

GUY PATIN  
AND THE  
MEDICAL PROFESSION IN PARIS  
IN THE XVII<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

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By

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WITH SEVENTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS  
INCLUDING NINE FULL PAGE PLATES



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travel in different countries, she can well take the advice of this Italian, and beyond doubt she could not easily see Rome, the Pope, and the many butterflies that are there, without travesting herself as she has done, whether she has done it seriously or not.

The Marquis de Charton was murdered as he came out from mass at the church of the Augustines. Patin tells with some gusto how one of his murderers was beheaded and the other broken on the wheel.

#### ABORTION

Abortion was an antisocial crime which prevailed to a terrible extent in the highest social circles in France during the seventeenth century. Bayle<sup>6</sup> devotes one of his most interesting marginalia to a discussion of the question. In spite of civil and ecclesiastical decrees and proclamations and of the special abhorrence with which the crime was regarded by the Church of Rome, the *grandes dames* of the time made light of the earthly and spiritual terrors which were held up to them and persistently resorted to crime to conceal their shame. Bayle uses this to support the thesis that the fear of

<sup>6</sup> Dictionnaire biographique. Guy Patin.

worldly shame is a stronger sentiment than that of religion. There was a large class of men and women who practiced abortion as a specialty, the latter drawn chiefly from the ranks of the midwives. It was estimated that over six hundred cases were known to have occurred, the greater part among women of high social position, in less than one year in Paris alone. Patin writes to Falconet (June 22, 1660) of a very notorious case of this kind; Mademoiselle de Guerchi had been seduced by the duc de Vitry:

They make a great clamor here about the death of Mademoiselle de Guerchi. They had imprisoned the midwife at the Châtelet, but she has been taken from there to the conciergerie by order of the Court. The curé of Saint Eustache has refused sepulture to the body of the lady. They say that it was carried to the hotel de Condé, and was there put in quicklime in order to consume it soon, so that it could not be identified if anyone came to see it. The midwife has defended herself well up to now. . . . But I believe the question will be put to her. The vicars-general and the plenipotentiaries went to complain to the Premier President that in a year six hundred women, by actual count, have confessed to killing and destroying their fruit.

The midwife of Mademoiselle de Guerchi, a woman named Constantin admitted that the lady had died in her house but denied having given her any abortifacient. She said she was told that the patient had taken some medicine, but that when she first saw her she was so very ill that there was nothing to do but to try to alleviate her sufferings. The Premier President and the *lieutenant criminel* consulted Patin about the case. A surgeon, named Le Large, was accused of complicity, but managed to exculpate himself though Patin thought his excuses very lame. The midwife was found guilty and hung at the Croix du Trahoir, as Guy says *en belle compagnie*.

The midwives were under regulation in the sixteenth century, and their moral character as well as their professional qualifications were looked into very carefully. Patin writes to Falconet (September 14, 1660) that he had been appointed by the Premier President to hold an examination for the appointment of a midwife to the Hôtel-Dieu, not only to serve the patients there but also to teach her profession in its wards. Thus the vast clinical material in the enormous hospital was utilized for teaching purposes at a time when clinical teaching was

almost unknown elsewhere. Blondel, the Dean of the Faculté de Médecine, officiated with Patin at the examination, and a short time afterwards they held another examination for the purpose of choosing a lithotomist to the Hôtel-Dieu.

The clergy were as depraved as their flocks. Their charges were openly bought and sold, and those who had enough money and influence would accumulate a number of benefices which they shamelessly neglected except for the collection of the incomes due from them. The lives of many of the most prominent ecclesiastics were shockingly immoral and fully justify the many aspersions which Patin casts upon what he sarcastically terms the sacred institution of celibacy. The Jesuits though not so openly immoral in their lives were ambitious and constantly mingling in political affairs. The one bright spot in the religious life of the time was afforded by the followers of Jansen, the Port Royalists, and they were looked upon with suspicion and hatred by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church because of their alleged heterodoxy but especially because of their open reprobation of the disorderly lives of their fellow clergy and the earnest efforts which they

made to purify the church. To the non-medical student of the times, Patin's letters are full of interest because of their constant references to current events and to the great personages who figured in them.

#### LOUIS XIV AND MEDICINE

Garrison<sup>7</sup> directs attention to three episodes in the life of Louis XIV which had a great effect on the medical profession in France. In 1657 the King had an attack of what was probably typhoid fever. His recovery was attributed by many to the antimony which was administered to him by his physicians. The result was a great increase in the vogue of antimony, so much so that a few years later it was restored to the official pharmacopœia. It is needless to say that Patin did not agree in this opinion. In his correspondence he refers in a number of letters to the King's illness. He had been taken ill while with the army and was conveyed from the camp in Flanders to Calais. From contemporary accounts there is but little doubt that his illness was typhoid fever, although, of course, that name was not given to it at that

<sup>7</sup> Garrison, F. History of medicine, Introduction. Philadelphia, 1921.