

**METHOD AND
MEDICINE.
AN ESSAY**

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Method and Medicine. An Essay by Balthazar W. Foster

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LONDON:

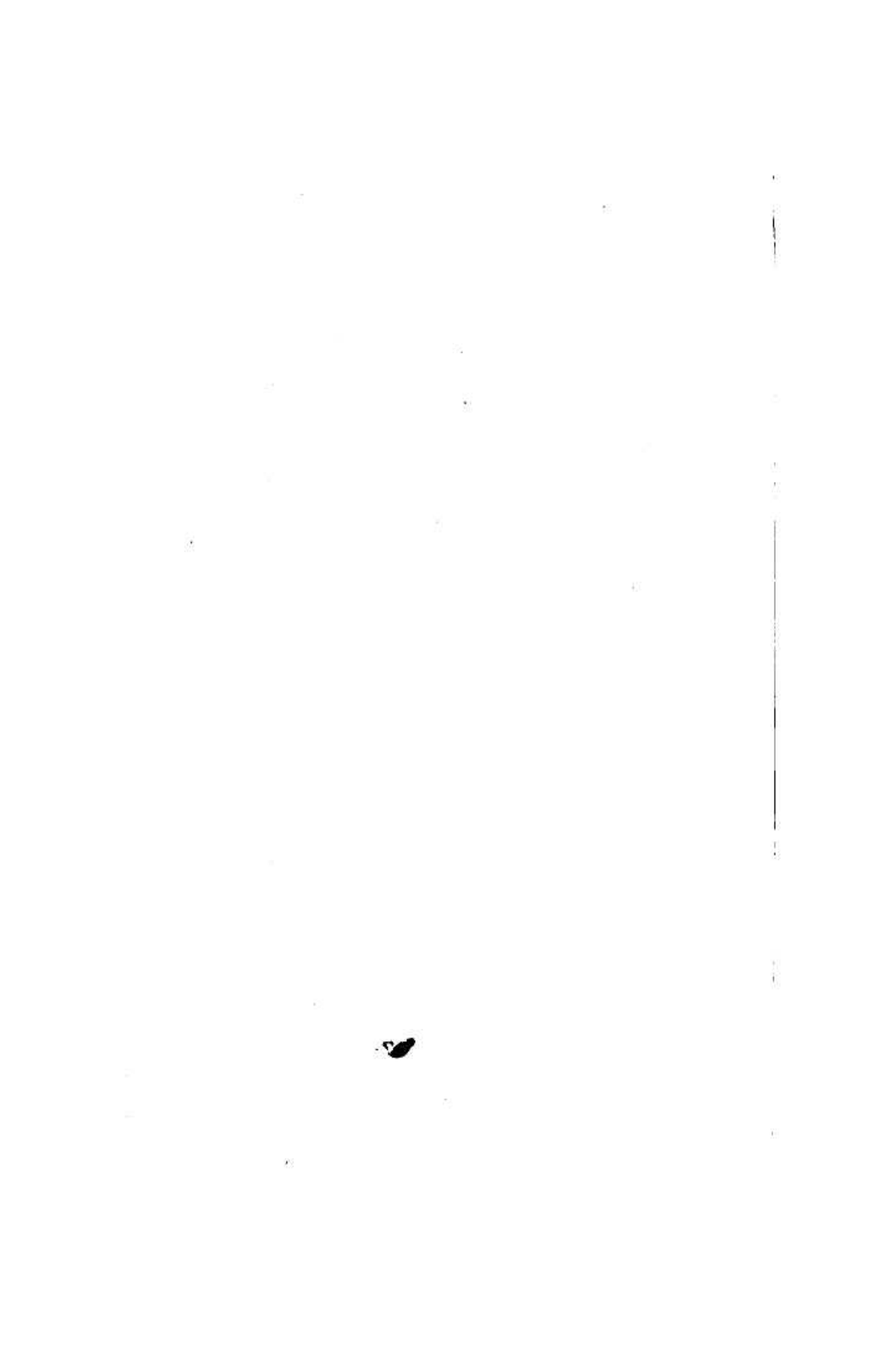
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The following paper originally appeared in a volume of Essays published by the Members of the Birmingham Speculative Club.

B. W. F.



METHOD AND MEDICINE.

A celebrated physiologist recently began one of his lectures with the assertion that "la médecine scientifique" did not exist; and not very long after, a distinguished French surgeon expressed in the pages of the album-number of the *Figaro* his satisfaction at the renunciation of scientific methods in the study of surgery. Two such remarkable statements naturally excited much attention. They were greedily seized upon by sprightly journalists, whose pens, like the hands of Ishmael of old, waging war against every one, rejoiced to find in the unsatisfactory position of medicine a suitable object for attack. Paris soon knew all these writers could tell of the shortcomings of medicine, and the bruit of the discussion reached even London ears. Medical questions always excite a certain amount of general interest, and for the more curious portion of the public they possess a

peculiar kind of fascination. It is remarkable how many persons profess to know a little—some, indeed, a great deal—about medicine, whose public pursuits or private studies have never led them even to the confines of the subject. Few reach a certain age without considering themselves competent to dogmatise, if not to practise, as physicians; and are never willing to admit the alternative of the familiar proverb as to physic or folly at forty. To all such readers the newspaper comments on the opinions of MM. Claude Bernard and Nélaton were of great interest, and to some they were possibly a confirmation of their own assumed ability to comprehend the art of cure.

To others, these opinions, if not so pleasantly reassuring, were no less interesting; for the progress of medicine touches each one more or less nearly; since on such progress, however slight, may depend issues of the most momentous import. To these it was really alarming to learn in the course of a few months that scientific medicine was a fable, and, moreover, that the very methods of modern science were unsuited to the investigation of disease. The absence of science was bad enough, but admitted, at all events, the possibility of improvement. The second statement, however, condemned the very methods by which earnest workers had striven to advance, and demanded the abandonment of all those instruments of precision of which they had been so proud. The fortress of knowledge was no longer to be assailed

by the Chassepot and the Armstrong gun, but must be breached by the bow and arrow and the catapult. Modern methods have not made medicine perfect; therefore, says Nélaton, fall back on the older methods, which, he might have added, left it very imperfect. Medicine has not yet reached the position of a strictly experimental science, and the physician is consequently unable to modify and control the phenomena of disease with the same accuracy that the chemist can regulate the combination and decomposition of his chemicals: therefore Claude Bernard denies the existence of scientific medicine. It may not be without profit to consider these statements by the light which the history of medicine affords. In so doing we shall see how the progress of this branch of knowledge has been retarded by false method; and the lessons derived from the study of past error may teach that better method by which the development of the scientific medicine of the future may be hastened.

Taking its origin in that instinct which impels us to offer aid to the suffering and to endeavour to mitigate pain, medicine must have existed, as Celsus has said, universally and from the beginning of time. The first successful attempts in allaying pain must have appeared so miraculous, that their author no doubt acquired a higher position in the esteem of his kind than has ever since fallen to human lot. Reverenced,

and possibly worshipped during life, he was deified at death. The deification demanded an altar, the altar required priests. Thus we find the priesthood surrounding the cradle of medicine, as we everywhere find them at the origin of civilization and the birth of knowledge. In the temples they fostered the small beginnings of the healing art; but called upon to exercise greater powers than they possessed, they cultivated credulity by a judicious exhibition of the marvellous. The unlimited faith of the people tempted them too strongly; they promised all that was asked, and, like other charlatans, they had great success. As priests serving a divinity they avoided all direct responsibility; thus in failure their reputation was not compromised, while in success it was established. They never forgot that the bolts of Jove fell on Æsculapius for his boldness in restoring the dead to life; they, on the contrary, exercised their powers with singular discretion, and saved themselves from the temptation to imitate their master by driving the dying from their doors. In this last respect quacks of more recent date have been equally discreet.

If in the charge of the priests of Apollo and Æsculapius, medicine did not advance, the practice of the art was nevertheless kept alive, until, in the steady progress of human knowledge, better hands were prepared to receive it. The temples of Æsculapius—Asclepia, as they were called—long maintained their reputation; and the priests, the Asclepiadæ, many of whom were descendants of