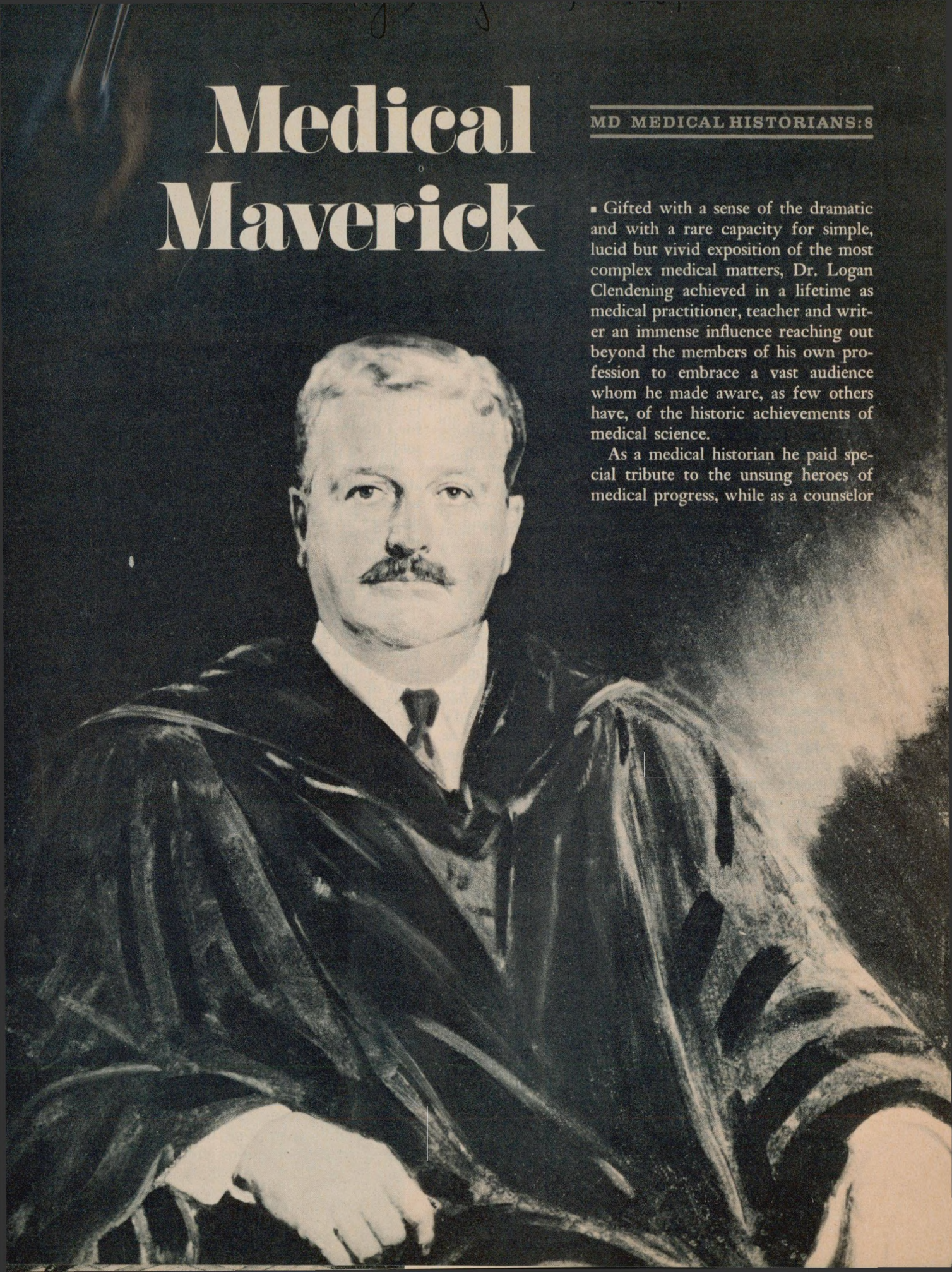
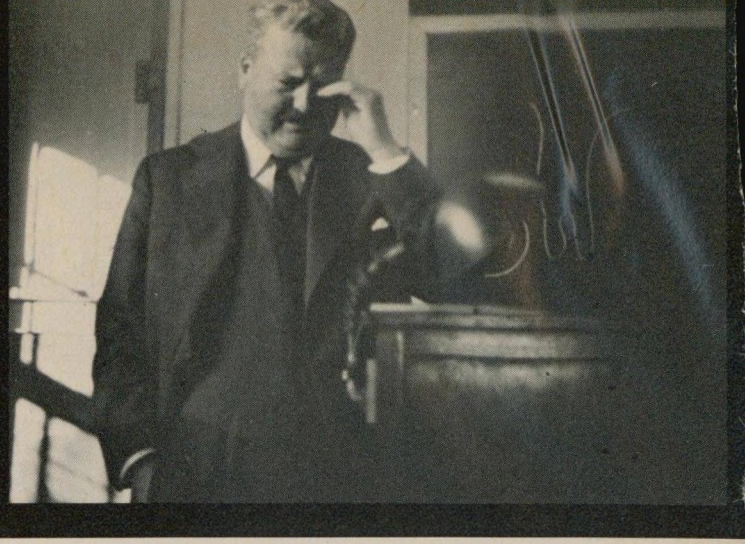
# Medical Maverick

MD MEDICAL HISTORIANS: 8

▪ Gifted with a sense of the dramatic and with a rare capacity for simple, lucid but vivid exposition of the most complex medical matters, Dr. Logan Clendening achieved in a lifetime as medical practitioner, teacher and writer an immense influence reaching out beyond the members of his own profession to embrace a vast audience whom he made aware, as few others have, of the historic achievements of medical science.

As a medical historian he paid special tribute to the unsung heroes of medical progress, while as a counselor





to the layman he cautioned against the follies of faddism and pseudo-scientific medical cults.

**BACKGROUND.** Born May 25, 1884 in Kansas City, Missouri, he was the son of the prominent citizen Edwin McKaig Clendening and the former Lide Logan, both of Scottish descent. He studied in the public schools of Kansas City, spent three years at the University of Michigan, took his M.D. at the University of Kansas in 1907, then spent two years abroad visiting medical centers in England, Scotland and on the Continent.

On his return he began medical practice in Kansas City where he married Dorothy Hixon in 1914. Commissioned a major in the medical corps in 1917, he spent two years as chief of medical service at the base hospital of Fort Sam Houston. He returned to Kansas City, accepted an appointment as instructor in medicine at the University of Kansas, and began to teach physical diagnosis, which remained a subject of compelling interest throughout his career.

His preoccupation with physical diagnosis prompted his first contribution to medical history, "The Centenary of the Stethoscope," published in the Missouri State Medical Association *Journal* in 1920.

Four years later he published his *Modern Methods of Treatment*, declaring in the preface that the sole justification for it was that it was the only work he knew which undertook to bring all therapeutic practice in internal medicine within the compass of one volume. "My aim has been to describe each method of procedure so clearly and minutely that a person who has never seen it performed could do it from the description."

Instead of offering a merely pedestrian exposition Clendening enlivened his work with background notes on the history of drugs and treatment, amusing anecdotes and those sweeping observations which became the hallmark of his work, such as the opening sentence: "Rest and surgery are the most effective therapeutic methods the modern physician has to offer a patient... Immature faddists are continuously proclaiming the value of exercise: four people out of five are more in need of rest than exercise."

The medical profession took so strongly to the book that it ran through eight editions. It also impressed publisher Alfred A. Knopf's chief editor Henry L. Mencken, who had long been searching for a doctor capable of enlightening the public on a subject so close to them as their own bodies.

Mencken visited Clendening and persuaded him, after overcoming his strong initial resistance, to write a book for the layman. The result was Clendening's masterpiece of medical popularization *The Human Body*, published by Knopf in 1927. It was an immediate success and has remained in continuous demand ever since. Sales of the book in hardcover and paperback have exceeded half a million.

Soon after the book appeared King Features Syndicate invited Dr. Clendening to write a daily health column. He accepted but gave up his private practice which he regarded as incompatible with this type of journalistic activity. He remained active in the dispensary and in teaching, advancing to a full professorship of clinical medicine at the University of Kansas in 1928, about the same time that he began his daily newspaper column which eventually reached an unprecedented audience of 25 million through 383 daily newspapers.

In the late 1920s he wrote for Mencken's *American Mercury*, *Collier's Weekly*, *Ladies Home Journal* and other magazines a number of articles bristling with sardonic comments characteristic of the Mencken literary circle on the birth control movement (he regarded it as the creation of misguided zealots), on the fad for exercise ("Against the fetish of exercise I set up the antidote of rest"), health audits and his *bête noire*, governmental dissemination in the Prohibition era of misinformation on the effects of alcohol.

He gathered these commentaries and expanded them in a volume titled *The Care and Feeding of Adults* published by Knopf in 1931. His sharpest outburst was on the subject of alcohol: "It is something like a shock to learn that in many states statutory law compels the author of textbooks on physiology and hygiene used in schools to include a chapter on the deleterious effect of alcohol on hu-

*From far left opposite, Dr. Clendening with medical historian Henry Sigerist, in his classroom and with fellow historian and educator Dr. Ralph Major. At right, in Kansas City jail after he destroyed an air compression drill that disturbed him. Illustration from Molière's* Le Malade imaginaire, *below, evokes his portrayal of 17th century clinical practice in his* Source Book of Medical History.

man life and health. I know of nothing in the American scene today more downright immoral!"

The historic background of medical development which he presented as a prelude to *The Human Body* became the subject of a second book addressed to the general public, a medical history titled *Behind the Doctor* (1933). A more scholarly work intended mainly for physicians interested in medical history was his *Source Book of Medical History* (1942).

**IMAGERY.** As a medical historian Clendening recreated the life and times surrounding the origin and development of medicine by a literary method akin to that of the fiction writer: he created characters, gave them names, put words in their mouths and described their actions; but he maintained the historian's discipline of circumscribing his imagined scenes within the clearly defined bounds of documented reality. Alongside an artist's rendering of neolithic trephining he published a photograph of a prehistoric skull with trephine openings and explained that the rounded edges of the opening show that the bone has grown after the openings were made, proving that they were made while the person was alive.

Even in his scholarly *Source Book of Medical History* he found ways of enriching the historic perspective by interlarding medical writings ranging from the Egyptian medical papyri to Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen's "On a New Kind of Rays," selections from the work of poets, philosophers, dramatists and novelists bearing on medical practice. For the account of Greek medicine and particularly the cult of Aesculapius he drew on references from Homer's *Iliad*, Aristophanes' *Plutus* and Plato's *Phaedo*, and for the plague at Athens he took Thucydides' account in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

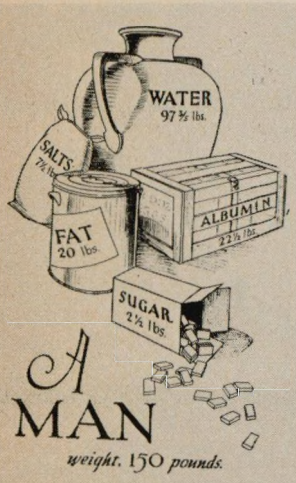
Besides quoting from the writings of such 17th-century contributors to medical science as Harvey, Sydenham and Malpighi, the historian portrayed 17th-century clinical practice with all its weaknesses through scenes from *l'Amour Médecin* and other plays by Molière. Similarly he used excerpts from Thackeray's *Pendennis*, Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* and John Brown's *Rab and His Friends* to evoke a melancholy picture of medical life in the early 19th century.

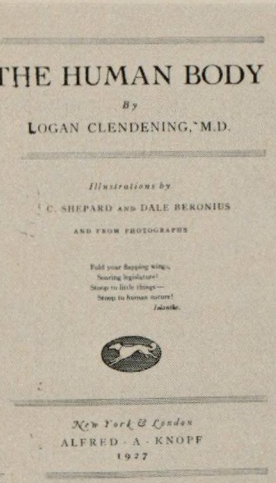
**MEDICO-LITERARY PILGRIMAGES.** With his wife Dr. Clendening made several pilgrimages to sites of particular interest for their medical or literary associations. One of the trips was a "Pickwickian pilgrimage" to England during which the Clendenings made the rounds of the spots mentioned in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. The doctor included a charming account of the experience in his *Handbook to Pickwick Papers*, issued in 1936 to mark the centenary of the original publication of Dickens' work.

On other trips the Clendenings visited Berkeley in Gloucestershire, the birthplace of the discoverer of vaccination against smallpox Edward Jenner, the place in Paris where Laënnec discovered auscultation, the anatomic theatre of Bologna, the university of Padua where Vesalius taught and Harvey studied, and the ancient tomb in Egypt of Ankh-ma-Hor, containing a relief carving which is the earliest known representation of a circumcision.

Dr. Clendening published lively accounts of his medical pilgrimages in the journal *Hygeia* and made

*Dr. Clendening's journalistic style is seen in a column he wrote for a 1936 issue of* The Saturday Evening Post, *right. Title page and illustration, below, are from* The Human Body. *"Bury St. Edmunds. What might have been. Clendening locates Westgate House for Pickwick and Snodgrass," opposite bottom, is from his* Handbook to Pickwick Papers.





THE HUMAN BODY

By

LOGAN CLENDENING, M.D.

*Illustrations by*

C. SHEPARD AND DALE BERONIUS

AND FROM PHOTOGRAPHS

Fold your flapping wings,
Soaring legislature!
Stoop to little things—
Stoop to human nature!
*Juvenile.*

*New York & London*

ALFRED · A · KNOPF

1927




# IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT

## By LOGAN CLENDENING

CARTOONS BY WYNCIE KING

I REALIZE it's not a matter of life and death," writes a woman about her ailments, "but it's so annoying that sometimes I wish it were."

Daniel Turner, the first English dermatologist, has a passage in the same strain: Speaking of baldness, "Although this disease is not much of Danger, yet it has much of Turpitude or Disgrace, insomuch that the Slaves among the Romans, labouring under this malady, were undervalued and sold at a much Viler Price."

I am the recipient of a good many letters from people about their illnesses and bodily troubles, and most of these troubles are of that minor kind. And the worst of it is that the medical profession doesn't know very much, in most cases, about how to help these little, picayunish things.

There is one kind of question that the medical man too often gets asked. And if you want to witness acute discomfiture, try it on some distinguished surgeon you happen to meet in a social gathering. There he stands, that noble and shining figure, almost godlike in his assurance and ability. Stroll up to him and ask, "Doctor, what's good for a fever blister?"

You would think anybody, at least any doctor, could answer that. But he can't. He doesn't know any more about it than you do. He smiles and says, "It'll go away," and if the fever-blistered one retorts, "Yes, but it'll come back," he is completely routed; has no answer at all.

Admitted, of course, that this is a casual question. It comes under the head of "free" or "curbstone" advice. But in his office, in consultation, and if he were being paid for it, he wouldn't come off any better. And it really is sort of devastating to think that that man standing there could arrange to lull you into unconsciousness, make a large gaping hole in you, remove through that aperture any one of half a dozen important internal structures, close you up and put you back to bed without doing you any real harm at all, and yet he doesn't know how to cure a fever blister.

This is especially true if he is a younger man in medicine. His time has been too much taken up tending to the big subjects—operations and queer complicated deviations from the smooth curve of the normal. As time goes on, he finds, too, that it's the little things that count—more and more people have them, and they are more anxious to get rid of them. Not long ago, in conversation with one of the most distinguished surgeons of the United States, I asked what was the subject of his paper before the surgical congress, with delegates from all over the world. His answer was "Corns." All of which forcibly reminds me of my first patient. Every doctor, I suppose, has a story about his first patient—we should get up a collection of them sometime.

She came in the office, that first patient of mine, I remember, with a troubled countenance, and began with great volubility to explain exactly why she had chosen me for consultation. She had heard that I had just completed a course of hospital residence in the East, and she felt certain that I must have the very latest ideas on medical science.

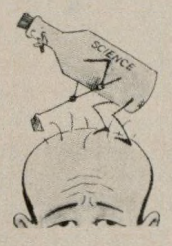
What, I kept asking myself—what wild and exotic derangement of function could be going on inside that superficially very healthy-looking exterior? I was fully prepared for something extremely choice, when finally I ventured to ask her what was her trouble, and she answered, "Sweating feet."

I must have looked abashed. I had never heard of a remedy for sweating feet, nor even that one had ever been suggested. If my patient had had some fancy and involved ailment, such as myelogenous leukemia, or subphrenic abscess, I would have been perfectly capable of attending her with every display of that very latest lore for which she yearned. We had plenty of those cases in the hospital. But sweating feet had never been mentioned by any of my instructors or chiefs.

Ignominiously I excused myself and rushed down the hall to the office of an older practitioner, who chuckled at my story and whispered the magic words, "Formaldehyde, teaspoonful to a pint of cold water; soak 'em night and morning."

There seems, however, to have been a change in the attitude of the faculty minds in this respect lately. A few years ago the least thing that any research worker would stoop to consider as a research subject was the cause of cancer. Propaganda in the form of the formation of societies for the control and prevention of were formed for heart disease and cancer. We were treated to hair-raising discourses on Sunday evenings on the increasing mortality of heart disease. The lecturer, selected from the less-busy group in the local medical society, had, in most instances, apparently been spending a good part of his time in the deadhouse, and he brought an unctuous enthusiasm to the description of the situation, which caused many of his auditors to stagger out into the night for a gulp of air. The death rate from heart disease is increasing—that was the burden of the song.

Symptoms and remedies were described most graphically. The lecturers were like the fat boy in Pickwick, "I wants to make your flesh creep."


What difference is all this to a person who hasn't got—and probably never will have—heart disease or cancer, but whose whole career is soured by warts, and superfluous hair, and sweating under the armpits, and white spots on the skin, and monthly attacks of migraine? There is something heroic about heart disease. You die a martyr's death, leaving pathetic little notes around, about what you want sung at your funeral. Or if you don't die, you are the center of every solicitude, surrounded by handsome nurses day and night, assisted in every move, and visited by friends who blink to keep back the tears, thinking of what a loss you will be to the community.

But, to repeat, things are changing. The gleaming armamentarium of the laboratory is turned on many of the annoying little fleas (Continued on Page 89)

them the subject of addresses before medical societies for which he was much in demand. At the annual banquet of the American College of Physicians in 1937 he described the visit to the site of Jenner's birth and life's work, and noted with regret that except for the tombstone marked only with Jenner's name and dates there was not elsewhere in Berkeley "a statue or a tablet or stone to one of the greatest Englishmen who ever lived."

He also told of returning from the tomb site to the dining room of the Berkeley Arms where Jenner had always been the moving spirit of the convivial medical society that gathered there, but it was hard to recapture the atmosphere because the dining room was "as cold as an enthusiastic New England audience," the "napkins were heavy with the damp chill of mortality" and the white sauce engulfing the boiled fish he found to be at a temperature of 54 F. by surreptitiously thrusting his clinical thermometer into it when the waiter was out of the room.

**STYLE.** The sparkling spontaneity of his style as an after-dinner speaker belied the meticulous preparations of his talks, which he wrote out in advance, carefully weighing the effect of each detail. Alexander Woolcott remarked that "no mere author has a better English style than that jolly medico Dr. Logan Clendening."

His style ran the gamut from the sober exposition of the nature and treatment of diabetes mellitus in *The Human Body* to the colloquial manner of a magazine article like "Our Arthritis" in the *Saturday Evening Post.*

Regardless of his stylistic manner he consistently sought to engage the interest and confidence of the reader by establishing common ground between the physician and the layman in their struggle against error. He explained that the mistaken belief of many diabetes patients that they suffer from a kidney disease arises inevitably because of disturbed urination in early and untreated cases and is hardly surprising since "the medical profession itself for long was under similar misapprehension."

In his breezy discourse on arthritis he observed that "it's really nothing but rheumatism putting on airs," and cautioned that getting expert advice on it is like getting expert advice on the stock market. In the midst of a detailed account of various etiologic hypotheses he pithily noted: "The two things that would be nice to know about arthritis or rheumatism are the cause of it and the cure of it." His tongue-in-check conclusion: "The true specialist in arthritis is a physician to the soul."

**THEATRICS.** An amateur actor in his youth, Clendening as a teacher used the most theatrical meth-

*First Clendening Reading Room in the Hixon Research Laboratory building in the University of Kansas Medical Center contains the frontispiece portrait of Dr. Clendening which was painted in 1939. Donor of the building was Dr. Clendening's father-in-law.*

ods of gaining and holding his students' attention. According to a colleague his classes in physical diagnosis were presented like one-act plays, with settings carefully arranged by a resident who served as stage manager. In a burlesque of the stethoscopic faddists of the time he once entered the classroom with earpieces in place and the bell trailing at the end of several feet of hose in the hands of a resident. Sometimes as he entered the room he would provocatively fire a question at a student in the front row, and if he failed to get a prompt answer would turn on his heel and leave with the admonition; "Gentlemen, when you decide to study for this course I will be back."

His most notorious display of wrath was reported on the front pages of newspapers throughout the country: emerging from his home in a fashionable residential section of Kansas City meticulously attired and wearing a white carnation in his coat lapel but wielding an axe in one hand, he approached a nearby W.P.A. sewer-building project and smashed an air compression drill which he complained had been disturbing him for months.

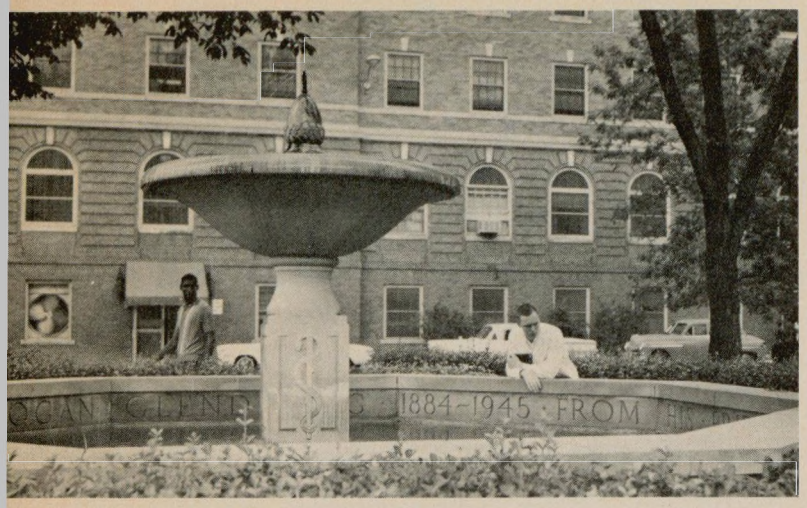
He then harangued the project laborers: "Why not build your sewers in Omaha? Why crush me and torture me with your machine and your sewers? I say to you this damned rat-a-tat-tat, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, must stop. And I am going to stop it once and for all." He was arrested, jailed for four hours, fined $50 for disturbing the peace and destroying government property.

**OUTLOOK.** In the revised second edition of *Behind the Doctor* issued in 1943 Dr. Clendening revealed some changes in his views from those he held when Henry L. Mencken first discovered him. His early hostility to the birth control movement gave way to the conviction that "overpopulation is the basis of most of our social problems." Discussing the future of medicine he noted the dilemma arising from increased costs of scientific medicine exceeding most private patients' capacity to pay. He criticized the apparent unwillingness to deal with this dilemma by the leaders of organized medicine in the United States, and he suggested that just as public and private education coexist to meet different needs, "there is no reason why public and private medicine should not exist side by side in the United States on very much the same basis."

He championed scientific medicine, rated Hippocrates, Vesalius and Sherlock Holmes most highly, put down Galen as a "second-rate genius exalted by the pedants of Oxford and Padua to the status of a god... for 1200 years the brilliancy of his rhetoric prevented men from learning at first hand anything about the human body."

He paid tribute to Sherlock Holmes in an irreverent story of his own invention which begins with the death of the great detective at 80 and his immediate ascent to Heaven where his arrival caused the greatest stir since that of Napoleon. Jehovah grant-

*Clendening Fountain at the University of Kansas Medical Center was erected as a memorial by friends of Dr. Clendening. It was dedicated in April, 1947.*




ed him an immediate audience and commissioned him to solve a problem: Adam and Eve had been missing for two aeons. The detective soon picked the missing couple out of a large crowd. When asked how he did it, he replied: "Elementary, my dear God, they have no navels." *

In the opening sentences of *The Human Body* he set forth his materialist concept of the human body as "an animal organism, differing in only a few respects from other animal organisms," and fitted by selection and evolution for two main functions, the conversion of food and air into energy and tissue, and reproduction.

"As a physiologist I have no data upon which to base a belief that it has been designed for any other purpose or destiny. Why it has been developed to its present state upon this tiny globule of dust in this obscure corner of the universe, why it continues monotonously repeating itself generation after generation, for no other apparent object than to litter up the verdure of the earth with images of its obscene gods, with its hideous habitations, and with the poignant momentoes of its dead—what these things mean are matters to which I have not been privy. Certainly there is no clue in the structure or functions of the body itself."

He denied that his definition of the human body omitted mind and soul, insisting that procurement of good food and shelter is the particular function of the mind, and procurement of a mate is the particular function of the soul. He acknowledged that his philosophy was "mechanistic" but cautioned that the notion of the body as a machine could be misleading because "it reproduces its own parts when they break down, which is like no other machine. It is a Humpty-Dumpty machine because no one can reassemble it: when that spark which is indefinable leaves it, all the parts may be there, but it won't run. And no one knows what it is for or can predict what it will do—all of which is unmachine-like."

* See *M.D.'s Companion* in *MD*, December, 1964, page 151.

**BIBLIOPHILE.** Clendening taught medical history after it became an established part of the curriculum in the University of Kansas school of medicine, presented Chauncey D. Leake, Henry E. Sigerist and other medical historians as guest lecturers, and organized the Quivira Medical Society among Kansas City physicians interested in the history of medicine. The society became a constituent member of the American Association of the History of Medicine, in which Clendening served first as vice-president and then president.

With help from his wife, who presented him with first editions of many medical classics, he became an avid bibliophile. His collection included one of the finest existing copies of the first edition of Vesalius' *De Fabrica*, a first edition of Harvey's *De motu cordis* believed to be among the few originally reserved for the author as presentation copies, first editions of Laënnec's work on auscultation and Withering's *An Account of the Foxglove* and hundreds of other medical rarities.

**OLD AGE.** In the last chapter of *The Human Body* he declared: "there is nothing so horrible as old age. When the wrinkles begin to come, and vision blurs, and the breath comes short on attempting an incline! And even the cosmetician cannot cover the repetitious fund of anecdote.

"So far as I am aware, medical science has no wisdom on these matters. You may be perfectly sure that if you live long enough, you will grow old, and that when you grow old, you will be unbeautiful and unattractive, and that surely death will come. When it comes, you may be certain you will disappear like all the rest and that you will not be missed nearly as much as even in your least sanguine moments you have been inclined to suppose."

In his late fifties, alcohol, which he had enjoyed all his adult life, became a problem. Early in 1945 he wrote a close friend that he felt written out, weary of the routine of teaching and bored. "My life seems to have run into an impasse." He worried about leukemia after a few lumps appeared under his skin, went to a private laboratory in Kansas City which reported an erroneously high white blood cell count. Colleagues at the Kansas City Medical Center discovered the error but could not convince him that the count was erroneous. On January 31, 1945 he was found dead in his bed with his throat and wrists slashed. The death was listed as a suicide after the family physician Dr. John Wheeler informed police that Dr. Clendening had told him several times that he intended to end his own life.

A monument to his life and work is his own library of medical history, half of which he bequeathed to the University of Kansas while his widow gave the other half. By gift and purchases from the bequest the library which numbered 4000 volumes at his death has since increased to 6500.