

# The Heraldry of Medicine

By R. W. M. STRAIN, M.D., B.SC.

"I SWEAR by Apollo the Physician and Aesculapius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the Gods and Goddesses that according to my ability and judgment I will keep this Oath and Stipulation . . ." So run the famous opening words of the Hippocratic Oath, and it is to the dim misty days of ancient Greek mythology that the Father of clinical Medicine himself directs us if we would find the beginnings of the symbolism so long associated with the art of healing.

Of all the tales of ancient Greece the one that lasts best in the memory of most of us who make no pretence to classical scholarship is the story of Jason and how he sailed with the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece. When Jason was a boy he was taken by his father to that strange school in a cave on the side of Mount Olympus and left there in charge of Cheiron the Centaur, that great wise creature, half man, half horse. There were many famous pupils at that school. There was Aeneas, the hero of besieged Troy, and Hercules who held the world on his shoulders while Atlas went to fetch the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, and many another name famous in Greek story. But there was the strange quiet child, the reputed son of Apollo himself, who used to steal away alone while the others, their day's work done, were out with Cheiron hunting or playing games. This was Aesculapius, who would confess to the Centaur how he had seen a serpent cast its skin and renew its youth, or how he himself had gone down into the nearby village and had cured an old dropsical man with an infusion of a herb he had seen a sick goat eating on the mountain side. And then Cheiron would tell the others that the Gods had given them all different gifts and virtues—to some strength, to some wisdom, and to some beauty, but that to this lad had been given the greatest gift of all—the power to relieve suffering and to heal. And so it came about that in time Aesculapius grew to man's estate and became the greatest healer of the ancient world and the god of Greek Medicine. To no physician since has death come as it came to Aesculapius. Pluto, lord of the underworld, complained to the High Gods on Olympus that the prolongation of life on Earth due to the skill of Aesculapius was reducing the population of Hades, so to restore the balance Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt.

In this little group we have the beginnings of Medical symbolism. Aesculapius is shown in Greek statuary as having in his hand a staff, round which is twisted a single serpent. Heraldry uses this as the symbol of Medicine to this day. You will find it week by week on the cover of the British Medical Journal and it forms the centre of the badge of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Apollo, the father of Aesculapius, is generally shown holding the Caduceus, which is a staff with two serpents. This represents not only Healing, but is the distinct badge of office of the Heralds of Greek Mythology and is therefore often shown winged. This is the badge which is seen in the insignia of the medical

branch of the Royal Air Force, in the Medical Services of the American Army, and on the cover of this Journal, the "Practitioner," and elsewhere.

The daughters of Aesculapius, Hygieia and Panacea, have left their names imperishably on Medical science, the one to preventive medicine and the other to therapy in the form of that long sought agent that will cure all ills.

Cheiron, the ancient teacher of Aesculapius, being himself a great healer and being half man and half horse, is often taken to represent the Veterinary Sciences, and he is to be found in the centre of the badge of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps.

The serpent as a medical symbol has at times been identified with that of Moses or Aaron, but there seems little doubt that the Greek foundation is the correct one.

About one hundred and fifty years before Christ, John Hircanus of the Maccabees founded a Hospital close to the Temple of King Solomon at Jerusalem for the use of pilgrims, and this continued to be used up to the time of the Crusades. In the eleventh century a number of merchants from Amalfi in southern Italy were so impressed by this work that they gave the brethren who served the Hospital considerable sums of money and from this began the Order of St. John. The history of the Knights Hospitallers needs little recapitulation. For many years they helped the sick and injured of the Crusades till driven from the Holy Land.

After periods of occupation of Cyprus and Rhodes the Knights finally settled in Malta, where they remained till expelled by Napoleon.

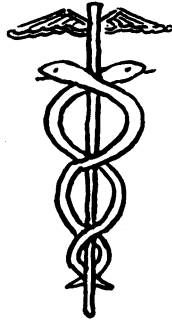
The badge of the Order, the white eight-pointed star, is well known. The arms of the Order are not so well known—a white cross on a red ground or as a Herald would put it: "Gules, a cross argent." The Order used to confer the use of the insignia on their benefactors, often with some small difference. Thus it has appeared in the centre of the Italian flag until recently in return for help from the House of Savoy and similarly its use was conferred on the House of Piedmont "Differenced"—with the arms of the cross cut off—"Gules, a cross argent coupé." This is to the present day the flag of the Swiss nation.

In 1859 at Solferino on the Plain of Lombardy, forty thousand men lay killed or wounded. A great battle had just been fought between the Austrians and the combined armies of France and Italy. Neither side had sufficient staff or supplies to look after its own wounded and no attempt was made to look after the captured wounded of the enemy. Watching the battle was a Swiss, Henri Dunant, who, inspired by the work of Florence Nightingale at the Crimea, did all he could for the wounded, irrespective of nationality. He gathered a band of helpers from the neighbouring towns and villages and carried out whatever measure of treatment could be improvised.

Shortly after his return to Switzerland he wrote a pamphlet in which he asked whether it would be possible for the wounded to be regarded as neutrals to be treated alike by the surgeons of both sides; whether it might not be arranged that prisoners could be exchanged, and putting forward the idea that in times of peace bands of voluntary workers could be trained to supplement impartially and internationally the medical services of armies in time of war. His idea was taken up



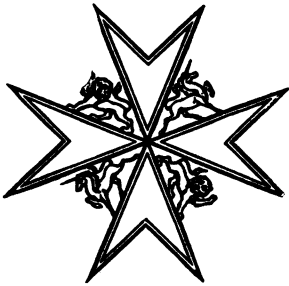
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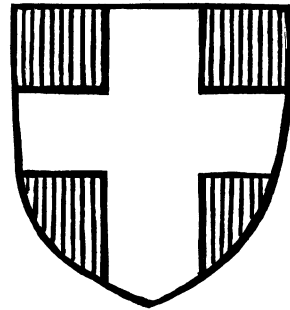
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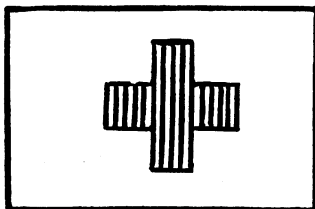


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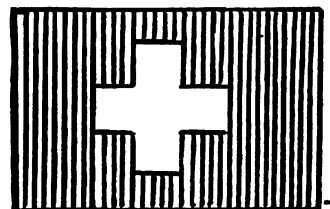


**ARMS**

**Order of St. John —**



**THE RED CROSS**



**SWITZERLAND**

by a humanitarian society in Geneva and in 1863 and 1864 Conventions were held which outlined certain general provisions along the lines he suggested. The medical services and allied personnel were to be recognised by the wearing of a distinctive brassard and flag. This was the red cross we know to-day as the international emblem of such work and was chosen as a tribute to Henri Dunant, being in fact the Swiss national flag reversed.

On many occasions before Solferino the opposing generals had made humane arrangements for the care of the wounded. In 1734 at Dettingen, Sir John Pringle, a physician serving with the British, suggested to the Earl of Stair that an arrangement might be made with the Duc de Noailles in command of the French for the neutrality of the wounded and their attendants and for their free exchange afterwards. Such an arrangement was made and scrupulously observed by both sides. It was, however, the work of Henri Dunant that established the practice in international law.

There are, of course, many other examples of Heraldry in Medicine, but the various forms of the rod and serpent have from the most ancient times represented the healing arts of western civilisation, while in more modern days the Red Cross stands for those special services which help and protect the wounded in war, and the distressed, destitute victims of the calamities of Nature, even when Man is at peace, in all the countries of the world.

The history of the Red Cross emblem, however, can be traced, as I have shown, through many generations of service back to Old Testament days.

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## REVIEW

**PSYCHOPATHOLOGY—A SURVEY OF MODERN APPROACHES.** By J. Ernest Nicole, O.B.E., L.M.S.S.A., D.P., M.R.C.P.&S., Medical Superintendent, Winwick Mental Hospital; late Deputy Superintendent and Assistant Medical Officer Winwick and Prestwich Mental Hospitals; Honorary Secretary Psychopathology Sub-committee, Royal Medico-Psychological Association, London. Baillière, Tindall & Cox. Fourth Edition, 1946. Pp. 268. 15s.

This small volume gives a brief summary of the teachings of the various modern schools of Psychopathology. Despite the fact that this is accomplished within the compass of two hundred pages, the presentation and style are such that the general reader will find his interest held throughout each chapter, more so perhaps in the latter part of the book in which is indicated the modern application of Psychopathology to child guidance, education, and vocational solution. In the comprehensive bibliography works are divided into groups, including those recommended as introductions to main themes and those dealing with specialised or more advanced subjects. This work thus combines a stimulating introduction to the subject and a valuable guide to further reading in its various branches.

T. M.