

IN THE DISSECTING-ROOM.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN AN OLD PHYSICIAN AND HIS SON,
A STUDENT OF MEDICINE.

BY PETER ROSEGGER.

LONG BEFORE the vacation began, he came home. His boots spattered to the very tops with mud, his hat soaked by rain even to the very lining, and an eye flashing nervously and angrily as he stood before his father.

“Who is this, then?” asked the latter, grasping the tip of his long beard and rubbing his old eyes with it. “Can this be my Adalbert?”

“Father, that’s who it is. I’m sorry to say it is, father.”

“Then the university is burned out,” said the old man.

“No, the university still stands. It is I that am burned out.”

The old man grasped the youth firmly by both shoulders as though to shake him. But as the young man scarcely moved at all, he said: “This is not ashes. Not at all. This is one who has a solid framework in his body. Perhaps it is in your pocket that things have gone wrong?”

The youth had thrown his soaked hat into a corner, and himself upon the sofa.

“You may have a calf butchered, papa; I come as a prodigal son. That is,—no, have me butchered. I am a prodigal son. I shall be one and shall remain one. There is no repentance in me. Let the calf live; but let me have a drink, I am thirsty.”

The old man went up to him and laid his hand upon his brow: “Is it possible that anything is out of tune here?”

“It is out of tune *here*,” said the young man, pointing to his heart.

“O yes, I see,—in love,” laughed the old man. “And for that the long trip in this beastly weather? Good, my son, that you value so highly the blessing of your old father.”

“The blessing will grow stale before I find a sweetheart.”

“Not that, then? An Adonis of twenty, and not in love? For shame! A healthy medical student, and not in love?—Boy, you’re studying anatomy, aren’t you?”

No, father. That is just it. I am no medical student. I am not studying anatomy. And that is why I am here destroying your pet ambition, poor, dear father!”

The old man filled his pipe; it had a stem so long that he handed the match to his son: “Be so good as to start the fire.” When he had taken several whiffs, and the blue rings were wavering about his grey head, he said: “So not a medical student! Well, why not, please?”

“To make it short: I can’t stand the infernal dissecting-room.”

“You can’t stand the in—”

“—fernal dissecting-room. It sickens me.”

“O, you dear baby you, that passes off in a few days.”

“For four weeks I attended. Then again for four weeks. The last day was even worse than the first.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” asked the old man imperturbably. “Why, you have often helped me bravely with surgical operations at home. No dread of blood, no blood poisoning. Why, a cadaver is nothing in comparison.”

“God forbid that a cadaver should sicken me,” cried the youth, springing up from the sofa. “It is the infernal *frivolity* that sickens me. Say, father, am I sentimental? Was I ever?”

“Like a golden russet in September! That is about my idea of your heart. Sentimental? Not that I know of.”

“Or am I a scoundrel?” snorted the young man, pacing up and down the room. “And if everything that goes on in the world is done or is said to be done for the sake of mankind,—every calling, every science,—or isn’t it so?—what sort of a physician is that that has no respect for mankind! If I am to respect the human being in myself and in others, I cannot be entirely irreverent toward a dead body. God knows, I cannot! And if I despise the dead body like a—like a—I don’t know what, then the living body is—mere dough! Yes, father, yes! Then I renounce medicine and shall become a soldier, or a hermit, or any arabesque in society.”

The old man took a deep pull at his pipe and looked at his son

with a smile. He even nodded his head a little. "Now I really begin to see clearly, Adalbert, that you were born for a physician."

"I can't scream louder," replied the youth, "if you don't understand me now — — —"

"Ah, how well I do understand you, my son! They write to a hospital: Request for three bodies, female if possible, at six florins. Good. The boxes come and are opened. The servant loads the stiff naked body upon his shoulder as a butcher carries a dead hog. On to the ice with it! The extremities upon the dissecting-table for the first-year students, the trunk for—"

"Please don't, father, it is horrible."

"It certainly is not poetical, my child. But it is necessary. Are young people to study anatomy on manikins? Or is this science really unnecessary? Does it only serve to satisfy idle curiosity, or at best the perfection of knowledge, and practically has the physician, who of course cannot take his patient apart like a clock, no use for anatomy? Is it possible that you have been taken by such silly phrases as these?"

"Indeed, I have not! The most thorough study of the human body, not in books, but in practice, is the first requisite for a physician. Certainly, that is clear."

"Well, then, young gentleman, what do you want?"

"Another profession."

"Since you are so delightfully inspired for the dignity of humanity,—what profession do you mean, which is so entirely filled with respect for others? Politics, perhaps? Or stock-broking? Name a calling, please, which demands greater sacrifices on behalf of mankind than that of medicine. One of these sacrifices, for instance, is so great that my young medical student is about to desert his colors because of it. Because out of respect for human kind he is repelled by the thought of making examinations of human bodies. Moreover, my boy," added the old man, laying his pipe on the table, "I had precisely the same experience thirty-five years ago that you are having to-day. My feeling the first time I entered the dissecting-room was one of rebellion. The brutality of the performance, and besides many a jest of thoughtless boys with the bodies, and the vulgarity of it all! Mere butchery! And these 'subjects,'—were they not human beings who a few days before had been living and suffering like ourselves, animated like us by the same ideals, spurred by the same 'demons'! This dead man to whom I am applying the knife mechanically,—is not some mother-heart weeping for him? Or some inconsolable widow, or a deserted or-

phan? How faithfully this body may have been nursed, how modestly veiled and guarded! And now!—On every highway the hurrying crowds bare their heads for a moment when a funeral passes along; the cemetery is a sacred place in all the world, even when all that rest in it are strangers to us. Everywhere the dead are respected, but not in the dissecting-room. A joyful ‘ah!’ runs through the ranks of physicians and students, if the cadaver reveals an abnormality from which a human being had suffered untold misery and finally perished! And when I saw how they burrowed into the vitals,—Adalbert, I felt their knives in my own breast. And I felt for the outstretched dead, thinking: If that were my father, or my brother, or my son! So it came about one day that they carried me out of the hall in a swoon — —”

“And yet you went back?” the youth exclaimed.

“And yet I went back,” replied the old man calmly. “I thought: Consider, if you think that there is too little reverence in the dissecting-room, you must simply carry some into it. At least for your own personal use. Many a calling is sadly vulgar, yet man can consecrate it. For coarseness in general, abominable, despicable coarseness, you will never be able to banish from the world. There are vulgar creatures everywhere, even in the temple of knowledge; and men of refinement, even in workshops and mines. The right man consecrates his calling and his work himself. Even if the work is only for money and property, for worldly vanities, man can by a good thought give it a noble meaning. The miner, as he goes down into the earth, says: A happy return! The peasant who sets plough to the sod, says: In God’s name! The sailor puts out to sea with an appeal to Mary! So they all have their phrases and their prayers with which they refresh their hearts lest they perish and turn to stone. The young physician, of all persons, must not let his heart perish and turn to stone; he needs it too much for the suffering brothers and sisters to whose welfare he has consecrated himself. And so I, too, devised me a phrase, a prayer, for the dissecting-room. It did me good service.”

“May I know it?” asked the son.

“You shall know it, Adalbert; you should have hit upon it yourself. You can interrupt your promenades through the room a moment and listen to me quietly. It is a very short lesson. Listen. When I entered the room, and before me on the table lay the form with the dull, yellow, waxy gleam, stark naked, cold as clay, clean shaven, the sunken eye fixed, the features expressionless, robbed of all humanity,—then I thought: “Thou dear, fortunate dead man!

While the most of thy kind must be given over to the earth straightway, thou art chosen to be useful to men even in death! Through thy remains, before they turn to ashes, the flames of knowledge and intelligence will be kindled, of power and performance for the common weal, so that from thee, thou dead body, new life shall pass into the limbs of the sick. Thou art chosen to contribute to the welfare of humanity. I honor thee!"—Behold, my son, this thought made me strong. Protected by this thought, my heart escaped the danger of growing brutal in the dissecting-room, and thus protected, I think I saved for the sick-room what little idealism I had."

"That sounds different," said the student. "Perhaps I will change my mind after all. But why doesn't the professor from his desk talk of these matters?"

"Why, there has to be something left for the father to say."