both books are worthwhile additions to any library.