

## PARACELSUS.\*

I TOLD you of Vesalius and Rondelet as specimens of the men who three hundred years ago were founding the physical science of the present day, by patient investigation of facts. But such an age as this would naturally produce men of a very different stamp, men who could not imitate their patience and humility; who were trying for royal roads to knowledge, and to the fame and wealth which might be got out of knowledge; who meddled with vain dreams about the occult sciences, alchemy, astrology, magic, the cabala, and so forth, who were reputed magicians, courted and feared for awhile, and then, too often, died sad deaths.

Such had been, in the century before, the famous Dr. Faust—Faustus, who was said to have made a compact with Satan—actually one of the inventors of printing—immortalised in Goethe's marvellous poem.

Such, in the first half of the sixteenth century, was Cornelius Agrippa—a doctor of divinity and a knight-at-arms; secret-service diplomatist to the Emperor Maximilian in Austria; astrologer, though unwilling, to his daughter Margaret, Regent of the Low Countries;

\* This lecture was given at Cambridge in 1869, and has not had the benefit of the author's corrections for the press.

writer on the occult sciences and of the famous "De Vanitate Scientiarum," and what not? who died miserably at the age of forty-nine, accused of magic by the Dominican monks from whom he had rescued a poor girl, who they were torturing on a charge of witchcraft; and by them hunted to death; nor to death only, for they spread the fable—such as you may find in Delrio the Jesuit's "Disquisitiones on Magic"\*—that his little pet black dog was a familiar spirit, as Butler has it in "Hudibras":

Agrippa kept a Stygian pug  
 I' the garb and habit of a dog—  
 That was his taste; and the cur  
 Read to th' occult philosopher,  
 And taught him subtly to maintain  
 All other sciences are vain.

Such also was Jerome Cardan, the Italian scholar and physician, the father of algebraic science (you all recollect Cardan's rule), believer in dreams, prognostics, astrology; who died, too, miserably enough, in old age.

Cardan's sad life, and that of Cornelius Agrippa, you can, and ought to read for yourselves, in two admirable biographies, as amusing as they are learned, by Professor Morley, of the London University. I have not chosen either of them as a subject for this lecture, because Mr. Morley has so exhausted what is to be known about them, that I could tell you nothing which I had not stolen from him.

But what shall I say of the most famous of these men—Paracelsus? whose name you surely know. He too has been immortalised in a poem which you all ought to have read, one of Robert Browning's earliest and one of his best creations.

\* Delrio's book, a famous one in its day, was published about 1612.

I think we must accept as true Mr. Browning's interpretation of Paracelsus's character. We must believe that he was at first an honest and high-minded, as he was certainly a most gifted, man; that he went forth into the world, with an intense sense of the worthlessness of the sham knowledge of the pedants and quacks of the schools; an intense belief that some higher and truer science might be discovered, by which diseases might be actually cured, and health, long life, happiness, all but immortality, be conferred on man; an intense belief that he, Paracelsus, was called and chosen by God to find out that great mystery, and be a benefactor to all future ages. That fixed idea might degenerate—did, alas! degenerate—into wild self-conceit, rash contempt of the ancients, violent abuse of his opponents. But there was more than this in Paracelsus. He had one idea to which, if he had kept true, his life would have been a happier one—the firm belief that all pure science was a revelation from God; that it was not to be obtained at second or third hand, by blindly adhering to the words of Galen or Hippocrates or Aristotle, and putting them (as the scholastic philosophers round him did) in the place of God: but by going straight to nature at first hand, and listening to what Bacon calls “the voice of God revealed in facts.” True and noble is the passage with which he begins his “*Labyrinthus Medicorum*,” one of his attacks on the false science of his day,

“The first and highest book of all healing,” he says, “is called wisdom, and without that book no man will carry out anything good or useful . . . And that book is God Himself. For in Him alone who hath created all things, the knowledge and principle of all things dwells . . . without Him all is folly. As the sun

shines on us from above, so He must pour into us from above all arts whatsoever. Therefore the root of all learning and cognition is, that we should seek first the kingdom of God—the kingdom of God in which all sciences are founded. . . . If any man think that nature is not founded on the kingdom of God, he knows nothing about it. All gifts," he repeats again and again, confused and clumsily (as is his wont), but with a true earnestness, "are from God."

The true man of science, with Paracelsus, is he who seeks first the kingdom of God in facts, investigating nature reverently, patiently, in faith believing that God, who understands His own work best, will make him understand it likewise. The false man of science is he who seeks the kingdom of this world, who cares nothing about the real interpretation of facts: but is content with such an interpretation as will earn him the good things of this world—the red hat and gown, the ambling mule, the silk clothes, the partridges, capons, and pheasants, the gold florins chinking in his palm. At such pretenders Paracelsus sneered, at last only too fiercely, not only as men whose knowledge consisted chiefly in wearing white gloves, but as rogues, liars, villains, and every epithet which his very racy vocabulary, quickened (it is to be feared) by wine and laudanum, could suggest. With these he contrasts the true men of science. It is difficult for us now to understand how a man setting out in life with such pure and noble views should descend at last (if indeed he did descend) to be a quack and a conjuror—and die under the imputation that

Bombastes kept a devil's bird  
Hid in the pommel of his sword,

and have, indeed, his very name, Bombast, used to

this day as a synonym of loud, violent, and empty talk. To understand it at all, we must go back and think a little over these same occult sciences which were believed in by thousands during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The reverence for classic antiquity, you must understand, which sprang up at the renaissance in the fifteenth century, was as indiscriminating as it was earnest. Men caught the trash as well as the jewels. They put the dreams of the Neoplatonists, Iamblicus, Porphyry, or Plotinus, or Proclus, on the same level as the sound dialectic philosophy of Plato himself. And these Neoplatonists were all, more or less, believers in magic—Theurgy, as it was called—in the power of charms and spells, in the occult virtues of herbs and gems, in the power of adepts to evoke and command spirits, in the significance of dreams, in the influence of the stars upon men's characters and destinies. If the great and wise philosopher Iamblicus believed such things, why might not the men of the sixteenth century?

And so grew up again in Europe a passion for what were called the Occult sciences. It had always been haunting the European imagination. Mediæval monks had long ago transformed the poet Virgil into a great necromancer. And there were immense excuses for such a belief. There was a mass of collateral evidence that the occult sciences were true, which it was impossible then to resist. Races far more ancient, learned, civilised, than any Frenchman, German, Englishman, or even Italian, in the fifteenth century had believed in these things. The Moors, the best physicians of the Middle Ages, had their heads full, as the "Arabian Nights" prove, of enchanters, genii, peris, and what

not? The Jewish rabbis had their Cabala, which sprang up in Alexandria, a system of philosophy founded on the mystic meaning of the words and the actual letters of the text of Scripture, which some said was given by the angel Ragiel to Adam in Paradise, by which Adam talked with angels, the sun and moon, summoned spirits, interpreted dreams, healed and destroyed; and by that book of Ragiel, as it was called, Solomon became the great magician and master of all the spirits and their hoarded treasures.

So strong, indeed, was the belief in the mysteries of the Cabala, that Reuchlin, the restorer of Hebrew learning in Germany, and Pico di Mirandola, the greatest of Italian savants, accepted them; and not only Pope Leo X. himself, but even statesmen and warriors received with delight Reuchlin's cabalistic treatise, "De Verbo Mirifico," on the mystic word "Schemhamphorash"—that hidden name of God, which whosoever can pronounce aright is, for the moment, lord of nature and of all dæmons.

Amulets, too, and talismans; the faith in them was exceeding ancient. Solomon had his seal, by which he commanded all dæmons; and there is a whole literature of curious nonsense, which you may read if you will, about the Abraxas and other talismans of the Gnostics in Syria; and another, of the secret virtues which were supposed to reside in gems: especially in the old Roman and Greek gems, carved into intaglios with figures of heathen gods and goddesses. Lapidaria, or lists of these gems and their magical virtues, were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. You may read a great deal that is interesting about them at the end of Mr. King's book on gems.

Astrology too; though Pico di Mirandola might

set himself against the rest of the world, few were found daring enough to deny so ancient a science. Luther and Melancthon merely followed the regular tradition of public opinion when they admitted its truth. It sprang probably from the worship of the Seven Planets by the old Chaldees. It was brought back from Babylon by the Jews after the Captivity, and spread over all Europe—perhaps all Asia likewise.

The rich and mighty of the earth must needs have their nativities cast, and consult the stars; and Cornelius Agrippa gave mortal offence to the Queen-Dowager of France (mother of Francis I.) because, when she compelled him to consult the stars about Francis's chance of getting out of his captivity in Spain after the battle of Pavia, he wrote and spoke his mind honestly about such nonsense.

Even Newton seems to have hankered after it when young. Among his MSS. in Lord Portsmouth's library at Hurstbourne are whole folios of astrologic calculations. It went on till the end of the seventeenth century, and died out only when men had begun to test it, and all other occult sciences, by experience, and induction founded thereon.

Countless students busied themselves over the transmutation of metals. As for magic, necromancy, pyromancy, geomancy, coscinomancy, and all the other mancies—there was then a whole literature about them. And the witch-burning inquisitors like Sprenger, Bodin, Delrio, and the rest, believed as firmly in the magic powers of the poor wretches whom they tortured to death, as did, in many cases, the poor wretches themselves.

Everyone, almost, believed in magic. Take two cases. Read the story which Benvenuto Cellini, the

sculptor, tells in his life (everyone should read it) of the magician whom he consults in the Coliseum at Rome, and the figure which he sees as he walks back with the magician, jumping from roof to roof along the tiles of the houses.

And listen to this story, which Mr. Froude has dug up in his researches. A Church commissioner at Oxford, at the beginning of the Reformation, being unable to track an escaped heretic, "caused a figure to be made by an expert in astronomy;" by which it was discovered that the poor wretch had fled in a tawny coat and was making for the sea. Conceive the respected head of your College—or whoever he may be—in case you slept out all night without leave, going to a witch to discover whether you had gone to London or to Huntingdon, and then writing solemnly to inform the Bishop of Ely of his meritorious exertions!

In such a mad world as this was Paracelsus born. The son of a Swiss physician, but of noble blood, Philip Aureolus Theophrastus was his Christian name, Bombast von Hohenheim his surname, which last word he turned, after the fashion of the times, into Paracelsus. Born in 1493 at Einsiedeln (the hermitage), in Schweiz, which is still a famous place of pilgrimage, he was often called Eremita—the hermit. Erasmus, in a letter still extant, but suspected not to be genuine, addressed him by that name.

How he passed the first thirty-three years of his life it is hard to say. He used to boast that he had wandered over all Europe, been in Sweden, Italy, in Constantinople, and perhaps in the far East, with barber-surgeons, alchemists, magicians, haunting mines, and forges of Sweden and Bohemia, especially

those which the rich merchants of that day had in the Tyrol.

It was from that work, he said, that he learnt what he knew : from the study of nature and of facts. He had heard all the learned doctors and professors ; he had read all their books, and they could teach him nothing. Medicine was his monarch, and no one else. He declared that there was more wisdom under his bald pate than in Aristotle and Galen, Hippocrates and Rhasis. And fact seemed to be on his side. He reappeared in Germany about 1525, and began working wondrous cures. He had brought back with him from the East an arcanum, a secret remedy, and laudanum was its name. He boasted, says one of his enemies, that he could raise the dead to life with it ; and so the event all but proved. Basle was then the university where free thought and free creeds found their safest home ; and hither Ecolampadius the reformer invited young Paracelsus to lecture on medicine and natural science.

It would have been well for him, perhaps, had he never opened his lips. He might have done good enough to his fellow-creatures by his own undoubted powers of healing. He cured John Frobenius, the printer, Erasmus's friend, at Basle, when the doctors were going to cut his leg off. His fame spread far and wide. Round Basle and away into Alsace he was looked on, even an enemy says, as a new Æsculapius.

But these were days in which in a university everyone was expected to talk and teach, and so Paracelsus began lecturing ; and then the weakness which was mingled with his strength showed itself. He began by burning openly the books of Galen and Avicenna, and

declared that all the old knowledge was useless. Doctors and students alike must begin over again with him. The dons were horrified. To burn Galen and Avicenna was as bad as burning the Bible. And more horrified still were they when Paracelsus began lecturing, not in the time-honoured dog-Latin, but in good racy German, which everyone could understand. They shuddered under their red gowns and hats. If science was to be taught in German, farewell to the Galenists' formulas, and their lucrative monopoly of learning. Paracelsus was bold enough to say that he wished to break up their monopoly; to spread a popular knowledge of medicine. "How much," he wrote once, "would I endure and suffer, to see every man his own shepherd—his own healer." He laughed to scorn their long prescriptions, used the simplest drugs, and declared Nature, after all, to be the best physician—as a dog, he says, licks his wound well again without our help; or as the broken rib of the ox heals of its own accord.

Such a man was not to be endured. They hated him, he says, for the same reason that they hated Luther, for the same reason that the Pharisees hated Christ. He met their attacks with scorn, rage, and language as coarse and violent as their own. The coarseness and violence of those days seem incredible to us now; and, indeed, Paracelsus, as he confessed himself, was, though of gentle blood, rough and unpolished; and utterly, as one can see from his writings, unable to give and take, to conciliate—perhaps to pardon. He looked impatiently on these men who were (not unreasonably) opposing novelties which they could not understand, as enemies of God, who were balking

him in his grand plan for regenerating science and alleviating the woes of humanity, and he outraged their prejudices instead of soothing them.

Soon they had their revenge. Ugly stories were whispered about. Oporinus, the printer, who had lived with him for two years, and who left him, it is said, because he thought Paracelsus concealed from him unfairly the secret of making laudanum, told how Paracelsus was neither more nor less than a sot, who came drunk to his lectures, used to prime himself with wine before going to his patients, and sat all night in pothouses swilling with the boors.

Men looked coldly on him—longed to be rid of him. And they soon found an opportunity. He took in hand some Canon of the city from whom it was settled beforehand that he was to receive a hundred florins. The priest found himself cured so suddenly and easily that, by a strange logic, he refused to pay the money, and went to the magistrates. They supported him, and compelled Paracelsus to take six florins instead of the hundred. He spoke his mind fiercely to them. I believe, according to one story, he drew his long sword on the Canon. His best friends told him he must leave the place; and within two years, seemingly, after his first triumph at Basle, he fled from it a wanderer and a beggar.

The rest of his life is a blank. He is said to have recommenced his old wanderings about Europe, studying the diseases of every country, and writing his books, which were none of them published till after his death. His enemies joyfully trampled on the fallen man. He was a "dull rustic, a monster, an atheist, a quack, a maker of gold, a magician." When he was drunk, one Wetter, his servant, told Erastus

(one of his enemies) that he used to offer to call up legions of devils to prove his skill, while Wetter, in abject terror of his spells, entreated him to leave the fiends alone—that he had sent his book by a fiend to the spirit of Galen in hell, and challenged him to say which was the better system, his or Paracelsus', and what not?

His books were forbidden to be printed. He himself was refused a hearing, and it was not till after ten years of wandering that he found rest and protection in a little village of Carinthia.

Three years afterwards he died in the hospital of St. Sebastian at Salzburg, in the Tyrol. His death was the signal for empirics and visionaries to foist on the public book after book on occult philosophy, written in his name—of which you may see ten folios—not more than a quarter, I believe, genuine. And these foolish books, as much as anything, have helped to keep up the popular prejudice against one who, in spite of all his faults was a true pioneer of science.\* I believe (with those moderns who have tried to do him justice) that under all his verbiage and confusion there was a vein of sound scientific, experimental common sense.

When he talks of astronomy as necessary to be known by a physician, it seems to me that he laughs at astrology, properly so called; that is, that the stars influence the character and destiny of man. Mars, he says, did not make Nero cruel. There would have

\* For a true estimate of Paracelsus you must read "Für Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus von Hohenheim," by that great German physician and savant, Professor Marx, of Göttingen; also a valuable article founded on Dr. Marx's views in the "Nouveau Biographie Universelle;" and also—which is within the reach of all—Professor Maurice's article on Paracelsus in Vol. II. of his history of "Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy." But the best key to Paracelsus is to be found in his own works.

been long-lived men in the world if Saturn had never ascended the skies; and Helen would have been a wanton, though Venus had never been created. But he does believe that the heavenly bodies, and the whole skies, have a physical influence on climate, and on the health of men.

He talks of alchemy, but he means by it, I think, only that sound science which we call chemistry, and at which he worked, wandering, he says, among mines and forges, as a practical metallurgist.

He tells us—what sounds startling enough—that magic is the only preceptor which can teach the art of healing; but he means, it seems to me, only an understanding of the invisible processes of nature, in which sense an electrician or a biologist, a Faraday or a Darwin, would be a magician; and when he compares medical magic to the Cabalistic science, of which I spoke just now (and in which he seems to have believed), he only means, I think, that as the Cabala discovers hidden meaning and virtues in the text of Scripture, so ought the man of science to find them in the book of nature. But this kind of talk, wrapt up too in the most confused style, or rather no style at all, is quite enough to account for ignorant and envious people accusing him of magic, saying that he had discovered the philosopher's stone, and the secret of Hermes Trismegistus; that he must make gold, because, though he squandered all his money, he had always money in hand; and that he kept a "devil's-bird," a familiar spirit, in the pommel of that famous long sword of his, which he was only too ready to lug out on provocation—the said spirit, Agoth by name, being probably only the laudanum bottle with which he worked so many wondrous cures, and of which,

to judge from his writings, he took only too freely himself.

But the charm of Paracelsus is in his humour, his mother-wit. He was blamed for consorting with boors in pot-houses; blamed for writing in racy German, instead of bad school-Latin: but you can hardly read a chapter, either of his German or his dog-Latin, without finding many a good thing—witty and weighty, though often not a little coarse. He talks in parables. He draws illustrations, like Socrates of old, from the commonest and the oddest matters to enforce the weightiest truths. "Fortune and misfortune," he says, for instance nobly enough, "are not like snow and wind, they must be deduced and known from the secrets of nature. Therefore misfortune is ignorance, fortune is knowledge. The man who walks out in the rain is not unfortunate if he gets a ducking.

"Nature," he says again, "makes the text, and the medical man adds the gloss; but the two fit each other no better than a dog does a bath; and again, when he is arguing against the doctors who hated chemistry—"Who hates a thing which has hurt nobody? Will you complain of a dog for biting you, if you lay hold of his tail? Does the emperor send the thief to the gallows, or the thing which he has stolen? The thief, I think. Therefore science should not be despised on account of some who know nothing about it." You will say the reasoning is not very clear, and indeed the passage, like too many more, smacks strongly of wine and laudanum. But such is his quaint racy style. As humorous a man, it seems to me, as you shall meet with for many a day; and where there is humour there is pretty sure to be imagination, tenderness, and depth of heart.

As for his notions of what a man of science should be, the servant of God, and of Nature—which is the work of God—using his powers not for money, not for ambition, but in love and charity, as he says, for the good of his fellow-man—on that matter Paracelsus is always noble. All that Mr. Browning has conceived on that point, all the noble speeches which he has put into Paracelsus's mouth, are true to his writings. How can they be otherwise, if Mr. Browning set them forth—a genius as accurate and penetrating as he is wise and pure?

But was Paracelsus a drunkard after all?

Gentlemen, what concern is that of yours or mine? I have gone into the question, as Mr. Browning did, cannot say, and don't care to say.

Oporinus, who slandered him so cruelly, recanted when Paracelsus was dead, and sang his praises—too late. But I do not read that he recanted the charge of drunkenness. His defenders allow it, only saying that it was the fault not of him alone, but of all Germans. But if so, why was he specially blamed for what certainly others did likewise? I cannot but fear from his writings, as well as from common report, that there was something wrong with the man. I say only something. Against his purity there never was a breath of suspicion. He was said to care nothing for women; and even that was made the subject of brutal jests and lies. But it may have been that, worn out with toil and poverty, he found comfort in that laudanum which he believed to be the arcanum—the very elixir of life; that he got more and more into the habit of exciting his imagination with the narcotic, and then, it may be, when the fit of depression followed, he strung his nerves up

again by wine. It may have been so. We have had, in the last generation, an exactly similar case in a philosopher, now I trust in heaven, and to whose genius I owe too much to mention his name here.

But that Paracelsus was a sot I cannot believe. That face of his, as painted by the great Tintoretto, is not the face of a drunkard, quack, bully, but of such a man as Browning has conceived. The great globular brain, the sharp delicate chin, is not that of a sot. Nor are those eyes, which gleam out from under the deep compressed brow, wild, intense, hungry, homeless, defiant, and yet complaining, the eyes of a sot—but rather the eyes of a man who struggles to tell a great secret, and cannot find words for it, and yet wonders why men cannot understand, will not believe what seems to him as clear as day—a tragical face, as you well can see.

God keep us all from making our lives a tragedy by one great sin. And now let us end this sad story with the last words which Mr. Browning puts into the mouth of Paracelsus, dying in the hospital at Salzburg, which have come literally true :

Meanwhile, I have done well though not all well.  
 As yet men cannot do without contempt;  
 'Tis for their good; and therefore fit awhile  
 That they reject the weak and scorn the false,  
 Rather than praise the strong and true in me :  
 But after, they will know me. If I stoop  
 Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,  
 It is but for a time. I press God's lamp  
 Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,  
 Will pierce the gloom. I shall emerge one day.