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THOUGHTS ON THE TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF MEDICINE¹

TWENTY years ago at St. Louis I pointed out the contrast between the definitions of medicine in two French dictionaries published one hundred years apart.

In a dictionary of the academy published in 1789, one may read these words: "Medicine . . . the art that teaches the method of preserving the health and healing diseases . . . (Medicine is a conjectural art)."

And one hundred years later in Littré's dictionary: "Medicine . . . the art which aims at preserving the health and healing diseases, which is based on the science of diseases or pathology."

The first definition was not quite fair, for already, in 1789, there had been for centuries those who had carefully observed and recorded and reasoned, and laid unshaken foundations for the scientific basis on which the medical art has come to rest. But the dramatic contrast between the medicine of the French revolution and the medicine of one hundred years later was hardly exaggerated.

Fifty-one years ago, in but a few weeks, the association between two great men began with this letter to Louis Pasteur:²

My dear Sir:

Will you allow me to offer you a pamphlet which I am sending you by the same post, which gives an account of some studies on a subject on which you have shed so much light, the theory of germs and fermentation? I like to think that you may read with some interest that which I have written on an organism that you first studied in your memoir on so-called lactic fermentation.

I know not whether the British Annals of Surgery have ever come under your observation. If you happen to have read them you have probably found, from time to time, notes on the antiseptic system which I have been putting to the test during these last nine years.

Let me take this occasion to offer you my most cordial thanks for having demonstrated by your brilliant researches the truth of the theory of the germs of putrefaction, and of having thus given me the only principle which could bring an antiseptic system to a satisfactory completion.

If you should ever come to Edinburgh it will, I fancy,

¹ Remarks made on the occasion of the dedication of the Colorado State Hospital and School of Medicine on January 23, 1925.

² This is translated from Valléry-Radot's "Life of Pasteur." I know not whether the original was in French or English.—W. S. T.

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