

**DR. GARTH: THE  
KIT-KAT  
POET, 1661-1718**

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Dr. Garth: the Kit-Kat poet, 1661-1718 by Harvey Cushing

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**HARVEY CUSHING**

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FROM JACOB TONSON'S MEZZOTINT REPRODUCTIONS OF KNELLER'S PORTRAITS OF THE KIT-KAT CLUB MEMBERS.

## DR. GARTH: THE KIT-KAT POET\*

(1681-1718.)

BY HARVEY CUSHING, M. D.

**I**N the reign of Queen Anne, a peasy-cook, one Christopher or Kit for short, 'immortal made by his pyes,' kept a tavern near Temple Bar at the Sign of the Cat and Fiddle. Here was wont to gather a group of the most distinguished men of the time, the patriots that saved Britain, according to the opinion of one who in the succeeding generation bore the name of not the least illustrious of them; leaders of the fashionable world, noblemen, poets, statesmen, soldiers; all fine gentlemen, all earnest Whigs, firmly sworn to support the Protestant succession in the house of Hanover. Of this famous club there were first and last some forty-eight members, including the great Marlborough, Robert Walpole, Godolphin, and Halifax, Addison and Steele, Kneller the artist, and Vanbrugh the builder of Blenheim, Jacob Tonson the famous book-seller—Pope's left leg'd Jacob—and many more besides the subject of this sketch, the popular, the generous, the companionable Garth.

Mary Pierrepont, the daughter of Lord Kingeton, one of the noblemen who helped to make up this distinguished coterie, was during her childhood an object of her father's special pride and fondness, and the following incident which in later years she loved to recall has been thus related by her granddaughter. "One day at a meeting to choose toasts for

\* Read at a Meeting of the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club, December 12, 1904.

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the year, a whim seized him to nominate her, then not eight years old,<sup>1</sup> a candidate, alleging that she was far prettier than any lady on the list. The other members demurred because the rules of the club forbade them to elect a beauty whom they had never seen. 'Then you shall see her,' cried he; and in the gaiety of the moment sent orders home to have her finely dressed, and brought to him at the tavern; where she was received with acclamations, her claim unanimously allowed, her health drunk by every one present, and her name engraved in due form on a drinking glass. The company consisting of some of the most eminent men in England, she went from the lap of one poet or patriot or statesman to the arms of another, was feasted with sweet-meats, overwhelmed with caresses, and," Lady Louisa Stewart adds with a touch of irony, "what perhaps already pleased her better than either, heard her wit and beauty loudly extolled on every side. Pleasure, she said, was too poor a word to express her sensations; they amounted to ecstacy; never again throughout her whole future life, did she pass so happy a day."

It is pleasing to think that Samuel Garth, the single medical member of the club, may have participated in this scene, and that the child toset, whom he, unlike some others, continued to admire throughout his life, was passed to him in turn for a greeting. Little could he then have thought that her name, both in medicine and letters, would almost outshine and outlive his own: for the child heroine of this episode was none other than the Lady Mary Wortley Montague whose gallant struggle against the popular prejudice and professional jealousy of the times, in her effort to introduce

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Mary, according to recent authority (Firth, Dict. of Nat. Bio.), was born in May, 1689, and the Kit-Kat Club, as such, was supposedly not founded until 1703, so that unless the Club held meetings, as is quite possible, before the designation of Kit-Kats was given them, she was not the child she feigned to have been. There is much confusion in regard to dates of many events of these times, especially in regard to such hearsay ones.

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the practice of "ingrafting" against the small-pox, must ever make her an object of interest to medical men.

One may perchance be the more readily excused for plunging into an incident almost in Garth's middle life, inasmuch as there are no details of

How the dim speck of entity began  
To extend its recent form, and stretch to man;  
*The Dispensary, CANTO I.*

and but scant ones of the time intervening until he became the popular and well known figure in the metropolis. He was born of a good family in Yorkshire,<sup>3</sup> probably in 1661; was at school in the village of Ingleton, a neighborhood of most romantic scenery; a student at Peterhouse, the eldest of the Cambridge Colleges, where he matriculated July 6, 1676, received his B. A. in 1679, and five years later a Master's degree in arts. These are the bare facts which carry us through the first twenty-five years of Garth's life without further illumination from contemporary writings. What induced him to take up Physick for his life's work seems not to be known, unless it was the direct influence of his college,<sup>4</sup> and the promise for the better in medicine of Sydenham's and Locke's recent and great reforms. The colleges, however, at the time, had only theoretical instruction in preparation for practice, and it was the custom for those very few students, who like Garth took their degree in arts before entering upon their professional studies, to look elsewhere for opportunities to gain practical knowledge. With this object in 1687 he repaired to Leyden, then approaching the zenith of its medical fame; and there Garth may possibly have touched elbows in

<sup>3</sup>The eldest son of Wm. Garth of Howland Forest in the West Riding (Dict. of Nat. Bio.).

<sup>4</sup>"Among the colleges at least one (Peterhouse) had in past times a laudable custom of urging her fellows to determine themselves in the line of some faculty—going on 'the Law line,' or that of Physic, or of Divinity." Wordsworth's *SCHOLAR ACADEMICÆ*; Some account of the studies at the English Universities in the eighteenth century. Cambridge, 1877.



his classes with the young Dutchman who was destined to become the greatest clinician of his time, and whose name made that of his university famous to the ends of the earth. Four years later (July 7, 1691) Garth received from his alma mater the degree of M.D., and repairing to the metropolis he was promptly admitted (June 26, 1693) a Fellow of the College of Physicians.

He must early have distinguished himself, for in the following year he is said to have delivered the Gulstonian Lecture, choosing *De Respiratione* as his text. Although a request was made that he should do so, Garth never published this discourse, and consequently we have lost the only one of his strictly medical writings of which knowledge has come down to us.

A further and still greater compliment was paid the young physician three years later, in 1697, when he was asked to deliver the annual oration in Latin before the College on St. Luke's Day—better known to us as the Harveian Oration.\*

ORATIO LAUDATORIA  
IN AEDIBUS  
COLLEGII REGALIS MED. LOND.  
17MO DIE SEPTEMBRIS  
HABITA  
A SAM GARTH  
COLL. REG. MED. LOND. SOC.  
LONDINI  
MDCXCVII.

The public tribute that Garth on this occasion paid to William III, as well as the tirade, at the close of the oration, against the professional quackery of the times, proved doubly influential in his career; the tribute, an open demonstration of his political affiliations, bringing him later on his Knighthood; the tirade, immediately, as it made him the acknowledged champion of the College of Physicians in a famous quarrel: for thus he was led to write the poem on which alone

\* An original paper copy of this oration will be found in the Surgeon-General's Library in Washington.

his position among the English poets rests. But to explain this I must retrace my steps.

#### THE DISPENSARIAN QUARREL.

A CERTAIN lack of sympathy seems always to have existed between those privileged to prescribe, and those who are restricted by law to the dispensation alone of drugs; and at the time of which we are writing a combination of circumstances had fanned latent animosity into a public broil. The apothecaries, for the most part, were uneducated men and at a somewhat earlier period their relation to the community was so loosely controlled that even the grocers and pepperers were privileged to dispense drugs and the fact that they were legalized, under certain circumstances, to perform phlebotomy sufficed to bring them intimately into contact with the people as patients. By a charter, granted early in the reign of James I, they had been made "Freemen of the Mystery of Grocers and Apothecaries of the City of London," but soon such remonstrance was raised on all sides against their incompetence and such scandal over the adulteration of their commodities that in 1617, owing to the intervention of one of the few distinguished members of their fraternity, Gideon de Laune, the apothecaries were separated by charter from their former associates, the grocers. The new grant placed them under the control of the College of Physicians and to this body was given the power of inspecting their wares and regulating their actions. This restraint was far from agreeable; its consequences were inevitable. The medical therapy of the time was based almost entirely on empiricism and the vendors of drugs found therefore that it was a simple matter to compete with the qualified practitioners. They encroached more and more on the physician's province; some of them indeed amassing large fortunes thereby.

So modern 'Pothecaries taught the art  
By Doctors' bills to play the Doctor's part,  
Bold in the practice of mistaken rules,  
Prescribe, apply, and call their masters fools.

*Essay on Criticism.*

Thus Pope, some years later, described the situation as analogous in a measure to that occupied by the critics who had come to turn their own arms against the poets from whom they had first learned to write. It has been said by Jeaffreson that the doctors of the day knew so little that the apothecaries found no difficulty in learning as much: so there is no cause to wonder at the story that has come down to us of one of Radcliffe's patients who left him preferring to be treated by a well known apothecary. Thus it was not long before the apothecaries grew away from the restraint legally imposed upon them and regardless of the College began to prescribe widely on their own responsibility. Were they threatened with punishment, they retaliated by refusing to call in consultation the physician who had censured them; an action that in many cases might have completely ruined his practice. The dependence that many placed on these consultations, even at a later date, is illustrated by the story of Mead, who in the morning at Batson's coffee-house, in the evening at Tom's, used to receive apothecaries and charge only half-guinea fees for prescriptions written without seeing the patient. The situation was a most entangled one. The apothecaries defended themselves on the ground that they would prescribe and care for the poor who could not afford to pay the physician's fees in addition to the expense of the drugs; possibly a just claim were our beliefs in their charitable pretenses not shaken by a knowledge of what were their actual practices.

In 1687 the first effort to counteract these abuses was made by the College. An edict was unanimously passed by that body (July 28, 1687), requiring all the fellows, candidates and licentiates to give gratuitous advice to their neighboring poor; but the solution of the difficulty was not so simple. It was in the first place, as at the present day, difficult to designate those who were to be considered "poor;" and the practice not only led to abuses but was further frustrated by the inordinately high price immediately put upon all drugs by the apothecaries. As the patients had not the wherewithal to get them filled, prescriptions were thrown to the winds. Under the shadow of benevolence, too, there is said to have lurked