

## A COMMENT ON THE TIMES

Just as common sense is one of the rarest faculties, so very often what is obvious is not seen. In this case it is the duty of whoever wishes to foster clear thinking to point it out and he may, with luck, easily acquire thorough this a reputation for great wisdom. In medicine there are several instances of this. One such is the truth that when something is adopted only because it is popular at that time and not because it has been shown to be true by scientific observation then those who accept it are inviting disaster. Sometimes even with the greatest care one can be misled such as has been the case in the use of hexachlorophane. The old saying about not being the first by whom the new is tried nor yet the last to lay the old aside has its value, although it could obviously be a dead hand on progress.

When one moves across from the material fields of medicine to those of ethics one is to adopt possibly different criteria. Yet although different these should not be opposite. The point-of-view that there are such things as right and wrong and that these have an objective reality is now curiously unpopular, although this should not be unexpected in times when lunacy (not, regrettably, in the precise legal meaning of the word,

which would at least have the advantage of making its victims "certifiable") is so rampant that the patently abnormal may come to be accepted as normal. Still the fact that this view is unpopular does not make it untrue. "It is not necessarily a condemnation of a man of the past", one wise man said, "to say that his opinions are out of date. There are some dates which it is very good to be out of, and it is most possible that the present is of that type."

It had to be the present to make of work a dirty word, of modesty a curiosity and of pride a virtue. Most glaring of all, gratitude is considered not only an oddity but a sign of weakness and servility. The strong man "who can keep his head when all about him are losing theirs and blaming it on him" will have none of this nonsense and it is the hope that such strong men should arise which can prevent despair. The one point which we would like to dwell upon is the gratitude which the student owes to his teacher because in no other branch of learning so much as in medicine is the relation between master and pupil so close and so vital. It is a glory of medicine that by long tradition the hard won experience of the master is passed on to the apprentice, just as the discovery of the day far from being kept secret is displayed to anyone interested, for comment and discussion. For all this we should be grateful. It is laid down in the Hippocratic Oath, which often sounds surprisingly modern, that the pupil should hold his teacher of medicine equal to his own parents, should make him the partner in his livelihood, should share his own riches with him should he be in need, should consider his family as his own brothers and should teach the members of his family the art of medicine, if they so wish, "without fee or indenture". It is rather a pity that present-day circumstances hardly allow this to be put into practice literally, but it would be good if it were possible for moderns to be given "a chance to acquire merit" as they used to say in "Kim", by practising these virtues. Although this is not practicable along the old lines it is certainly feasible along modern ones with a return to good man-

ners and a gracious respect for one's teachers.

We will add that what is praiseworthy between individuals is even more desirable and admirable between countries. Indeed the reverse of gratitude is a contemptible surliness and arrogance such as is very commonly prevalent now. We have had and have now the repulsive spectacle presented by countries like Uganda, whom the patience and skill of the coloniser lifted out of a brutish and disease-ridden existence into the light of day, not only showing ingratitude but turning upon their teachers. Not from these any thanks for the hard acquired knowledge which a parent country has unstintingly lavished on its charge; not from them the appreciation of what the doctor and the missionary have bestowed at the sacrifice of their lives, of the engineer who has bridged the torrents and overcome distances, of the agricultural expert who has substituted plenty for the erst prevailing hunger, of the teacher and the legislator substituting knowledge and order for ignorance and savagery. It is these same benefactors who are peremptorily being bidden, in the vilest manner, to leave the country they have civilised.

We write of this because medicine is closely concerned with it and it is well that we in Malta should remember and strive to repay the debt we owe to British medicine. Ever since a fortunate historical accident linked our destinies with those of Britain, in countless ways the learning and experience of the Mother Country have been passed on to us without the slightest reserve. This wisdom has, of course, been available to all the world since countries have at least remained sane enough to share such things, but to us it has been given in many special ways: almost every paper in this issue of our periodical bears this out. English, now fortunately accepted as the world language of science, is our heritage and it is something we must cherish and foster in every way. Let us by all means cultivate our own language, but this must never be at the expense of what links us with the vast cultures of Britain and of

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the United States of America. In many ways we must see to it that Malta should become even more British than it has been, for the advantage it gives us in medicine apart from for a host of other reasons.

Should we make excuses for speaking of ethics and of sociology in a medical periodical? We do not think so since we believe that after all it is even more important to save a civilisation than it is to prolong a life for a few months or to indulge in the academic pleasure of des-

cribing some illness which affects only a few and perhaps only lightly. It all comes back to the same thing: we must foster our links because they are essential for the increase of our knowledge and this knowledge will serve us again to improve our medical learning. What we must not be is an island in any sense except the geographical one. No one in his senses will deny the value of contacts with every country, especially the historic countries of Europe which have civilised the world, but we must make the best of that accident which made us one with the country that is now what Athens was two thousand years ago.