

The Medicine Man

George Gissing

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One could not say that Dr. Bobbett had lost caste, for his birth was of the humblest, and education had done little towards polishing his manners. His social decline seemed very much in the nature of things; cursing his folly, be none the less adjusted himself to circumstances, and without any great effort. For a moment he had emerged; thanks to his father, the shoemaker, he found himself a qualified medical man, and became the assistant of a respectable practitioner in a London suburb; then his father died, and, with the help of a small sum of money that fell to him, Bobbett ruined himself. It was all very well to start an independent practice, but less advisable to marry a woman of no character and inclined to drink. At thirty or so Bobbett was adrift. After some years of grimy experience, he managed to open his 'dispensary,' and a year or two more brought him the only kind of professional success he could now hope for. To work as a healer, amid the press of obscure and often miserable mortality, would appear to some men no ignoble lot; but Dr. Bobbett was incapable of illusions concerning the people with whom he lived, and had no temptation to mask his own motives. He had got rid of his fatal wife, but, at the same time, had lost all ambition. Like the wise man of old, though in a somewhat different sense, he knew that he knew nothing. His scientific acquirements, never more than the barely sufficient, were blurred in a squalid past, and rule-of-thumb answered well enough for his day and night practice among folk infinitely more ignorant than himself.

He was strongly built and coarse-featured, with a distrustful, defiant eye, a flattish nose, a broad mouth showing teeth the worse for tobacco. When attending patients in his dispensary (which stood between a pawnbroker's shop and a small eating-house), he wore no coat, and often no collar; the wrist-bands of his shirt were frayed and dirty, and his hands never fastidiously clean; from his waistcoat pocket protruded a pair of scissors; under his arm-pit was thrust a handkerchief. At intervals he came forth from his consulting-chamber, and surveyed, with a genial grin, the coughing, hawking, chattering group that sat in the bare, ill-smelling ante-room.

'You there again?' he would perchance remark to some haggard scarecrow. 'Got the money?'

The reply, as likely as not, would begin with semi-articulate irrelevancies, which the doctor speedily cut short.

'Off with you! Go to the hospital. Now then, next patient.'

There was no hospital less than a mile away a fact not disregarded by Dr. Bobbett when he chose the locality of his practice. For an ordinary consultation, with medicine, he charged one shilling, occasionally smaller sums, and it was no unusual thing for him to see thirty patients in the course of an evening. When summoned to a house, which generally happened after midnight, his charge was regulated by circumstances. In every such case he thrust his head out of the window, and, after hearing what was the matter, asked, 'Have you got the money?' Unless payment were made in advance, he firmly refused to set forth. In Dr. Bobbett's part of London this behaviour was strictly professional; it could only be taxed with inhumanity by one completely a stranger to Dr. Bobbett's experience.

In course of time he found it necessary to engage an assistant. The applicants for such a post would be numerous enough, but Dr. Bobbett was saved the trouble of choice by a happy accident. Late one night, in the West-End, where he had sought an hour's relaxation in casual society, he encountered an old acquaintance, a fellow 'medical'

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of his earliest student days. This man, Dent by name, having even less aptitude for the profession than Bobbett himself, had never reached a diploma: by ways of vulgar dissipation he fell to shifts for bare life, and now, after years of vagabondage, was hungering as clerk in the office of a money-lender. Mr. Dent suffered from the common complaint of indolence: in conversation with Bobbett he called it rheumatic gout. They recognised each other at a drinking-bar, where Bobbett's peculiar voice, raised in facetious colloquy with a female companion, struck on the ear of his quondam friend. Dent, much given to the melting mood when his pocket allowed him to frequent places such as this, shed tears of joy. He was a weak, aimless, soft-hearted fellow, incapable of rascality as of reasonable effort, wont to chide the fates that had dealt so hardly with him, and abounding in foolish gratitude to any one who gave him even contemptuous notice. Walking eastward, arm-in-arm with Bobbett, who was nearly twice his size, he poured forth a very honest account of himself. The Doctor listened and reflected.

'I tell you what,' said Bobbett bluntly; 'I want a dispenser. Ten bob a-week and your grub. What do you say?'

'How can I dispense? I've forgotten'

The Doctor interrupted with an unsavoury expletive. Half-an-hour's instruction would be all that was needed. In short, he would take no refusal; and the very next day Mr. Dent compounded drugs at the dispensary. Truly, it was no difficult matter to make up Dr. Bobbett's prescriptions. What the patients chiefly regarded was quantity. Having to bring their own receptacles, most of them came with wine bottles, and Bobbett rarely sent them away with less than full measure. The assistant, who retained something of a fair education, viewed with astonishment many of his employer's proceedings, but he allowed himself no comments, and only after a week or two of shrewd observation did Bobbett disclose the purpose which had been in his mind from the first.

'Look here, Jack, my work's getting a bit too heavy for me. I want you to give a hand; take an evening or two with the patients, and go out at night now and then. What do you say?'

Dent was startled, but less seriously than he would have been a few days ago. He made a timid objection, met by the Doctor with good-natured ribaldry. As they sat over their drinks in the consulting-room Dr. Bobbett grew communicative and philosophical.

'We've got to live, my son, and there's many a less honest way. The fact of the matter is that you and I are just as good doctors for people of this sort as if we'd both got our M.D. Yes, and a damned sight better! As you see, it's mostly women, and I defy any man living to put low-class women through a course of treatment unless he's got them in a hospital. Do you suppose they do what I tell them? Do you suppose they take the right doses or at the right times, or do any single thing as they are told to do it? They can't! If their lives depend upon it, they can't! They come to a doctor just to ease their minds with talking, and get a quart or two of stuff to swallow whenever they think of it. I'm telling you the plain God's truth. They're so blasted ignorant that they don't understand what medical treatment means. It's a superstition; a bottle of coloured stuff for internal or external use, is a charm, and nothing else. Know what I mean by that? Yes, of course you do. You remember the "medicine man" in Indian stories; that's what we are. If I gave them a bit of wood to hang round their necks, they'd do it, and be as pleased as Punch, and come telling me it had done them no end of good. And what's the use of science for people of that sort? Of course, I'm speaking of ordinary complaints. There's midwifery and surgery I shouldn't put you on to those jobs at all events, not just yet. But the bulk of a practice such as this is just fooling, and you're as competent as I am, or any other man. We have to treat pretty much as we should have done if we'd lived in the Middle Ages. If they get well so much the better. If they don't, why, there was no help for it out of a hospital. You shall begin to-morrow. You may have a bit of trouble at first: they'll be wanting to see me; but you've got a soft way of speaking, and I shouldn't wonder if a lot of them come to prefer Dr. Dent to Dr. Bobbett. He's a rough-tongued sort of , is Dr. Bobbett!'

So, on specified terms, the arrangement came about, and with issue satisfactory to all concerned save, perhaps, to those patients whom neither of the practitioners could save from gloomy Avernus. For Dr. Bobbett, though in

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unpolished phrase, had uttered a truth which should be laid to heart by all excessively anxious about the ignorant poor. The day arrived when Dr. Dent, long since instructed out of scruple, did not shrink even from furnishing a death certificate. To be sure, he signed it with the name of his qualified partner, but that was a mere formality.