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Glimpses of the past

Immersed in the story as I was while listening in the car on the way to work, I found myself wondering about what would happen to Mary Thorne. Was Frank Gresham going to propose or would he "marry money"? Would Mary herself give him up? I had long forgotten how it all ended, and listening to one episode at a time I felt each morning rather like Charles Dickens' readers, who would excitedly wait at the wharf in New York for the ship bringing the next episode of *David Copperfield*.

Doctor Thorne (1858) is Anthony Trollope's third Barchester chronicle, still read and relevant when so many once fashionable authors have sunk into oblivion. Marrying money and preserving distinctions of rank and blood are the predominant themes, but the book should also interest doctors, especially those discontented with present day arrangements.

Trollope's hero, Doctor Thorne, charges only seven shillings and sixpence for a visit and supplements his income by dispensing medicines that he himself mixes up. His rivals, or indeed enemies, are the fashionable Barchester physicians who charge several guineas and look down with contempt on the apothecary. Medical practice consists of calling at patients' houses, on a horse or in a horse carriage. Prescriptions are written for drugs that we may safely infer were mostly ineffective and sometimes harmful. When things get sticky the solution is to call in another doctor in consultation. The fashionable physicians will have nothing to do with their apothecary rival, but may on occasion call in a famous physician from London. Some patients are notoriously fickle, now calling in Dr Thorne, now his rivals.

The doctors' armamentarium is clearly limited. But they make up for this by spending much time with the patient, even staying all night if the patient is very ill or dying, especially if the patient is wealthy or important. The fashionable doctors write reports for a medical gazette. Dr Thorne manages the squire's money and gives sensible lifestyle advice.

An often quoted passage explains how to collect a fee without embarrassment. It should be done without a look, without a move of the facial muscles, with hardly an awareness "that the last friendly grasp has been made so much more precious by the touch of gold." How much easier to receive a monthly pay check.