

On Charlatans

by Voltaire

THE article entitled "Charlatan" in the "Encyclopedic Dictionary" is filled with useful truths agreeably presented. The Chevalier de Jaucourt has there presented the charlatanry of medicine.

We will take the liberty of adding here a few reflections. The abode of the doctors is in the large towns; there are barely any doctors in the country. It is in the great towns that the rich invalids are; debauchery, the excesses of the table, the passions, are the cause of their maladies. Dumoulin, not the lawyer, the doctor, who was as good a practician as the other, said as he was dying, that he left two great doctors behind him, diet and river water.

In 1728, in the time of Law, the most famous charlatan of the first species, another, Villars by name, confided to some friends that his uncle who had lived nearly a hundred years, and who died only by accident, had left him the secret of a water which could easily prolong life to a hundred and fifty years, provided a man was temperate. When he saw a funeral pass, he shrugged his shoulders in pity; if the defunct, he observed, had drunk my water, he would not be where he is. His friends to whom he gave generously of the water, and who observed the prescribed regime in some degree, thrived on it and praised it. He then sold the bottle for six francs; the sale was prodigious. It was water from the Seine with a little nitre. Those who took it and who subjected themselves to a certain amount of regime, above all those who were born with a good constitution, recovered perfect health in a few days. He said to the others: "It is your fault if you are not entirely cured: correct these two vices and you will live at least a hundred and fifty years." Some of them reformed; this good charlatan's fortune increased like his reputation. The Abbe de Pons, the enthusiast, put him far above the Marechal de Villars: "The Marechal kills men," he said to him, "but you make them live."

People learned at last that Villars Water was only river water; they would have no more of it; and went to other charlatans.

It is certain that he had done good, and that the only reproach one could make against him was that he had sold Seine water a little too dear. He led men to temperance by which fact he was superior to the apothecary Arnoult, who stuffed Europe with his satchets against apoplexy, without recommending any virtue.

I knew in London a doctor named Brown, who practised in Barbadoes. He had a sugar refinery and negroes; he was robbed of a considerable sum; he assembled his negroes: "My lads," he said to them, "the great serpent appeared to me during the night, he told me that the thief would at this moment have a parrot's feather on the end of his nose." The guilty man promptly put his hand to his nose. "It is you who robbed me," said the master; "the great serpent has just told me so." And he regained his money. One can hardly condemn such a charlatanry; but one must be dealing with the uneducated.

Scipio Africanus, this great Scipio very different otherwise from Dr. Brown, willingly made his soldiers believe that he was inspired by the gods. This great charlatany was long the custom. Can one blame Scipio to have availed himself of it? he was the man who perhaps did most honour to the Roman Republic; but why did the gods inspire him not to render his accounts?

Numa did better; it was necessary to police some brigands and a senate which was the most difficult section of these brigands to govern. If he had proposed his laws to the assembled tribes, the assassins of his predecessor would have made a thousand difficulties. He addressed himself to the goddess Egeria, who gave him some pandects from Jupiter; he was obeyed without contradiction, and he reigned happily. His instructions were good, his charlatany did good; but if some secret enemy had discovered the imposture, if he had said: "Exterminate an impostor who prostitutes the name of the gods in order to deceive men," Numa ran the risk of being sent to heaven with Romulus.

It is probable that Numa took his measures very carefully, and that he deceived the Romans for their benefit, with a dexterity suitable to the time, the place, the intelligence of the early Romans.

Mahomet was twenty times on the point of failing, but he succeeded at last with the Arabs of Medina; and people believed that he was the intimate friend of the Archangel Gabriel. If to-day someone came to Constantinople to announce that he was the favourite of the Archangel Raphael, far superior to Gabriel in dignity, and that it was in him alone people should believe, he would be impaled in the public place. It is for charlatans to choose their time well.

Was there not a little charlatany in Socrates with his familiar demon, and Apollo's precise declaration which proclaimed him the wisest of all men? How can Rollin, in his history, reason from this oracle? How is it that he does not let the young idea know that it was pure charlatany? Socrates chose his time badly. A hundred years earlier, maybe, he would have governed Athens.

All leaders of sects in philosophy have been somewhat charlatans: but the greatest of all have been those who have aspired to domination. Cromwell was the most terrible of all our charlatans. He appeared at precisely the only time he could succeed: under Elizabeth he would have been hanged; under Charles II. he would have been merely ridiculous. He came happily at a time when people were disgusted with kings; and his son, at a time when people were weary of a protector.

OF CHARLATANRY IN SCIENCE AND LITERATURE

The sciences can barely be without charlatany. People wish to have their opinions accepted; the quibbling doctor wishes to eclipse the angelic doctor; the recondite doctor wishes to reign alone. Each builds his system of physics, metaphysics, scholastic

theology; it is a competition in turning one's merchandise to account. You have agents who extol it, fools who believe you, protectors who support you.

Is there a greater charlatanry than that of substituting words for things, and of wanting others to believe what you do not believe yourself?

One establishes whirlwinds of subtle matter, ramous, globulous, striated, channelled; the other elements of matter which are not matter at all, and a pre-established harmony which makes the clock of the body sound the hour, when the clock of the soul shows it with its hand. These chimeras find partisans for a few years. When this rubbish has passed out of fashion, new fanatics appear on the itinerant theatre; they banish germs from the world, they say that the sea produced the mountains, and that men were once fish.

How much charlatanry has been put into history, either by astonishing the reader with prodigies, by titillating human malignity with satire, or by flattering the families of tyrants with infamous eulogy?

The wretched species that writes for a living is charlatan in another way. A poor man who has no trade, who has had the misfortune to go to college, and who thinks he knows how to write, goes to pay his court to a bookseller, and asks him for work. The bookseller knows that the majority of most people who live in houses want to have little libraries, that they need abridgments and new titles; he orders from the writer an abridgment of the "History by Rapin-Thoyras," an abridgment of the "History of the Church," a "Collection of Witty Sayings" drawn from the "Menagiana," a "Dictionary of Great Men," where an unknown pedant is placed beside Cicero, and a sonettiero of Italy near Virgil.

Another bookseller orders novels, or translations of novels. "If you have no imagination," he says to the workman, "you will take a few of the adventures in 'Cyrus,' in 'Gusman d'Alfarache,' in the 'Secret Memoirs of a Gentleman of Quality,' or 'Of a Lady of Quality'; and from the total you will prepare a volume of four hundred pages at twenty sous the sheet."

Another bookseller gives the gazettes and almanacs for ten years past to a man of genius. "You will make me an extract of all that, and you will bring it me back in three months under the name of 'Faithful History of the Times,' by the Chevalier de Trois Etoiles, Lieutenant of the Navy, employed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

Of this kind of book there are about fifty thousand in Europe; and it all passes just like the secret of whitening the skin, of darkening the hair, and the universal panacea.