

BOY MEETS GIRL MEETS FOOT

ANYBODY who chanced to be flat-boating down the Sunday book-review sections lately, poling his way through such nifties as "Bismarck: A New Synthesis," by Dr. Stauffer, or "A Deciduous Girl of Old Williamsburgh," by Sara Leamington Latrobe, probably wound up the day in a darkened room applying vinegar poultices freely to his forehead. It would seem from the publishers' spring lists that the entire membership of the American Medical Association had forsworn the art of healing in favor of letters. Possibly because of the general world breakdown, the family doctor whose reticence was celebrated in song and story has suddenly caved in and become a garrulous old chatterbox, buttonholing the passer-by and babbling your most cherished anatomical secrets. Since the success of Dr. Victor Heiser, a veritable freshet of reminiscence has been roaring through the bookshops. If turnabout is fair play and a layman may diagnose his physician's complaint, the boys who wrote "The Horse and Buggy Doctor," "Consultation Room," and "Doctor, Here's Your Hat" are down with a thundering case of *furor scribendi*. Gone the spatula and the glittering optical mirror, and in their place the quill pen and the purple patch. If you have been looking for a bargain in second-hand scalpels, this is your golden opportunity. But it looks like a hell of a summer for invalids.

It remained for Dr. Dudley J. Morton of the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia, however, to invest the common or garden foot with glamour and employ it as material for romance. In "Oh, Doctor! My Feet!," undeniably the most plaintive title of the season, Dr. Morton sets your foot tapping, if only to convince yourself that it still articulates. Dr. Morton has builded better than he knew; the reader becomes so acutely aware of his feet that he spends his day listening with a rather cunning expression to the metatarsals meshing into gear. My experience has been that although this type of work is not exhausting, it pays very badly.

Dr. Morton, with a sense of dramatic value not commonly encountered in orthopedists, opens his narrative explosively. Into the office of a Dr. Nelson, shouting "Oh, Doctor! My feet!," bursts Mrs. Roberts, an attractive young matron. Conscious of the brusqueness of her words, she adds hastily, "Oh,

please forgive me, Dr. Nelson, but my feet burn and ache so I scarcely know what to do." Dr. Nelson soothingly guides her to a chair with "Well, you have done the rational thing by coming to see me, for I'm certain I can help you." I suppose the irrational thing for Mrs. Roberts would have been to consult a blacksmith, but I myself would have liked her better for it. As a matter of fact, Dr. Morton throughout portrays Mrs. Roberts as something of a boob, which I suspect is a deep-seated conviction among doctors about their patients. She is scarcely seated when her face expresses "a considerable degree of surprise." "Why, I didn't know you were interested in feet, Doctor." By one of those amazing coincidences which happen only in fiction, Dr. Nelson turns out to be the ideal party to whom Mrs. Roberts should have brought her feet. He invites her to relate her symptoms. "Well, Doctor," Mrs. Roberts replies, "they started to bother me about two years ago and since then I've tried almost everything. My closet is so full of shoes I've bought on recommendation or seen advertised that my husband laughs at me and suggests I open a store." You will notice that Dr. Morton, not content with delineating Mrs. Roberts as a simpleton, gratuitously insinuates her husband is a red-faced, bull-necked extrovert who taunts his wife with her malady. Somehow it left me with the uncomfortable feeling that the author had poisoned a well. Try as I would, I kept seeing Mr. Roberts in my mind's eye as a sort of Dr. Grimesby Roylott, a savage tyrant who goes around kicking open doors in Baker Street and bending pokers double.

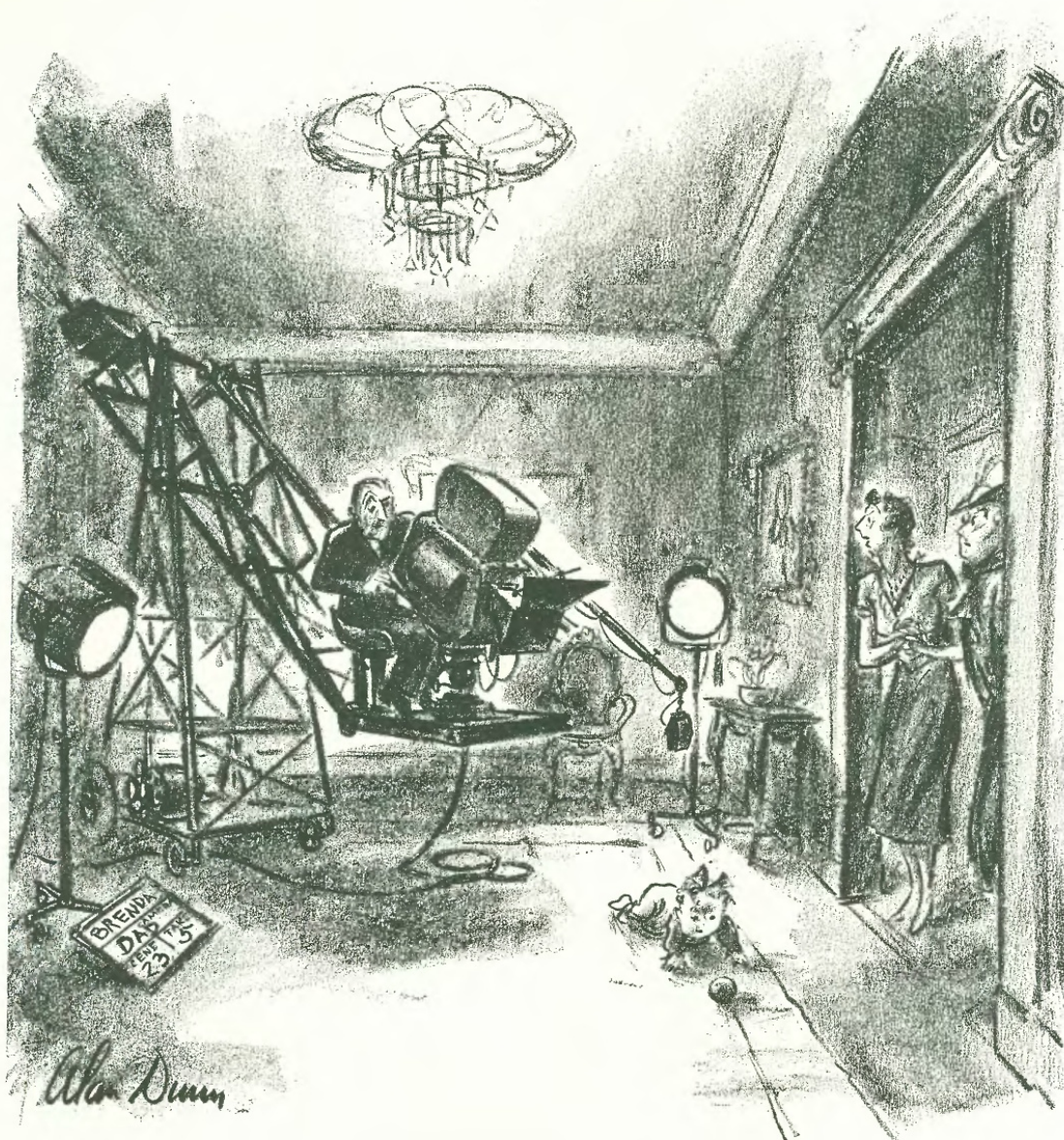
Oddly enough, at this very juncture Dr. Nelson puts on a display of scientific deduction that would have done credit to Holmes himself. Ordering Mrs. Roberts to remove her shoes and stockings and stand directly in front of him, he asks his patient, "with hardly more than a cursory glance," "Do you have the calluses on the soles of your feet treated often?" If Mrs. Roberts was surprised before, she now is reduced to a stupefaction worthy of Watson. "You haven't even looked at the bottom of my feet," she reminds the Doctor faintly. The latter, without even a casual yawn or a "Come, what do you say to Paganini at the Albert Hall tonight?," points out that her second toes are distinctly longer than her great toes. Simpering

girlishly, Mrs. Roberts replies, "But I always took that to be an indication of a perfect foot. If you will permit a little confession, I have always been secretly proud of my feet—at least, I have been since I noticed that the short great toe is distinctly shown in Grecian sculpture." Dr. Nelson, in that maddening way doctors have, crushes Mrs. Roberts' pitiful little pride in her feet with the rejoinder, "What was ideal for the women of ancient Greece is definitely not ideal for the modern woman who wears high-heeled shoes." Of course, old smarty-pants Nelson knows what Grecian women wore on their feet; he was there. Everybody remembers him around the agora, arm in arm with Pericles. Oh, you wine-dark, loud-thundering, many-throated Nelson, you!

Well, one thing and another and before you know it Mrs. Roberts is on her way home with orders to stay off her feet and plunge them alternately into hot and cold water, which I could have told her, who know as much about podiatry as any wide-awake gibbon in the Bronx Park Zoo.

THE next chapter is a colloquy on Mrs. Roberts' feet between the Doctor and his nurse. This could easily be lifted in its entirety and put into a revue. The dialogue is crisp and meaty, and Dr. Nelson manages to make quite a fool of the girl with his answers. It would have made an effective blackout had they beaten each other with rolled-up newspapers, but there I go carping again. Early next morning another patient staggers in, a Mrs. Wells. She, too, is having a very thin time with her feet, and the Doctor treats her with the tender sympathy of a Torquemada: "He then proceeded to test the movements of all the joints of the foot and ankle, noting that Mrs. Wells was able, when her knees were held straight, to bend her feet upward only slightly beyond a right angle with her legs. [That is, without applying the boot.] Finally he pressed gently but deeply into the centre of her instep. She winced and drew her foot back, just as Mrs. Roberts had done the day before." The upshot of this diablerie is one of those superb bits of patient-baiting that doctors excel at: "His patient . . . could no longer suppress her eager curiosity. 'Doctor,' she asked, 'are my arches fallen?' 'No,' he replied, 'they aren't—any more than a person with eye-strain is blind.'" In her place I would have given the Doctor a jab in the sweetbreads with my shiv and





"It all started with an ordinary Ciné Kodak."

trusted my feet, however retrograde, to outrun the law. But Mrs. Wells, shaken by her session on the rack, has hardly strength to whimper. With the admonition she is to rest her feet and take contrast plunges—old sure-shot Nelson—Mrs. Wells totters out, her nerves vibrating like banjo strings.

From this point on, I must confess, the suspense implicit in the characters is not sustained. With all the elements of a corking triangle, two women driven

crazy by their feet and their love for a handsome orthopedist, the author does little. True, he has Dr. Nelson afford his patients some relief, but at what a price! In the twelfth chapter, Mrs. Roberts confesses, "Dr. Nelson, my feet are so much better, but I am embarrassed over the ridiculous way I acted the other day." In other words, he has succeeded in substituting a nice expensive neurosis for what is, after all, only a housewife's occupational disease.

Moreover, on the very next page is the alarming admission, "The doctor examined her feet again. He noted that the calluses had been removed and the areas covered with moleskin." Is Mrs. Roberts happier with an inferiority complex and feet that look like a pair of old football pants? That's her lookout. Me, I'll string along with hexerei. Where would a man pick up a lucky potato and the hair ball of an ox?

—S. J. PERELMAN