

Original Articles.

THEODORE TRONCHIN. 1709-1781.
A SKETCH.*

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THE name of the great practitioner of medicine, like that of the great advocate in her sister profession, is written in water, unless he produces a book and thus wins attention during his life, or, perchance, appreciation after his death. Even if the book be indifferent or bad, the book it remains and is treasured as such in the cemetery of books, the library.

Theodore Tronchin, pupil of Boerhaave, honorary professor of medicine at Geneva, of enormous vogue there, and later in Paris, as a practitioner, is a case in point. His name is contained neither in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* nor in the *Century Dictionary of Names*. There was no "Who's Who" in those days. A sketch of his life, with extracts from his voluminous correspondence, has lately appeared,¹ and rescues from oblivion a man of strong character and broad intellect, who dared at a time when medical dogma and theory were still in the ascendant, and when disease was combated by bleeding, purging and puking, to exercise a rare common-sense, to inculcate right living and outdoor exercise, and to recognize in these the most potent means of the prevention and treatment of many maladies.

Personally, and by letter, he was called upon to advise those highest in rank and most eminent for talent or genius of the time. His success and heterodox ideas won him the ill-will of his professional contemporaries.

He was descended from Remy Tronchin, a captain of cavalry in the service of Henry IV, who became a Protestant and hence found it convenient to move to Geneva, where his descendants were prominent in civic life.

He was born in 1709. His father was a banker and gave him the best education which Geneva offered, intending him for the ministry. He was a good student, but nature sometimes has her way, and we read that "he was so very fond of dancing that he would walk several miles of an evening to go to balls without the knowledge of his parents." A serious illness, which nearly proved fatal, led him to take more serious views.

His father's fortune disappeared with the collapse of the Law boom, and the son went to England hoping to find advancement through the influence of Lord Bolingbroke, a distant relative. The statesman was, however, out of power, and in retirement at Dawley. Tronchin during his visit met both Swift and Pope, and by the advice of the latter passed at least a year at Cambridge, where he came into close relations with Bentley.

He then decided on medicine as a career and Boerhaave as his master. He passed several months in London, frequenting the hospitals, and met Richard Mead, then in the full tide of his

career. One day he asked Mead the secret of his success. The reply sank deeply into his mind and was often quoted by him as having profoundly influenced his practice: "I have not done much good, but I have tried not to do harm."

In September, 1728, we find him in Leyden, where he lodged with s'Gravesande, professor of mathematics, and was the bearer of a letter from Bentley to Burmann. Naturally supposing this to be a letter of introduction, he delivered it in person. After reading it, Burmann's manner and conduct were such that Tronchin fled from the house and hastened home to s'Gravesande, whom he informed that Burmann was bereft of reason. s'Gravesande hurried to his friend, who showed him Bentley's letter, which contained only abuse of Burmann for the reason that the latter had not only differed from, but even criticised, Bentley's views on the fables of Phædrus.

He assiduously devoted himself to Boerhaave's teaching and soon attracted his attention, perhaps from the fact that his hair was thick and long. A remark of Boerhaave's that the care of such an ornament must take time was repeated to Tronchin, who forthwith sacrificed his locks.

After two years in Leyden, when scarcely twenty-one, he graduated in medicine, having completed three years of professional study, and had the precious privilege of close association with an unusual number of remarkable men of varied interests and international reputation. Residence away from home during an impressionable period of his life, combined with the above association, broadened, at least, a character congenitally strong. For, as we have seen, he came of stock early exiled by religious convictions. He settled at Amsterdam, then visited by some virulent epidemic, in accordance with the advice of Boerhaave. His youth and foreign birth were obstacles to success, and he seriously thought of returning to England. Boerhaave, as well as Van Swieten, however, gave him encouragement and support, the former even referring Amsterdam patients who proposed to consult him to the young man, with the statement, "You can consult me without leaving Amsterdam in consulting him."

In 1738 Boerhaave died, in his last years, it is said, having wished to get Tronchin back to Leyden to assist him in his university work. By this time Tronchin was firmly established at Amsterdam and was known even outside of Holland, Senac and Quesnay writing from Paris, the former to ask how to treat whooping cough, the latter to invite criticism of a forthcoming book.

In 1740 he marries Hélène de Witt, a descendant of the great De Witt. She does not seem to have had beauty, but he says of her, "My wife is not merely adorned with virtues; she is covered with them."

The decadence which came upon Holland under William IV of Nassau led him, in 1753, to send his two sons to Geneva to school. "For three reasons," he writes, "I send them away. The first is my dread of the effect of certain religious

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¹Theodore Tronchin, par Henry Tronchin. Paris and Geneva, 1906.

principles on boys of their age. The second, and corollary of the first, is the evil state of morals. How can these live without principle behind them! The third reason is, that unhappily both morals and manners are so lacking."

He was offered the place of physician-in-chief to the infant stadtholder, William V, but declined, and in 1754 quietly departed with his wife and daughter for Switzerland after a residence of nearly twenty-five years in Amsterdam. He received overtures from the regent to return, and also declined an offer from the Empress of Russia to go thither upon his own terms. At Geneva professional pettiness and jealousy threw every obstacle in his way, trying to render his appointment as professor purely honorary, by at first refusing him a place to meet students; but the faculty was beaten, and Tronchin taught sometimes in Latin, sometimes in French, until his final move to Paris.

We have no reason to believe that as a teacher of students he was pre-eminent. He was too sensible a man to ally himself to any existing school of thought in medicine, nor did he found a school himself.

After an exceptionally broad and thorough professional education, which brings him into close contact with eminent men, and after an experience of twenty-five years of practice in which his guiding principle—true follower, of Hippocrates that he was—ever was to study nature, to learn from and be guided by her rather than to combat her, he becomes, perhaps, the leading practitioner of Europe, consulted personally and by letter from far and near. In the Latin preface which he wrote for the edition of Baillou's works, we find, "[Doctors] blinded by their petty disputes, have preferred to lay down laws to nature rather than to search out her own." . . . "A painstaking study of nature is the only foundation on which one can build a system of medicine which will endure. The dogmatism of hypothesis and theory have made medicine the scourge of the human race."

In a letter he says, "The physician walks safely only arm in arm with nature. If he loses sight of her he goes astray, and beneficent nature, held in so slight esteem, is usually all-sufficient, for God, whose work she is, has not been pleased to limit her with the power of keeping the body well, but has added that of restoring it when diseased. The wise physician contents himself with removing obstacles. He restrains nature when she is too active; he stimulates her when she nods; but it is nature alone which cures."

We moderns see and bewail some evidences of the commercial spirit here and there among us. In 1757 Tronchin writes Senac, physician of Louis XV, "Since our art has degenerated into the shameful pursuit of gain, physicians, as a rule, are simply financiers, and so sacrifice their duty to their wants. It is useless to look for delicacy and principle in those who have only wants. The noblest of arts has become the most contemptible and accursed." We see that sometimes the fire burned hotly within him, and then

he spake with his tongue. He writes Dr. Rast, who had, apparently, classed him as a Methodist, "I am no adherent of this or that sect; I will live and die in freedom, following nature step by step, profiting as far as I can by the mistakes of those who do not know or despise her. I thank heaven that I am no sectarian."

Grimm says of him: "Never has a physician been closer student of nature, or seized with greater sagacity her tendencies and hints."

Tronchin himself writes: "The first requisite in a physician is that he be an honorable man. Science comes next. He should be freely credited with all the harm which he refrains from doing. If sometimes he is blamed for sins of omission these are swamped by those of commission, of which the horde of self-styled healers is daily guilty." Remember that this was written a century and a half ago.

The following also has a closer application to those than to present times. "The patient, intolerant of his state, persuades himself that evacuations are the means to health. Timidity and the clamor of the patient often induce the doctor to act contrary to experience and theory. He bleeds, he purges, he pukes. The sickness gets worse. The sick man loses his head and knows not on which saint to call for health." Tronchin bled, but he bled with brains, not as a routinist.

He writes a patient: "I recall a lady of one of the first cities of France, in an even worse plight than you, who consulted me six years ago with regard to her eight hundred and thirty-third bleeding, which could not be effected in spite of the doctor's orders, because the blood would not flow. The doctor still deemed it necessary. But how let blood if there be none? He proposed to wait a week. 'Between now and then,' said he, 'perhaps' you will make some.' During the expectant period she consulted me." The inference from what follows is that these eight hundred odd bleedings all fell within one year. This seems incredible to us. "A hungry wretch who steals a loaf is hung," is his comment on this case.

Marteau's statement, in 1756, that bleeding killed 4,000 people a year in Paris, 40,000 in France, was condemned by the faculty.

As regards drugs, Tronchin says, "The number of specifics grows less as wisdom increases." He was no lover of the "shotgun" prescription, but gave simple remedies, oftentimes placebos. It is related that a count who traveled far to Geneva for advice compared his prescription with that of several other patients, and all alike called for soap.

His belief in right living, and his shrewdness in promoting it, even in court society during the regency, is shown by his insistence that his pills be taken daily: one at 7 A.M. on rising, a second at 5 after a light meal, a third at 9 after going to bed. These were bread pills!

His biographer says:² "The real novelty of Tronchin's treatment is, in short, hygiene, at that time quite neglected. Many practices which to-day seem to us a matter of course, a number of

² Page 48.

truths which to us are axioms, were then unknown. It is to Tronchin's credit that he brought them to notice and made them adopted, at a time when the mode of life had become more and more artificial, and when the errors of dogmatic medicine took precedence of the demands of nature."

He repeatedly writes: "Lead a more active life, all sorts of exercise are good for you, but remember that over-fatigue is injurious. One is not born an athlete, though training may make one such."

The saddle is a favorite prescription. He advises an abbé to saw wood, an abbess to make her bed and polish her wood floor, with footwear adapted to the purpose, if she can't get exercise outdoors. "I have often cured cases thought to be beyond help, in their own rooms." He advises fencing and gymnastics. He cites the anatomical relation of veins and muscles as an argument for exercise. Evidence of his influence is seen in that the fashionable women who followed his counsels, taking a morning walk with cane and in short skirts, were called "tronchines," and the verb "tronchiner" was coined.

The temptation is great to quote too freely from the letters of this great hygienist. In the main his principles are those universally held today. It is not so much his principles as the fact that he held them one hundred and fifty years ago and had such success in making them effective which interests us.

He condemns bed-curtains and the upholstery of bedrooms, the exclusion of fresh air, nightcaps and heavy perukes and wigs, rich food and late hours. He urges pregnant women to walk abroad, mothers to nurse their children and applies the same supreme common sense to the management of babies that he does to other matters.

It seems quite possible that Rousseau derived from Tronchin many of the principles of the simple life which he preached with such power and effect, especially in "Emile" with regard to the education of children. Tronchin's attitude as to these matters was well known, and he doubtless revealed it in the intercourse which it is known he had with Rousseau. But the latter allowed his logic and rhetoric to carry him to lengths in the hardening process of children which the good sense of Tronchin, never an extremist, would not endorse. The relation between these two men—the one a brilliant egotist, always ill-balanced, and becoming the victim of the mania of persecution, the preacher of morals, who handed over his own children to foundling asylums; the other a doer of the word, of high religious principle, patriotic, of unusual balance and clearness of vision, consistent throughout—relations between such could not indefinitely continue intimate and friendly.

Rousseau's jealous nature could not reconcile itself to the esteem inspired in Mme. d'Épinay, Grimm and Diderot by Tronchin, who was, moreover, the trusted physician of Voltaire.

Tronchin secured for Rousseau the offer of the position of librarian at Geneva, but the latter

refused, doubtless partly for the reason that he was unwilling to live so near Voltaire and suffer an eclipse, to be noted by all.

The words "psychosis" and "neurasthenia" had not been coined in Tronchin's day, but that which they represent was common enough, and among fashionable women was called "vapors." To a lady who details her sensations by letter he writes: "Your imagination, madame, frightens me more than your ailments. It is ready to make you the victim of those who prey upon it. You have been victimized so often, and will be again, that from the bottom of my heart I am sorry for you, and this is perhaps all the service I can render you. Most of the ills you have taken the trouble to recount to me, and which pity has constrained me to read from end to end, are factitious, unreal; the number of these actual or possible ills is almost limitless. They result from the bodily and mental weakness of those afflicted, the multiplication of bad remedies, the ignorance and rascality of those who give them. Disease is thus manufactured on a larger scale than anything else in Europe."

As few physicians of his time Tronchin understood and rationally availed himself of, for the benefit of his patients, the action of mind on body and body on mind. Voltaire says of him, "He knows human nature; he is a great physician." Grimm speaks in much the same terms.

He writes Mme. de la Popelinière: "It is not our fault if our art has limits. These are inherent in the nature of things; but we are wrong, very wrong, if we shut our eyes to these limitations or fear to acknowledge their existence to our patients." Yet this is the man whose success in Paris and whose revolutionary common-sense methods led to caricature and abuse. He was called charlatan and pirate. In a burlesque poem in three cantos, Tronchinades, a deputation of the Paris faculty, visits and bids the Genevan begone, for they had no fees since he came. "The Paris physicians justly reproach me with having seen too many patients," Tronchin says. "Had I had my own way, I should have seen fewer. No one realizes more keenly than I that too large a practice is criminal." "*On ne voit pas de maladies quand on voit trop de malades.*"

It would not be fair to convey the impression that Tronchin had only detractors among the profession of Paris, and it must be confessed that his language was not always as reserved as it might have been wise or even just. His condemnation of the prevalent mode of treatment sometimes included those who merely carried out the ideas of their time. He was a member of the College of Physicians of Montpellier and of the Academy of Surgery of Paris; foreign associate of the academies of Science of Berlin, Paris, Edinburgh, Stockholm and St. Petersburg, and member of the Royal Society of London.

He was criticised for having written nothing, and partly for this reason, apparently, partly to show his esteem for the Duke of Orleans, published in Geneva in 1757, a monograph on "*Colica Pictorum*," written in Latin and dedicated to

the duke. This production was scarcely worthy of him, in the main a compilation in which he did not exercise the critical acumen which he did in dealing with patients. It was savagely attacked by Bouvart and others. Bouvart's pen was sharpened by his antagonism to inoculation, Tronchin's connection with which next claims our attention.

How Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had her son inoculated at Constantinople in 1718, her daughter in London in 1720, and how the practice was soon after adopted in England, is a many times told tale. Opposition there was plenty, as well from the doctors as the clergy. The Bishop of St. Andrews declared in the pulpit that it was tempting God to ingraft a disease, and his ingenious diagnosis of Job's parlous state was inoculation for smallpox done by the devil himself. Dr. Zabdiel Boylston inoculated his son in Boston in 1721 "with prayer and fasting." But the Continent would have none of it.

Tronchin, in 1748, while still in Amsterdam, and president of the College of Physicians there, was led to inoculate his older son by the narrow escape of the younger brother from dying of the natural disease. He then inoculated 9 other persons, and some four years later, when the disease was rife in the city, others; and the leading people soon came to regard inoculation with favor. During a visit to Geneva in 1749 he inoculated first his nephew and then some relatives and friends. Thence the practice spread into other parts of Switzerland. He insisted on the importance of a good state of general health as a pre-requisite to inoculation. He sent his patients to the country, made them exercise and eat moderately. "Inoculation demands greater precaution in Europe than in the East, where a simple life is the rule," he says. He inoculated on the leg, through incision in adults, small blisters in young children. Thanks to his rigid and far-sighted precautions, his success was unbroken.

There can be no question that the influence of Voltaire, who settled in Délices in 1755 just as Tronchin returned to his native city, greatly helped the cause. He wrote Richelieu in May, 1755, "Thirty people are to be inoculated this month in Geneva. The practice has the same following and success as in England. The turn of the French comes late, but it will come."

In 1755, the Chevalier de Chastellux was successfully inoculated at Paris. It was he who, as the Marquis de Chastellux, came to this country, fought in our Revolutionary War and published his well-known volumes of travel.

The death of Mlle. de Châtelain after inoculation put an end to the practice. Soon after, however, the Duke of Orleans decided to have his two children inoculated, and to intrust the operation to Tronchin, who, without confiding in any one either his destination or errand, started for Paris, Feb. 12, 1756. In spite of all sorts of pressure against the experiment, the Duke stood firm, and March 25, Louis Philippe, later to be called Égalité, and still later guillotined, and his sister, were inoculated at the Palais Royal, which was quarantined for three weeks. When

it became known that the children were well there was great enthusiasm, and the curiosity to see Tronchin may be imagined. The street that he lived in was almost impassable for carriages, and he was the chief subject of interest and talk in Paris.

After a stay of about four months he returned to Geneva, toward which patients now streamed from every direction to seek advice or be inoculated. The practice made no headway in France, however, for twenty odd years, though it was cussed and discussed and led to such stormy scenes in the faculty that Parliament was forced to intervene. D'Alembert says that the sessions of the faculty came so near to being bloody as to warrant calling surgery to the aid of medicine.

In 1759, Tronchin was called to Parma to inoculate the only son of the reigning duke, whose wife, daughter of Louis XV, and whose daughters also had, at an interval of four years, died at smallpox, one at Paris, the other at Vienna. The operation was a perfect success. Eight months later, the duke who had thus protected his son, succumbed to the disease, as did Louis XV in 1774.

Two months after Tronchin's return to Geneva to live, Voltaire, banished from France, driven from Prussia, after a year of wandering, settled at Délices, later removing to Ferney. The two men had, years before, corresponded, perhaps met. In 1739 Tronchin writes to his friend, the Chevalier de Jaucourt, "It is mortifying to reflect that Voltaire is a scamp, rattle-brained, a man devoid of both judgment and conduct." Within a year after Voltaire's arrival near Geneva Tronchin writes again: "What can one expect of a man who is always in contradiction with himself, whose heart has always been the dupe of his intellect? His moral side from earliest infancy has been so abnormal and twisted that he is an artificial being, unlike any other. Of all men the one whom he knows least is himself." The relation between the two became pretty close. Tronchin never approved of Voltaire and seems to have understood him thoroughly. His position and influence in Geneva, and the favor in which he was held at the Court of France, were no mean additions to his professional skill, as Voltaire clearly saw. The poet laid siege to the physician, generally addressing him as "Mon Aesculape," or even "Aesculape-Apollon."

Tronchin was no friend of either tea or coffee, which latter Voltaire took to excess. The most that Tronchin could do was to limit him to three cups a day of a mixture of coffee and chocolate! No sooner is Voltaire at Délices than he writes to his banker in Lyons, Robert Tronchin, cousin of the doctor, to send him a rhubarb root big enough to purge a province. He finds, however, that Aesculapius prefers cassia and then writes for 20 lb. of it as a winter supply. He is solicitous for the health of his Paris sister, Mme. de Fontaine, and suggests, "Can't you give her equal parts of cassia, manna and oil to soften, sweeten and clean the dry guts of the niece as you have those of the uncle?"

The mutual relations and the correspondence of these two remarkable men throw much light on the characters of both. No brief abstract can do justice.

After the death of Louis XV, Voltaire returned to Paris and was very anxious lest Tronchin should refuse to take charge of his health. He could not quite bring himself to follow Tronchin's good advice to return to Ferney and a quiet life. Tronchin took care of him in his last illness, and writes Bonnet of the unedifying end as follows: "Had my principles become slack and needed a firm bond, the man whom I have seen waste away, and whose death agony I have watched, would have furnished a very Gordian knot; and the contrast between the death of a good man, the close of a fine day, with that of Voltaire, is that between a beautiful day and a tempest, between the serenity of soul of the sage, who merely ceases to live, and the frightful torments of him for whom death is the King of Terrors."

In 1762 Tronchin declined the appointment of physician-in-chief to the Duke of Orleans, but three years later accepted, and betook himself permanently to Paris, making only infrequent visits to Geneva thereafter. He was lodged at the Palais Royal, provided with a cook and three lackeys, a carriage and two pair of fine black horses. He says that his purpose in changing his abode was to moderate his work and limit his enormous correspondence, for we must remember that he advised many patients only by letter on a statement of their physician, without seeing or examining them himself. This was more feasible at that day, when diagnosis rested on symptoms rather than on signs, and there were no instruments of precision. He was doubtless weary of the civic and religious strife then rampant in Geneva, from which he could not keep entirely clear.

Professional jealousy was again awakened in Paris on his return, though the surgeons welcomed him.

A prominent ecclesiastic who consulted him for intractable facial neuralgia submitted to double nerve section under his supervision with brilliant success.

He used suspension for the nine-year-old Duc de Chartres for a curvature of the spine, and inveighed against the heavy and brutal mechanical appliances of the time.

The Dauphin of France, son of Louis XV, and father of Louis XVI, died of consumption. Soon after it was found that his wife was also a victim of the disease, doubtless contracted from devotion to her sick husband. The king, much to the disgust of the court physicians, had Tronchin called in consultation January, 1767. As soon as he entered, struck by the foulness of the air, he exclaimed: "The princess is poisoned," and ordered the windows opened. It was the custom at Versailles to shut tight all windows Nov. 1 — All Saints' Day — and keep them so until Easter. This exclamation was twisted in meaning to imply an accusation that the Dauphiness, as gossip said had been the fate of her husband and of Mme.

de Pompadour, was being disposed of by the Duc de Choiseul, and won for Tronchin the undying and implacable hatred of that statesman. For this Tronchin bore no malice, and even publicly showed his esteem for the fallen Choiseul when he went into exile. Tronchin took full charge of the princess, giving her fresh air, feeding her generously, sending her out on foot and to drive. The fever subsided, and for a time she improved. But a copious hemoptysis occurred, and she failed and died March 13, 1767.

The faculty took advantage of the revolutionary treatment and every feature of the case to discredit Tronchin, but without success, save to cause him trouble. He retained the confidence of the king, and of his friends and patients.

To Dr. C. G. Cumston I owe a reference to Tronchin in Casanova's Memoirs. "I have been assured, though I have difficulty in believing, that he [Tronchin] cured a phthisical subject of a secret disease by means of the milk of an ass, which he had submitted to thirty massive mercurial frictions administered by four strong porters."³

In his last years he devoted two hours daily to poor patients, giving them the money to buy their remedies. He died at the Palais Royal as he had lived, with dignity and calm, large numbers of the poor following his bier to the grave.

It is impossible in a sketch like this to do justice to its subject. But I trust I may have succeeded in stimulating some of you to read his life in detail. He doubtless had faults—what of that? It profits not to seek or dwell upon them. It is uplifting as well as interesting to study the career of a high-principled, thoroughly trained physician, who, far in advance of most physicians of his time, followed the dictates of common sense in therapeutics, who worked with rather than combated nature, and to give him a tardy recognition which was accorded by the laity but denied him by the profession of his time. He made no discoveries, but rendered enormous service to a great number of people. His patients became his friends. His life was consistent throughout. He was one of the greatest practitioners of medicine the world has seen. This may be a strong statement, but I believe it to be true. We can all profit by his example, thanking God that we live at a time when all true physicians are humble followers and students of nature, when the impassioned advocates of theory and hypothesis have gone to their long rest and when Medicine is coming to her Kingdom.

AN UNUSUALLY EXTENSIVE MILK-BORNE OUTBREAK OF TYPHOID FEVER.

BY CHARLES HARRINGTON, M.D.,

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ON March 31, 1908, after several months of practical freedom from typhoid fever, a case of that disease occurred in Jamaica Plain, followed,

³ Vol. iv, p. 455.