



CHAPTER THIRTEEN - HEALTH

This subject is so great that volumes have been written on it, but I hope by my poor effort here, to show something of how the great advances made, appear to just an ordinary countryman.

In an earlier chapter I have told of how Miss Fanny kept several sets of baby clothes for new arrivals of the poor, and as far as I can remember, that was about the only bit of infant welfare work going on in our village at that time.

Families generally were much larger than they are to-day, and the mortality rate was very high. To give some idea of this, let me quote some figures which really shook me.

I was lent a bound copy of the Parish Magazine for 1900, when the population was less than half what it is to-day and each month of that year there were at least two babies buried, under the age of two years, and most months there were more than two. Now our present burial ground was opened just before our National Health Service started and in fourteen years there have been seven babies laid to rest there.

In most cases a doctor had nothing to do with a birth unless something went wrong, for he had to be paid and for most people it was a struggle to live, without paying him.

Most births were attended by the Parish Nurse, or by a certified Midwife. One elderly widow who lived near us took her certificate quite late in life, but she had been doing such work for years before, without any thought of passing an examination.

Her service was very different from the one we know to-day. She lived with a married daughter and when she was needed for a case if possible she would move into the household for several days, attending mother and baby, and in many cases looking after the rest of the family. Often she was the means of a few extra coppers as pocket money for me. I had a little two wheeled cart, of which I was very proud, and her daughter would come to see if I would take the washing basket to her mother's job to collect the laundry. When this was washed and ironed, I would take it back and I was well off for a day or two.

After baby had arrived, how differently they were dressed and nursed compared with those of to-day, for some time the poor little things were in long clothes, layer upon layer, far too heavy for them to move about much and often a light cloth was kept over their faces to keep the light from their eyes.

There were things for their upbringing considered a "must" by most parents, one a cradle on rockers, which the child got used to, and often would not go to sleep without this rocking motion. Another, now rarely seen, was the rubber dummy or comforter, used by some for a long time, until they moved about amongst other children and were teased about it.

There were no clinics as we know them, to keep a constant watch on mother and child, doing a wonderful job, and so giving both a better chance in life. There are still the blind, crippled and deformed, but nothing like the number we used to see and the once fairly common scourge of rickets is almost wiped out.

As well as clinics, every medical and surgical attention is available for everyone, including children, for whom as far as I know there were very few in bygone days covered by club or friendly society, for it was as much as most families could do to keep just the bread-winner insured by this method and so most children's illnesses and complaints were dealt with by mother and friends and neighbours. Many remedies were crude, but often effective, but how ideas and knowledge have improved.

Not long ago everybody, including hospitals and doctors thought it absolutely necessary to have a regular dose of purging medicine, of which a wide variety were claimed to be the best. The common ones for the youngsters were senna tea, and brimstone and treacle. This latter one in our house sometimes had dire results, for we all liked the treacle and when a chance arose we would help ourselves from the basinful, always ready to be mixed in the pantry.

I have wondered how many ways were used for taking Epsom Salts, by many old folk regarded as a certain cure for all ills. My grandmother always kept a large bottle with it dissolved in water,

with a small glass standing by it, for each member of the household to take at least once a week.

The quantity of fruit that is eaten now by dwellers in both town and country would seem fantastic to people of those days. This is a much pleasanter way of keeping the human engine in order.

Each spring when I was at school I was sent to a swamp some three miles from home to collect a small sack of young king-cup tips, for my grandmother to make an ointment for an old fellow, who years before had slipped off the iron step of a carriage and so grazed his skin, which never healed properly.

He swore by this ointment, but his skin never got better. To make this ointment grandma would put the weed into a big cast iron boiler, with a large lump of home-made lard and while it was simmering over the fire she would stir and beat it with a heavy stick until it was reduced to a pulp. It was then strained into jars and tied down: another twelve months supply for old Jim.

Another annual ointment which she made on a smaller scale, was from a certain kind of ivy leaves. This was for chilblains, kept in a box in a drawer of the kitchen table, where also were several large ripe acorns, a certain cure for diarrhoea, while hanging from a beam in the shed was a bottle with a feather pushed through the cork, which held a supply of adder oil, the only known remedy for adder bites, and also useful for other bites and sores. Grandfather had a good idea where and when he could find one or two of these reptiles in the wood. He would cut two forked sticks about three feet long, with the spurs of the fork four inches long and sharpened to a point, on finding an adder he would peg it to the ground with one fork and then, by using the two he would gradually work along to its head, finally cutting the head off. The oil was extracted by frying it in an old pan kept for the job.

If one should have a bilious attack, the cure grew in the corner of the Churchyard, in the form of a barberry bush, from which a twig was cut and enough of the yellow underbark to cover a sixpence was the dose for the average attack.

It is a long time now since I had a small partly baked onion tied on my ear for earache, but I have tried it more than once.

Before the days of aspirin there were some wonderful cures for coughs and colds. For a cold on the chest, you just could not beat a brown paper plaster, a piece of coarse brown paper spread liberally with Russian tallow, mostly obtained by melting a tallow candle, and worn next to the skin for two or three days.

For a cold, boiled onions or hot stout with plenty of ginger were used, but the only thing for a sore throat was a sock or

stocking pinned round the neck, and anything wrong with the eyes meant bathing them with cold tea.

New ideas about wearing glasses have changed. The old folk were convinced that our eyes and teeth were not in the same field as theirs. Their argument was that far more people used glasses and false teeth. Of course they do, for they are so much easier to obtain.

Again going back to my grandparents, they both lived to a good age, and both wore glasses for close work only, grandfather for reading and cutting his corms, and grandma for sewing and mending, for she like many others could not read. Their spectacles had small oval lenses in plain steel frames, the side pieces made of spring steel, flattened at the ends to grip the side of the head. They were kept in beautiful polished cases with inlaid designs on them.

Neither of these old people ever saw an optician, but bought their glasses at the door. At fairly long intervals an old fellow came into the district calling from door to door with his pockets full of glasses. I was present the last time he called, just after the first world war. He wore a long black coat and a high black felt hat, and had a lovely white beard, a very impressive looking person. I wondered however many pockets he had got, for he seemed to have an endless supply of wares, and to try them he carried a small piece of newsprint for those who could read and several pieces of coloured material on which were various sizes and types of stitches for those who could not, an easy way to get fitted up with glasses, the average price, three and sixpence.

One of the early breakaways from the plain metal frames was the pince-nez. The two eye pieces were made separately with a straight bar passing over the bridge of the nose and a hinged pad fitted to the side of the nose. These two pieces were held together with a coil spring passing over the bridge bars, and keeping the whole somewhat heavy contraption pinched on to the nose. On the side of one eyepiece was a metal loop, to which was attached a black cord or ribbon which was worn round the neck in case they fell off. After some years this style gave way to the much lighter type, just the two lenses held together by the bridge, and kept on the nose by springs under the pads. Now of course the styles and patterns are as numerous and varied as the people wearing them.

What a trouble teeth are to most people, and such a worry when baby is cutting them. A little later comes the change over and then toothache, which few escape. In bygone days the great majority had just to put up with it, so many having bad teeth, that it was the few with the good ones, on whom comment was made. Very few had false teeth until the arrival of the American dentist. Just before the first war, an agency opened in our neighbouring town, and it was

the talk of the place. The name was right across the building in great brass letters and by the entrance was an elaborate glass showcase displaying teeth and dentures and the notice advertised painless extractions for one shilling.

Complete sets of dentures from one pound ten shillings were offered with extractions free. The local doctors and dentists were right up in arms about it, but from the start it was plain that he had come to stay and it seems that from then on, teeth were really taken seriously.

Science has made a great difference to many deaf people through the invention of the hearing aid. Only a small percentage of folk with this affliction possessed ear trumpets, for most of these instruments were rather cumbersome and when in use the person using it had to give just as full attention as if they had not got it.

At one time at our Church the only person that could be found willing to give up his time to blow the organ was an old fellow, so deaf that on the first service at the job he kept on pumping the whole time for he was in a little cubby-hole where he could see no one to give him a signal of any kind. After this the organist fixed a wooden arm like a railway signal, with a white handkerchief on it, which by pulling a string he moved to and fro, this answered very well as long as old Billy was looking at it, but there were times when he was not. Later on with the help of that wonderful little packet of power, a dry battery, a small light was fitted up, and with this vast improvement old Billy managed the job for several years.

Another incident I well remember was when broadcasting was in its early days. An elderly lady who had been deaf for years was staying with us, when one evening I slipped a set of earphones, then in fairly common use, over her ears, and she burst into tears. After a few minutes she said "That's a bird." And it was. She had not heard one for years. What a wonderful thing that must have been!

Until recently the only artificial leg was a plain wooden stump and nearly always the person with one could only walk with crutches, indeed many still use these appliances, but far more have scientifically made legs which have moving joints, and with practice the wearers are able to walk, drive a car, and often dance, in fact in heaps of cases you cannot see that they are in any way handicapped.

Those cripples who in years past had to rely on others for getting around, benefit from the wonderful things now made for them. They no longer need a donkey or Bath-chairman. Some of these ancient carriages were marvellous contraptions, the supposedly better ones having coach-built bodies, heavily upholstered, with a folding leather hood and apron for protection against bad weather.

Most of the Bath-chairs had two large wheels at the back and a small one in front which by means of a tee handle could be turned right round, this made it possible for the attendant to pull the chair and the patient do nothing, or the attendant push the chair from the back, and the patient do the steering. Of course the really aristocratic ones were pulled by a pony or donkey. Many people made a living by letting these conveyances out on hire, especially at seaside and holiday resorts.

Not long ago I was at a party and there was a young person present who was completely helpless from the hips down. She was brought into the room in a very light wheel chair, which she was able to move about by herself. When the time came for her to go, a car door was opened for her and by means of a bar, a standard fitting on that type of car, she pulled herself in onto the seat next to the driver, who then took hold of the centre of the chair seat, and by pulling it up the whole thing folded flat and was dropped out of sight in the boot of the car and on reaching home it was just tucked under the stairs. Again, who wants to go back to the good old days?

I have already spoken about some of the home-made remedies for various ills. Those medicines prescribed by the doctor and others sold by chemists and other shops, have undergone great changes, although many of the old ones still have their place.

The bottle of coloured liquid has largely given place to tablets and capsules. You rarely hear of them these days, which is another great improvement, for pills etc; are much easier to take and I am certain that sinks and handbasins don't get such a large share of medicine as they used to! Of course there is now the familiar use of the "needle" which a few years ago was a very rare and terrifying ordeal.

The National Health Scheme by which most of these drugs are supplied must have dealt a stunning blow to many manufacturers of patent medicine and quacks who did a roaring trade with their one and threepenny bottles and boxes, one shilling for the article and threepence stamp duty. Even so, I suppose most of us still often go and buy a proprietary brand of certain cure, rather than see a doctor, in case he tells us something we would rather not hear, such as, "I think you had better see so-and-so at the hospital."

Our hospital service, possibly the finest institution of its kind in the world, is available to every citizen rich or poor. Let us just take a look at the one in our village. For about one hundred years it was a workhouse, and with its infirmary, its methods of use and administration changed very little over this period of time. I have already made mention of the children and old men who were inmates there, and on looking back it does not seem possible that

such a way of living could have been common such a short time ago.

Here I will only deal with the sick folk, who were mostly the aged and infirm, with no one in a position to look after them at all, many of them tramps and beggars, a class which has now largely disappeared.

The small infirm block, as the hospital section was called, was staffed by a matron and a few nurses, the domestic work being done by the workhouse inmates to a very large extent, under the supervision of one or two of the officials, known as the master and matron, the house-keeper and the labour-master. There was no resident doctor, this duty shared by one or two general practitioners who lived in the district.

In the late thirties a great change took place. The old workhouse section was transferred to another building some fourteen miles away, and the "Union" became a County Hospital, which has been growing ever since, and is now regarded as one of the best in our county and deals with cases of all kinds.

In the old days when an operation was necessary the patient needing it had to go to the General Hospital in the neighbouring town, which was kept going by voluntary funds and contributions. The first and greatest worry of those needing treatment was the letters required for admission. These were obtained from various wealthy people, Churches, Clubs and Friendly Societies who contributed towards the upkeep of the hospital, each letter representing a certain amount and when the patient was a case of long-standing often a number of them were needed, and mostly, not easily obtained.

The letter of admission was the first thing to be found, the second was the means of getting there, for there were no ambulances with trained attendants to deal with every emergency. The usual transport for this journey was a horse cab, or later a taxi. I well remember a man falling out of an apple tree and hurting his back. The doctor was sent for and he ordered that he should be taken in a lying position to hospital at once. The nearest conveyance suitable was a small open van belonging to the chimney sweep. A door was taken off a shed for use as a stretcher and while this was being got ready it came on to rain, and so the sweep's canvas sheet was stretched over the van to keep him dry, but the poor fellow died through shock and exposure before the hospital was reached.

Surgery has made as much headway as any of the sciences, perhaps more than most and if any good at all has come through recent wars I feel that it might be in this field, where the old saying that "necessity is the mother of invention" has been proved over and over again. One of the outstanding examples was the use of plaster for setting purposes, a product of the Spanish Civil War, when

supplies of dressings were so short that the wounds of the injured were done over with plaster and left until they could be attended to, some for quite a long time and when they were undone, no further attention was needed.

With the use of new drugs, antiseptics and anaesthetics operations although still a serious undertaking are not so universally dreaded as they were only a very short time ago and now the patient is often kept in bed afterwards for fewer days than at one time they were for weeks. The advantage of this fact alone is tremendous.

When a person's stay in hospital is over, it may be that treatment has to be followed up as an out-patient. At one time that old bogey of transport reared its head and the expense to many prohibitive, another worry taken over by that wonderful ambulance service with their sitting case cars which travel all over the place picking people up from their own homes and taking them back afterwards. Most of these vehicles are in constant touch with their base by radio telephone and so plans can be instantly changed if needed.

I once remember reading a notice in an old Parish Magazine, dated somewhere around the beginning of this century, which announced that our village would shortly have a resident trained nurse, whose service could be had by any who joined the District Nursing Association, the annual subscription being as follows :-
Tradesmen 2/6, Journeymen, Butlers and Coachmen 2/0, Gardeners, Carters, Cowmen and Labourers 1/6, old people in receipt of relief 1/-

Elderly people who knew the first good lady to hold this post have told me what a nice person she was, respected by all. She did her rounds on foot in all weathers, dressed in a uniform with a long skirt, such as was the fashion of those days, and a bonnet with a long train and carrying a small Gladstone bag and after dark a candle lantern, for many of her calls were off the beaten track. For several years her successors were to be seen doing their calls with the aid of a bicycle, until the great day in the thirties when the Association was presented with a brand new Austin Seven for the nurse's use and she was also put on the telephone. So once again we see mechanisation and electricity making life that much easier and should be happier, but sometimes I wonder.

It is only of recent years that we have had our own chemist. Before he arrived the doctor made up his own prescriptions and left them in a box on the wall by the surgery door to be called for. Sometimes this was a difficult business on a wet winter's night with the box nearly full and only a box of matches to see with. That box is still there for notes and packets, but when you open the door a little light comes on.

The chemist's shop occupies one of the most prominent places in the High Street, and when you see the marvellous displays in the window, of beauty aids, photographic accessories and many electrical appliances, to say nothing of his hundred and one patent medicines, you wonder however we managed before he moved in, but somehow we did.

In the thirty years that he has been in our midst there has been one very noticeable change. When he first opened up his shop the name "stinks" certainly fitted, for it had a smell of its own, but now the scent from the hairdresser next door outs it right out. The only things that still keep their places are the large coloured bottles in the background, without which no chemist's shop would be complete, and they still look as important as ever.

All these wonderful services are paid for by National Insurance, and so to some extent many of the old clubs and benefit societies no longer play such an important part in many people's lives.