Some months ago a writer in a London Sunday newspaper suggested that Madame Bovary was the finest novel in the French language. Probably this is an opinion that very few readers would be inclined to endorse. Even among Flaubert’s most ardent admirers there are some who would prefer the gorgeous Salammbó to the sordid Madame Bovary. It is impossible to compare the novel in question with any of Victor Hugo’s masterpieces, the class of writing being so utterly different. Even in the realistic school itself there are at least two, if not three, of Zola’s books which surpass Madame Bovary in the very qualities in which its author is supposed to excel. And coming to the later French writers, surely, as a work of art, Flaubert’s novel cannot be compared with Pierre Loti’s pathetic little idyll, Pécheur d’Islande.

Mais chacun à son goût.

Flaubert’s great fault is his laboured style. His industry is too evident. He draws every line with a hard pencil and with the full weight of his hand. In Madame Bovary he is also unfortunate in his heroine. From start to finish she fails to enlist the reader’s interest. She is a commonplace woman who carries the hysterical fancies of a schoolgirl into adult life. She commits gross sins, as some people tell lies, without any reasonable motive, for the author’s elaborate psychological analysis is not convincing, and in the end she reveals the instincts of a common prostitute. Even her deathbed scene, which Flaubert paints in lurid colours, fails to arouse our sympathy.

But from other points of view the novel is interesting, and particularly for the picture it presents of the everyday life of a French country practitioner in the early decades of the last century.

The father of Charles Bovary, whose wife plays the title-rôle in the story, held the grade of aide-chirurgien-major in a regiment in the days of Napoleon Bonaparte. Owing to some political indiscretion he quitted the service in 1812, and having married the daughter of a rich tradesman, he settled down as a gentleman farmer in the Pays de Caux. He was a dissolute
fellow, who cared for nothing but his own pleasure, and had it not been for his wife’s firmness, his only child’s education would have been utterly neglected. As it was, the boy was sent first to the lycée at Rouen, and afterwards to the School of Medicine attached to the great hospital of that city.

The curriculum of a French provincial school of medicine in the first half of the nineteenth century appears to have been fairly extensive. It included anatomy, pathology, physiology, chemistry, and botany, materia medica, therapeutics, pharmacy and hygiene. There were in addition courses of clinical medicine and surgery. This statement is probably correct, for Flaubert was the son of a physician on the staff of the Rouen hospital, and there is ample evidence in his writings that in his early life he was familiar with the details of medical study, and even with those of general practice.

At such a school, it is clear that a man had every opportunity of acquiring a thorough knowledge of his profession. But Charles Bovary does not appear to have been a brilliant student. In fact, there are features in his character which make one think that it would have been better if he had not gone in for medicine at all. The first time he presented himself for the examination for the humble qualification of officier de santé he was promptly rejected. Urged by his mother, more perhaps than by his own wishes, he returned to his studies, and the second time he appeared before the examining board he was successful.

Charles Bovary set up in practice in Tostes. There is a village named Tôtes, in the department of Seine-Inférieure, about half way between Rouen and Dieppe, which is probably the one to which Flaubert refers.

The young doctor’s establishment was not luxurious. Those who have walked or cycled—motoring is no good; you can’t see anything—through the Pays de Caux, that part of Normandy which lies east of the Seine and extends northwards from Rouen towards Dieppe and the other coast towns, will remember passing through villages of the same type as Tostes. The cottages, built of brick, and having tiled or thatched roofs, cluster on either side of the main thoroughfare. Among them are one or two a little larger than the others—having an upper storey, for example. It was in one of these last that Bovary found his new home. The house stood close to the roadway. The front door opened on a narrow passage, which ran straight through the building to the garden in the rear. On the right of this passage was the
salle à manger. On the left was the consulting-room. This was an apartment about six paces square. The partition, which separated it from the kitchen, was so frail that the odours of cooking penetrated freely, and the cook had the advantage of hearing the patients relate the lugubrious story of their sufferings to the doctor.

The furniture of the consulting-room consisted of a table, an armchair for the doctor, and three other chairs for the patients and their friends. There was also a bookcase in pinewood with six shelves, on which were installed the numerous tomes of the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales*. Bovary had bought this work second-hand, and, although the covers had suffered many things from the various hands through which the volumes had passed, the pages were still uncut. We have to thank the modern medical publisher very much for issuing his books with the leaves ready cut. It saves our blushes when a patient, left alone for a few minutes in the consulting-room, chances from curiosity to take down and examine one of the portly volumes which occupy a place on our not overcrowded shelves.

The first important case, to which the young practitioner was called, was one of a broken leg. As Bovary rode through the night to the farm where his patient was lying, he tried to recall to his mind all that he had ever heard or read of fractures and their treatment. It must be confessed that he had no great confidence in his own skill, which was rather surprising, seeing how ignorant he was; for, as a rule, the less we know, the more confident we are in ourselves. Fortunately for both surgeon and patient the injury was not serious, and the treatment was successful.

The fee paid in this case was 75 francs, to which the grateful patient added the present of a turkey when he came to settle the account.

The daughter of this farmer became Charles Bovary's second wife, and the heroine of the story. Of the young doctor's first marriage it is only necessary to say that it was not a happy one. The poor man seems always to have had bad luck in the matrimonial lottery.

After his second marriage Charles Bovary settled down to the humdrum life of a country practitioner. At all hours and in all kinds of weather he might have been seen riding through wayside lanes. His meals were irregular. Often he was glad to eat an omelette in one of the farmhouses. Gradually his
reputation became established. The peasants loved him because he was not proud. He petted the children; he was never seen in a public-house; and, further, he inspired confidence by his morality. He succeeded particularly in the treatment of catarrhs and diseases of the chest. Always having before his eyes the dread of killing his patients, he hardly ever prescribed any but soothing mixtures, now and then an emetic, a hot foot-bath, or a few leeches. As for his practice of surgery—well, he bled his patients freely, and for the extraction of teeth he had *une poigne d'enfer*.

In order to keep himself up to date in medical science, Bovary took in *La Ruche Médicale*, a new journal, of which the prospectus had been sent to him. He tried to read a little in the evening after dinner, but the warmth of the room, the soothing influences of digestion, and the fatigue of a long day in the saddle, soon sent him to sleep. So that in the end it is to be feared that the numbers of *La Ruche Médicale* shared the fate of the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales*, and found themselves on the shelves of the bookcase in the consulting-room with many of their leaves uncut.

But if Bovary was happy at Tostes, his wife was not. She was the victim, partly, of a foolish method of education, and her head was full of silly fancies. She found her life intolerably dull, and presently she developed a formidable array of symptoms, for which her husband prescribed camphor baths and valerian. As this treatment did not seem to do much good, Bovary took his wife to Rouen to consult his old master, Dr. Larivière. This worthy diagnosed a nervous breakdown—he seems to have been quite modern in his ideas—and ordered change of scene.

Charles Bovary was sorry to leave Tostes after four years of practice, and just when *il commençait à s'y poser*. However, of course, his wife's health was the first consideration, and having made inquiries, he heard of an opening in another village, Yonville-l'Abbaye, a good many miles to the east of Rouen, and in the neighbourhood of Neufchâtel. He wrote to the apothecary of the place to know what was the population of the village, the distance from the nearest medical practitioner, and the approximate income of the former doctor. The reply being satisfactory, Bovary made arrangements to move as soon as he could settle his affairs.

Yonville was a far more important village than Tostes. It possessed a large church, somewhat dilapidated; a market-place; a *mairie*, built after the designs of a Parisian architect; an hotel,
the Lion d'Or, and several shops. One of these last was the glory of Yonville—it was the apothecary's shop. The sign, which extended the whole breadth of the building, bore in huge letters of gold the words "Homais, Pharmacien." The remainder of the front of the house was covered from top to bottom with advertisements of various druggists' sundries and proprietary medicines. At night, when the interior of the establishment was lit up, the red and green colours of the two great bottles, which stood in the window, were thrown far into the dark street. Inside the shop, upon the shelves which lined the walls, bottles of all sizes were drawn up in terrible array. There were also rows of drawers labelled with cabalistic characters, and on the counter stood a large pair of scales and the private desk of the proprietor. Finally, at the back of the shop was a glass door, on the upper part of which appeared the mystic word "Laboratoire," and a little lower down the name "Homais" was repeated in letters of gold on a black ground.

As for Monsieur Homais, the apothecary, it is almost worth while wading through the weary pages of Flaubert's novel to make his acquaintance. Miss Betham Edwards, in her charming Literary Rambles in France, tells us that "our neighbours cite Homais now as we speak of Podsnap or Micawber." His face was slightly marked with smallpox. He usually appeared in public in green leather slippers, and wearing a Greek velvet cap with a gold tassel. Even when he dined at the Lion d'Or or at the house of a friend, he was accustomed to request permission to keep on his cap for fear of coryzas. Vain and conceited to a degree, he had all a half-educated man's love of argument. He prided himself upon being a freethinker of the Voltairean species, and nothing gave him greater pleasure than a wordy battle with the curé, in which he generally came off the conqueror. He delighted in long words, and never used a short or simple one if he could avoid it. He gave high-sounding names to his children, and he called the loft where he stored his drugs the "capharnaum." Once, when the great Dr. Larivière lunched with him, he could not refrain from using the word "saccharum" when he asked his guest whether he took sugar in his coffee.

Of course, such a man as Monsieur Homais wrote to the papers. He even seems to have had a vague idea that he was on the staff of the Fanal de Rouen. He was the member of one learned society—he always spoke as though he was the member of several. He had published a pamphlet on Du Cidre, de sa Fabrication et de ses Effets, and another entitled, Des Observations sur le Puceron Laniger,
copies of both of which he had sent to the Académie, and he had great hopes of being one day decorated for his scientific works.

But with all his failings, the apothecary had his good points. He was a good husband and neighbour, and, like the French middle-class father generally, he was extravagantly fond of his children.

Some of the other characters, which made up the village society of Yonville, are painted in lively colours, for Flaubert has now warmed to his work. There is Madame Lefrançois, the landlady of the Lion d'Or, a good-natured gossip, who is terribly anxious about the affairs of her kitchen, and jealous of competitors in her business. There is Hyppolyte, the garçon of the hotel, of whom more anon. There is Monsieur Bournisien, the curé, a stout, red-faced man, with all the bonhomie of the village priest, and all his little foibles. And, not to lengthen the list unduly, there is Lestiboudois, the gravedigger. He was parish beadle as well as sexton, so that when a funeral took place he derived a double benefice from his connection with the Church. The good man was always anxious to turn an honest penny, and he hated to see the gifts of Nature neglected. Accordingly, he grew potatoes to his own profit in the unoccupied portion of the cemetery. Once, when there was an epidemic in the village, he hardly knew whether to rejoice at the increase of his income from the number of interments, or to grieve at the loss of so large a part of his potato plot.

As for Madame Bovary's lovers, who now begin to figure on the scene, they are the most uninteresting sketches of humanity to be found in literature. The one was coarse, and the other silly. We can only say that they were worthy of the lady.

The Bovarys settled down quietly in Yonville. The doctor soon became popular; the people liked him, and the curé spoke of him with respect. As for Monsieur Homais, the apothecary, he was kindness itself. He told Madame Bovary where she could buy the best provisions, he ordered the cider for her himself, and he took the trouble of going down into the cellar to see that the barrel was properly placed. He advised upon the important matter of buying cheap butter, and finally, he arranged with Lestiboudois, the sexton, who in addition to his sacerdotal and mortuary functions, exercised the profession of jobbing gardener, that he should look after the plot of ground in the rear of the doctor's house. Possibly there was an ulterior motive underlying the apothecary's cordiality.

Monsieur Homais was an inveterate quack, and he enjoyed a
great reputation in Yonville and the neighbourhood for his medical skill. On market days his shop was crowded with peasants who came to consult him. Now, the French code strictly debars any unqualified person from exercising the art of medicine, and the apothecary’s illegal practice on one occasion brought him into trouble. He was summoned to Rouen to answer for his conduct, and he had an interview with the procureur du roi in his private room. Monsieur Homais was ready to die with fear. As he stood trembling before the magistrate, terrible in toque and ermined robe, he saw himself shut up in a prison cell, his family in tears, the pharmacy sold up, and all his beloved bottles scattered over the face of the earth. Fortunately, he was let off with a severe reprimand, but when he left the Court he was in such a nervous condition that he was obliged to go to a neighbouring café for a glass of rum and water before he was able to recover his usual aplomb.

But you cannot cure a quack. There is something so delightful in advising others, particularly when there is a little money to be made at the same time. So, in spite of his terror of the law courts, Monsieur Homais found it impossible to give up the private consultations in his back shop. Consequently, it was wise for the apothecary to be on amicable terms with his neighbour, the young officier de santé, for a friend was more likely to wink at his irregular practice of medicine than an enemy.

Occupied as Madame Bovary was with her amours, and she had not been many months at Yonville before she plunged in the full tide of illicit love, she still found time to be ambitious for her husband. She was only too conscious of his mediocrity, and it pained her. In her day-dreams she longed to see him rich and successful, with a ribbon or a rosette in his buttonhole. It was pure selfishness on her part, for she did not care a fig for the poor man. Only, his glory would reflect on her, and give her wealth and social position. But it seemed impossible for this obscure village practitioner to distinguish himself, seeing how moderately he was endowed with intelligence. However, one day Monsieur Homais conceived an idea which seemed to promise the fulfilment of Madame Bovary’s wishes.

The work of Delpech and Stromeyer about this time had brought tenotomy, as a method of curing club-foot, prominently before the medical world. Anything that was new interested the liberal-minded apothecary. He was a village patriot also, and the idea occurred to him that Yonville, in order to keep up
with the times, ought to have operations for club-feet. There was a case ready to hand. Hyppolyte, the red-headed stable hand and general factotum of the Lion d'Or, had suffered from this deformity from his birth. What was there to prevent Charles Bovary from operating upon him, and thereby acquiring an immense reputation? And naturally—but, of course, this was only an after thought, and could have had no influence on the mind of a philanthropist—if the village surgeon's practice increased, the business of the village apothecary would flourish also.

Monsieur Homais became enthusiastic.

"What does one risk?" he said to Madame Bovary. "Examine the matter"—and he enumerated on his fingers the advantages of the attempt. "Success almost certain. Comfort and improved appearance of the patient. Celebrity quickly acquired by the operator. Why should not your husband, for example, cure this poor man, Hyppolyte of the Lion d'Or? And note, that he will not fail to recount his cure to all the travellers who stay at the hotel. And then"—and Homais lowered his voice, and looked carefully around him for fear somebody should be within earshot—"and then, what is there to prevent me from sending a little note about the successful operation to the newspapers?"

Charles Bovary had no more confidence in his own skill now than he had at the commencement of his career. Indeed, he may have had less, for most of us learn our limitations in time, although we don't always talk about them. However, he allowed himself to be convinced by his wife and the apothecary that he might possibly become a celebrated surgeon. He ordered a copy of Duval's Surgery from Rouen, and every evening he might have been seen with his head between his hands busily studying the book.

While the doctor in his efforts to master the subject became more and more confused between valgus, varus, talipes-equinus and talipes-calcaneus and all the varieties of club-foot, congenital and acquired, the apothecary set himself to work to induce the stable boy to submit to the operation.

"You will scarcely feel it," he argued. "A little pain, a simple prick as if you were being bled—not nearly so bad as cutting your corns."

But Hyppolyte did not seem much impressed. He only rolled his stupid eyes.

"However," continued Monsieur Homais, "it is no business
of mine. It is yours. I only speak from pure humanity. I should like to see you, my friend, freed from this ugly lameness, which must hinder you very much in the performance of your duties."

Then he attacked the man's vanity.

"Think how much better looking you will be," he said. "Think how much more you will please the ladies"—Hyppolyte grinned foolishly. "Besides, you are a man. If you are called to the colours, how can you fight with a game leg?"

Monsieur Homais went away indignant. He declared he could not understand this obstinacy, this blindness which would not take advantage of the benefits of science.

At last, after the whole village had preached to him on the subject, Hyppolyte agreed to undergo the operation on the condition that it cost him nothing.

The case appears from Flaubert's description to have been one of talipes-equinus, and Bovary, with a trembling hand, for he was in an awful state of funk, succeeded in cutting through the tendo Achillis. Then with the assistance of Monsieur Homais, who of course was present, he put the leg up in a wonderful apparatus, the work of the village carpenter and locksmith, which weighed about eight pounds, and in the construction of which neither iron, wood, leather, screws, nor bolts had been spared.

That night Monsieur Homais composed an article for insertion in the Fanal de Rouen.

"On Tuesday," he wrote, "our little city of Yonville was the theatre of a surgical experiment which was at the same time an act of the highest philanthropy. Monsieur Bovary, one of our most distinguished practitioners, operated on the club-foot of Hyppolyte Tautain, who has been garçon d'écurie at the hotel of the Lion d'Or for more than twenty-five years. The operation was performed as by enchantment. Scarcely a few drops of blood showed themselves upon the skin, and the rebellious tendon, so to speak, yielded to the efforts of Art. Everything leads one to believe that the convalescence will be short, and who knows, but at the next village fête we shall see our brave Hyppolyte figuring in the Bacchanaal dances in the midst of a choir of joyous girls, and thus proving his complete cure by his grace and gambols."

Five days later gangrene set in. Probably the wonderful apparatus, with its many screws and straps, was to blame. Now nobody knew what to do. Bovary and the apothecary both lost
their heads. Valuable time was lost, and the case would have gone from bad to worse if Madame Lefrançois, the landlady of the Lion d'Or, had not called in another doctor. This was Dr. Canivet of Neufchâtel, who had a considerable local reputation as a surgeon. Being a doctor of medicine he naturally looked down on a mere officier de santé, and he laughed disdainfully as he examined the gangrenous leg. Going across the street to the apothecary's shop, he declaimed loudly against the asses who had reduced an unfortunate man to such a state.

Monsieur Homais listened to the doctor's tirade with a timeserving smile. It was necessary to be polite to Dr. Canivet, for his prescriptions frequently found their way as far as Yonville. So the apothecary did not undertake the defence of Bovary. In short, abandoning his principles, he sacrificed his own dignity to the more important interests of his business.

The next day Dr. Canivet amputated the leg. It was in the pre-chloroform days, and the cries of the patient resounded through the village, until they reached the ears of Bovary, who was shut up in his house, overcome with shame. The story of this unfortunate operation, he thought to himself, will be the subject of conversation in all the villages for miles around. It will even reach to Rouen. He, Bovary, would be ruined. Besides, Hyppolyte, if he lived, would probably bring an action against him. How was he going to survive the disgrace?

However, things turned out better than might have been expected. Hyppolyte recovered. By the advice of his wife, Bovary bought a cork leg for his late patient. This was a marvellous affair. The joints were fitted with springs, and the complicated piece of mechanism was covered with a black cloth trouser leg, and finished off with a varnished boot. But Hyppolyte dared not make use of such a handsome limb every day—perhaps the new trouser leg did not match with his old one. He begged Madame Bovary to get him a more useful one. Accordingly, her husband had to go to the expense of another artificial limb—a bucket-leg probably, as no doubt that would be more suitable for stumping about a stable-yard.

Little by little, as he became accustomed to his maimed condition, the poor fellow took up his old duties, and was seen moving about the village as before. But whenever Bovary heard the sound of the wooden leg on the pavement, he took care to go another way.

Naturally, all this was not calculated to improve a country
practice. Nevertheless, the unsuccessful surgeon would probably have lived the affair down—for his good-nature made him popular in the district—if his wife had allowed him to do so. But Madame Bovary's conduct became daily more and more disgraceful. She not only deceived her husband, but she appropriated his money where and when she could put her hands on it, in order to spend it on her debaucheries, and when everything else failed, she got herself involved in the toils of a crafty tradesman who had a taste for money-lending.

The inevitable catastrophe drew near. One day an execution was put into the doctor's house. Seeing that the whole story of her life was about to be revealed, Madame Bovary became frantic. She appealed to her lovers for help, but received none. In her distress she tried to obtain money from other rich men of her acquaintance. All was without avail. At last, in her despair, she obtained the key of the apothecary's store-room—the "capharnaum"—and poisoned herself with arsenic.

Bovary was beside himself. He summoned Homais to his assistance. But the apothecary was not much good. All he could suggest was that they should make an analysis—of what, he did not say. But he had read somewhere that it was the proper thing to do in case of poisoning, so he harped upon the subject.

They sent to Neufchâtel for Dr. Canivet and to Rouen for Dr. Larivière. These two lights of science arrived in due time, but they could do nothing. And so the woman died.

As I have said above, Flaubert paints the deathbed scene in lurid colours. He throws up the high lights by touches of grim humour. Imagine the freethinking apothecary and the curé sitting up all night to watch the dead body, and passing the time in religious discussions, which were more animated than logical! But incongruity is said to be the soul of humour. In the most solemn part of the funeral service the congregation is disturbed by the sound of an iron-shod stick on the pavement of the church, and looking round, the mourners see Hyppolyte, the maimed stableman, who has put on his best artificial limb with the black cloth trouser leg and the varnished boot for the occasion. That night Justin, the apothecary's errand-boy, the only being in the world, except her husband, who really loved the dead woman, is disturbed, while praying beside the newly-made grave, by Lestiboudois, the beadle. Justin hurriedly decamps—for we are often more ashamed of a good deed than we are of a bad one—but Lestiboudois recognises him as he climbs over the wall, and
is satisfied now that he knows who comes by night to steal his potatoes.

The rest of the story is quickly told. Charles Bovary, whose love for his wife was genuine, was broken-hearted at her death. He brooded over it, and nothing could rouse him from his melancholy, not even Monsieur Homais' well-meant efforts to interest him in designs for the dead woman's tombstone and the inscription to be engraved thereon. Bovary died suddenly a little while after, and when Dr. Canivet kindly came over from Neufchâtel to make a post-mortem examination of the body, he found no cause for the death.

As for Monsieur Homais, he flourished. He worked the quackery department of his business so thoroughly, that he starved out three young doctors, one after another, who came to Yonville to try to take up the late Charles Bovary's practice. But Monsieur Homais was upheld by public opinion. Even his scientific attainments in the end were recognised, and he received the long-coveted decoration.