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A N E S S A Y

ON THE

SUREST METHODS OF DEGRADING

THE

Profession of Dental Surgery.

Read before the AMERICAN SOCIETY OF DENTAL SURGEONS, at its Annual Meeting in Boston, July 21st, 1842, and ordered to be published in the *American Journal and Library of Dental Science*—and also in pamphlet form as an Appendix to that work.

By SOLYMAN BROWN, M. D.; D. D. S.

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ESSAY

ON THE

Most direct methods by which a Dental Practitioner may succeed, without a possibility of a failure, in degrading both himself and his profession.

By SOLYMAN BROWN, M. D.

At our last Annual Meeting, it was my privilege to present to the society, a few desultory considerations relating to the "*pursuit of professional eminence.*"

On the present occasion, availing myself gratefully of the courtesy and kindness of the brethren here convened, I propose to occupy a few moments in treating of the most direct methods by which a dental practitioner may succeed, without a possibility of failure, in degrading both himself and his profession.

I do not allow myself to fear that any honorable member of this society, or of the profession at large, will believe me capable of the ungenerous suspicion, that he himself has the slightest desire to study any of the precepts, or pursue any of the paths of professional degradation.

The son of Anchises needed a chart indicating the site of Scylla and Charibdis, not because he wished to wreck his vessel on that hidden rock, or to engulf it in this dangerous whirlpool; but because he desired to avoid both, and transport in safety his household gods to the "Lavinian Shores."

It is a *lamentable* rather than a *necessary* truth, that any calling connected with the wants and conveniences of human society, should be either irksome or humiliating. Fields might be cultivated; oceans navigated; habitations erected; food and raiment provided for man; and all the sciences and arts that preserve, prolong and embellish life, exercised to any desirable extent, without inconvenience and without disgrace, if there were not, in human nature, together with the ability of thinking, feeling and acting right, an equal ability of thinking, feeling and acting wrong; and if, moreover, some individuals did not make the permanent choice of exercising this delegated power in the wrong direction.

Inasmuch then, as there are some in our profession, as well as in every other human avocation, who tread the downward path and humble in their descent both themselves and their calling, it may be neither uninteresting nor unprofitable, to trace the steps of their progress, if for no other reason, than that we may learn to avoid them.

In the first place then, let him who would thoroughly debase our art, and trample the science of Dental Surgery successfully under foot, take special care to assume the duties of the profession, without any previous qualifications, either from general education, particular preparation, or predisposing instinct.

On the score of general science, he should avail himself of the easy precaution, to be profoundly ignorant of the distinction between a mixture

and a solution, an amalgam and an alloy, a line and a superficies. He should by no means fatigue himself with the useless inquiry, whether the metals are oxidizable, fusible or malleable, or whether the human bones are silicious, argillaceous or calcareous: much less should he know that animal muscle is susceptible of inflammatory action, and that animal nerve is the seat of acute sensibility. All such knowledge would be much too high for the zero of his ambition.

With general literature he should be not less unacquainted. It would be but a burden to his memory to recollect the unimportant circumstance whether Milton wrote the *Æneid*, the *Odyssey*, or *Paradise Lost*; or whether Hannibal was a Greek, a Roman, or a Carthagenian.

Of the particular science to which he allies his name, and of the history and literature of Dentistry, he should know still less.

Of what use is it to him to inform himself whether the maxillary antrum be in the upper or the lower jaw; whether stiptics or stimulants should be exhibited in excessive hemorrhage; or whether a poultice or a leech will best reduce an inflammation?

To the full success of his *descending career*, there are other kinds of acquisition vastly more important.

How perfectly a matter of supererogation to such an one, to inform himself whether Hunter or Handel, Fox or Fontenelle, Bell or Bacon, Koecker or Confucius, has written most extensively on the teeth! And in fact, on the score of literary or scientific acquirement, there are many in our profession in all civilized countries, who seem to have inherited from nature a superintending instinct, which has led them to secure their object by discontinuing their education at that peculiar point of time, just before they began to learn to read and write, and cast accounts.

Of what an enormous economy of time, labor and lamp-light, have such men to boast! Instead of rashly arousing themselves in the morning from refreshing slumbers, before the peep of dawn, and earlier than the matin of the lark, at the execrable sound of a college bell, these men have allowed their physical natures to repose and expand in the genial radiance of the rising sun, as the "king of day" looks through their lattice upon their protracted slumbers. And their intellectual natures, too, have been indulged in a similar repose, lest the mind should outstrip the body, and thus become its own destroyer, through a culpable precocity of expansion! No long and weary days have been worse than wasted over musty volumes, either modern or antique;—nor have these men confounded their mother tongue with the jargon of the *Humanities*. How much precious time have they snatched from oblivion by leaving the history and the literature of bygone days to the curious antiquarian? Thus how much accumulated strength have they carefully reserved for future effort, by having wasted nothing on the past!

We would not be understood to recommend the self-denying parsimoniousness of the miser, in regard to these untouched stores of intellectual wealth; but there is really something so conservative of the latent energies of the soul, in spending one's childhood and youth in the elegant and healthy amusements of pitching quoits and coppers, fishing and hunting for the mere sport of destroying harmless animals, cock-fighting and gambling, smoking and drinking, together with other kindred occupations of the modern coxcomb, that we shall be in no danger of commending too highly that economy of brain which constitutes so prominent a feature in the early education of

many of those individuals, in whose professional fraternity, every honorable dentist of the present age, finds himself associated in the public mind.

In the second place:—He who has thus made an easy somerset from the idleness of an ill spent youth, to the exercise of the Dental Profession, should consecrate the first fruits of his ignorance to the induction of others no less stupid than himself, into the mysteries of his new calling.

He can find no difficulty in obtaining students, inasmuch as he can safely assure them that it will require but a very inconsiderable period of time to impart all his knowledge to the discerning intellects of his pupils.

Such men, both the teacher and the taught, are not ignorant of the important fact that time is money; and, with them money is more than education. Hence the solution of the dark enigma concealed in the well known circumstance, that, as a general rule, those members of our profession who have the fewest qualifications to teach, have the most pupils. For the credit due to this *discovery*, I trust to the justice of posterity. I am aware that the proverbial jealousy of contemporaries, will bestow few encomiums on my particular perspicacity in this behalf.

I have said, this class of instructors can find no difficulty in obtaining students. They have only to make their terms cheap, and the period of inculcation short, and there are not wanting scores of loungers, who, hearing of a few successful practitioners in our art, are ready to make the easy experiment. As such persons are not addicted to the vulgarity of cash payments, they promise their instructors a barrel of molasses or a bag of peanuts whenever they make a professional visit to the Indies. And when the PERIOD of instruction is considered in connexion with its *quality*, such a compensation seems not to bear a great disproportion to the talents and labors of the instructor. As "*time is money*," too much of this precious commodity should not be wasted on the education of such Dental Students; and we find that these teachers understand this secret of their trade. Two weeks, three weeks, or a month, is considered by them an ample period for the transmutation of Dunces into Dentists; and they thus rapidly recruit that army of scientific Hessians whose march is to be equally propitious to friends and foes.

To this branch of "*the art of sinking*" in the practice of Dental Surgery, too much importance cannot easily be attached; and if it were not for the fear of being suspected of an attempt to arrogate unmerited glory to the age in which we live, I should be almost tempted to say that some of the members of our profession have carried this department of the art well nigh to its utmost attainable perfection.

It is no very uncommon circumstance, in this land and age of improvements, that a single manufactory of dental blockheads, should send abroad from eight to twelve per annum of these patent practitioners, to prey upon the credulity, the purses, and the grinders of those lovers of novelty and quackery with whom society abounds. All these, in addition to their equally meritorious *confreeres* whom a widely extended commerce annually brings to our shores, constitute literally an army well appointed to the work of a wide spread professional degradation.

Let every individual, therefore, who has at heart the thorough disgrace of himself and his calling, and who finds himself utterly unqualified for the task of instructing, see to it that he multiply the professional effigies of himself as extensively as possible, in order that his own ignorance and disgrace may be confounded with that of his companions.

Again—In the third place :—Every Dental practitioner who makes the humiliation of his calling a darling object of pursuit, should take care to perform all his operations in so careless a manner as to render them of so little value to his patients that they will ever after pronounce the services of the Dentist to be worse than useless.

On this part of my subject, I flatter myself that I shall find no difficulty in securing the practical concurrence of all that portion of the profession for whom these instructions are designed. The performance of useless, and even deleterious operations on the human teeth, is so economical both of time and genius, that I urge this precept with peculiar satisfaction. The instructors of mankind are always flattered on finding teachable disciples; and in this behalf there is little reason to apprehend that I shall be disappointed in my expectation of proselyting many, not only in theory, but to practical effect.

If it has been often declared, by the members of the faculty themselves, that the general practice of medicine—that branch of the healing art so universal in society—has probably done more harm than good, including all its quackeries, patent pills, infinitesimal doses, and experimenting abuses, how emphatically true, when predicated of the general charlatanism of dental practice, unguarded as it is by statutory enactments, and unprotected by even the common discretion of mankind.

Here, then, is a field for the unobstructed enterprize of every low born son of *pseudo-genius*.

There is indeed in this confederated republic one shining exception to the legislative neglect which has left the practice of dentistry wholly exposed to the depredations of imposture. The State of Alabama has passed an Act prohibiting the exercise of the dental art in her territory hereafter, excepting by such individuals as shall be duly qualified agreeably with the provisions of that statute. This is an example worthy of all praise, and expresses an acknowledgment that the good people of that State have so far cut their wisdom teeth as to discover that they have no further need of the proffered services of ignorant quacks, and itinerating mountebanks.

Still the fraternity of impostors has little reason to despair. Twenty-five populous States of the American union throw wide their doors to impudence and enterprise, and thus tacitly encourage the incursions and the pillage of these Goths and Vandals.

Could I be persuaded that any advantage would result from entering into *particulars* on this head, the scope of instruction is ample; and the rules of the art of sinking, multiplied and various.

I might say, in filling teeth let the operator use any and every thing but gold. This being the only substance which experience has shown to be generally suitable for this purpose, should be left to respectable practitioners, who vainly pride themselves on being a little superior to the great mass, the *ignobile vulgus* of their profession; and therefore should use a royal and aristocratical material utterly odious to republican simplicity.

Lithodium, royal mineral succedaneum, metallic paste, mercurial amalgams, anything but gold, will fully answer the purpose of disappointing the expectations of the patient and disgracing the profession; and if, in any case, gold should be employed to satisfy the stubborn prejudices of a difficult patient, let the manner of introducing this precious metal, secure the same result. It is important to be known that the purest gold is little better than any other material for stopping carious teeth, unless it be

properly introduced to the permanent exclusion of every other substance, solid, fluid, or æriform.

In cleaning beautiful sets of teeth, let the student, as well as the veteran professor in this art, employ some one of the undiluted mineral acids which will not merely facilitate his labours, but secure the necessity of future dental operations in the way of artificial substitutes. I have seen an entire set of teeth in the mouth of a most estimable lady in one of the Southern States, reduced to the condition of the carbonized stumps left by the fire of the forest pioneer, occasioned by the use of sulphuric acid, applied at first by a dentist when engaged in scaling and cleaning the teeth, and recommended by him to be used frequently afterwards. To dentists like him, the lesson which I am now inculcating will be wholly useless.

Again; In the extraction of teeth—an operation in which mercy and kindness are especially required, the venerable turnkey, the formidable pelican, or the mallet and punch, should be preferred in all cases to forceps, screws and elevators, and those improved instruments used by skilful and reputable dentists of the present day.

It is particularly important to the class of practitioners for whom these instructions are intended, that the extraction of teeth should be accompanied with such intense anguish, and attended with such an array of horrors, that every patient may be fully convinced of having the worth of his money. It must be provoking to a man of sense and feeling to pay fifty cents or a dollar for an operation which inflicts scarcely sufficient pain to distort a muscle. But when the patient is seated on the floor of the operating-room, in order to facilitate *perpendicular extraction*, or drawn three or four times round the room to give circulation to his corporeal fluids, and then taken into the open air, and drawn all around out of doors, there seems to be some propriety in paying a round fee. In such cases the purse strings are untied and tied again in good earnest, and the parties separate with mutual satisfaction.

But I must proceed to another topic of discourse, inasmuch as, in running against time, I am likely to be beaten in the race; and I therefore hasten to counsel all true proficients in the art of sinking to be always on the alert, to take every possible pecuniary advantage of that class of patients who would prefer to submit to imposition rather than be exposed to a newspaper notoriety for resisting fraud. Females are in an especial manner fit subjects of this gentlemanly species of professional extortion: and more particularly that class of females who, being unprotected orphans, brotherless and friendless, are little prepared to resist oppression. No matter for their tears: how obvious it is to tell them that tears are but the easy and hypocritical artifices of women and children to obtain their objects. No matter if they have been compelled to labour for a year, in the most abject drudgery; in plying the needle both night and day, without exercise or amusement; or in the thankless task of forcing an education upon the minds of idle and contumacious children, for a piece of service which the dentist can execute in half a day, still he should steel his heart to the feelings of humanity, and exact the utmost farthing that avarice can demand.

If the operator cannot succeed in obtaining such prices for his work, in those cases where a previous bargain has been made, as shall exceed four-fold the value of his services, he may at least avail himself of those other instances in which no terms have been previously stipulated, and extort heavy sums from the confiding and unresisting. In this he may draw his lesson from nature, in imitating the spider, which, although it may succeed

in capturing a fly in the meshes of its web, only at distant intervals, yet can sustain itself for a long period on the carcass of a single victim.

Such a course of practice will have the double effect of lining the pockets of the operator, and forwarding at the same time the great business of his life, that of degrading his profession, and affixing the title of *land-sharks*, to all those individuals who are found professionally associated with knaves and mountebanks.

Once more :—He should take care to render his room and his company as disagreeable as possible, so that his fellow-citizens will never visit his apartments except from necessity.

He would counterwork the general tendency of his professional character and practice, if he should make his rooms an agreeable resort to all his neighbours and acquaintances, as do some of the high-minded, liberal, and well-educated members of the profession.

There are in all villages and cities persons of both sexes whose habits of domestic retirement allow them little intercourse with society, and who find the drawing-room of an intelligent dental practitioner, an agreeable resort for a leisure moment, either to meet a friend, exhibit the bright faces and gay attire of half a dozen laughing children; or to inquire for the news of the day.

There too the sociable young lady may meet her companions, and gossip away the irksomeness of an idle hour.

Nor is it always impossible that the man of years and wisdom may find some individuals even in the desecrated ranks of dental surgery, in whose occasional society he can find both pleasure and improvement.

But against such intruders the doors of that class of practitioners for whom these remarks are intended, should be for ever shut. The latch at their threshold should be lifted by those only who come with a trembling hand and an aching heart; choosing reluctantly between the dentist and death. Parents who should be under the necessity of dragging their children to their apartments as the doomed ox is dragged to the slaughter-house, snuffing the blood of his companions.

Should a member of his own profession deign to call upon a dentist of the character in question, he must see to it that he treat him churlishly; and though the visitor be from some distant city, and call for the most friendly purposes, he should be answered in sullen monosyllables, and dismissed at last as though he were a beggar at the door.

In order to remove himself as far as possible from the imputation of being called a gentleman, the dentist whom I am laboring to instruct, should always carry the shop with him wherever he goes. That is to say, he must be a dentist, and nothing but a dentist in every circle in which he may chance to move. Whether he be in a stage-coach or a railroad car, a steamboat or a drawing-room, no subject should engage his conversation except the teeth.

And he should not only take the *shop* with him, but a part of its *contents*; for he should always carry his pocket full of hawksbills and cotton wadding, in order to try his skill upon dogs and donkeys by the way, to attract the notice of the public, and thus make himself notorious. He should, moreover, be a skilful punster in order to be incessantly playing upon words which indicate his professional office, to the end that he may either secure a patient, or at least corroborate the authority of Johnson, who avers with perhaps less truth than sarcasm, that "he who would make a pun would pick a pocket."

Again :—He who would contribute largely to the efforts so constantly and so successfully made to render dentistry contemptible as a profession, should be careful to propagate the sentiment far and wide, that no man can be a good, a useful, and a successful dentist, unless he has first obtained a medical diploma from some college of physicians.

If he be shrewdly confronted by some of the knowing ones, the evidences of whose acquirements are to be found rather in a cultivated mind than in a sheet of parchment; and if he be informed by them that it is not the Astley Coopers, the Benjamin Rushes, the Valentine Motts, the Anthony Carlises of the medical and surgical schools who have become dental practitioners through the cogent argument of a lack of encouragement and success in the other departments of the healing art; and that, moreover, it is utterly idle to attempt to attach a higher importance in the public estimation to a sheepskin diploma than to positive science, practical ingenuity, and sterling operations in dental surgery; he should still insist upon his position that no man but an M.D. can be a good dentist. And let him not be daunted when he is told, that, although there are many highminded men who, in preparing themselves diligently and scientifically for dental practice, have received the degree of doctor of medicine, and whose success will be commensurate with their ability; and whose ability to be distinguished in their profession will be greatly augmented by extensive medical and surgical knowledge: yet that there are many others who imagine themselves the only *magnates* of the land, merely because they once studied medicine, failed in the attempt to practice, and as a desperate resort, betook themselves to dentistry because they have made the discovery that they can pull a tooth and raise a blister.*

Once again :—Another available and successful method of allying our profession with quackery and disgrace, is to oppose all dental associations for mutual improvement and protection, and all dental magazines published with the liberal design of communicating knowledge.

Not only should this opposition be accompanied with the avowal, that it is made from selfish motives, but with the further asseveration, that knowledge should be cautiously concealed, especially that practical professional knowledge which is eminently important to the public welfare.

The art of sinking urges this precept with peculiar emphasis, whilst the profession at large have convincing proofs that the present epoch is abundantly supplied with skilful professors of this art. But let the foremost in the ranks of the conservatives of the ancient regime, encourage themselves and their comrades to avoid chagrin when they are told that some conceited individuals flatter themselves with the belief that they can make more capital by *showing their teeth* at the dentists' society than by *showing their talents IN IT*; but that by so doing they pursue the true order of nature, and make a display of their *canine* sooner than of their *wisdom* teeth.

Finally, as a crowning perfection in this downward career, let the dental

* The author has been informed that some individuals who were present when this Essay was read before the society, received the impression that it was the intention of the writer to underrate the intrinsic value of a medical education in preparing students for the dental profession. But the author is confident that no such inference can be justly drawn from the foregoing observations. But to remove all doubt, the author is most happy to state, that it is his unwavering opinion, that, all things else being equal, the superaddition of medical knowledge, and especially of surgical studies and practice, are calculated to give a very decided advantage to the dental practitioner who has acquired them; provided they neither inflate his vanity, nor paralyze his efforts in pursuit of the appropriate knowledge of his profession as an operative dentist.

practitioner who studies the precepts which I have given, to practical effect, be particularly on the alert to speak in disparaging terms of every operator but himself, especially of those who reside in his immediate vicinity.

Or if he have not yet brought his conscience to so low an ebb, let him see to it that he never say anything to the advantage of any of his brethren, lest he thereby affect himself injuriously by acknowledging the merits of a rival. But especially should he be careful, when the eulogium of a brother becomes inevitable, to speak of him in such measured and moderate terms as to "damn him with faint praise."

In doing those things with tact, consists the principal accomplishment of some who exercise our profession. In fact many have already acquired so much expertness on this subject, as to render these instructions almost superfluous.

If it could be necessary to alledge a motive, in addition to that of exhibiting without disguise the true character of that notorious individuality contemplated in these remarks, I have a motive to urge, involving the very existence of that class of dental practitioners for whose sole benefit and instruction the foregoing directions have been given. It is this; those individuals of the present age, who, following in the footsteps of predecessors worthy of such a progeny, have labored to entail upon the profession of dental surgery, the character of arrant quackery and imposture, must now either arouse themselves to a sense of their duty and their danger, and, by their united effort, bring down the character of the profession to their own level, or be left to exclaim with the Moor of Venice, "Othello's occupation's gone;" for there is an enemy abroad bent on the annihilation of their craft.

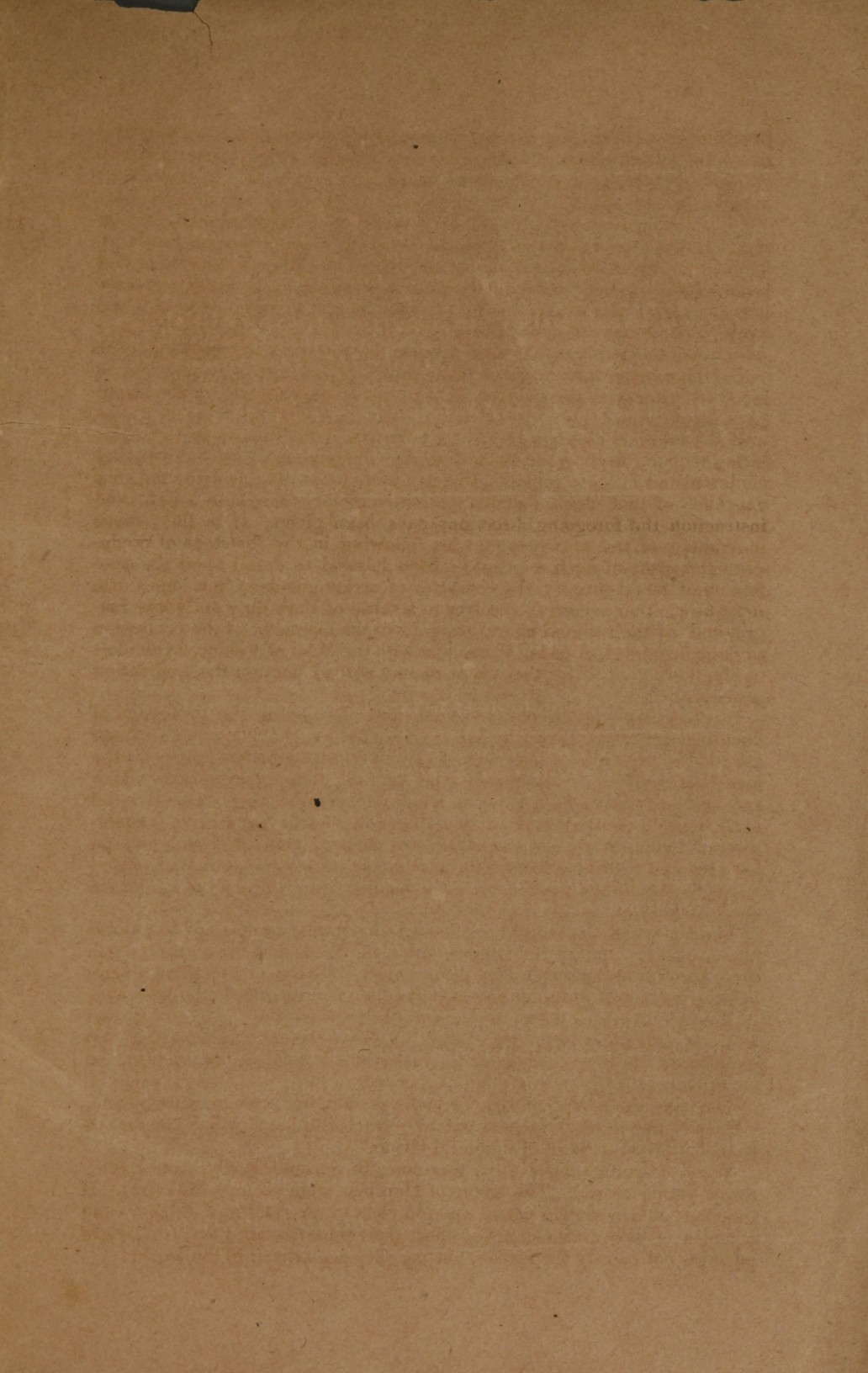
It is not they who discourage social efforts to elevate the profession of dental surgery; nor they who are aggrieved when the knowledge of our art and the principles of our science, are disseminated far and wide for the benefit of mankind; nor yet they who, vain of a temporary success which accident has thrown in the way of ill desert, contract themselves like the snail, beneath the shelter of a ridiculous self-sufficiency, and leave the interests of a noble science to the caprices of chance. Spirits of nobler mould have entered with dauntless resolution into the mighty competition, resolved either to elevate the profession above the disgusting vulgarity of ignorance and quackery, or perish in the attempt.

The history of the world has afforded numerous examples of the moral power of a few united individuals with clear heads and brave hearts. A mere handful of such men have been known to overthrow empires, demolish the palaces of kings, and reorganize the governments of the world.

Rouse yourselves, therefore, ye conservatives of the "*ancient regime*," and come manfully to the encounter. Ye have the encouragement of past experience to prove, that of all the arts which are cultivated by man, the art of *sinking* is the most certain of success.

The cherished bard of the Cæsars has said for your encouragement, "Easy is the descent to hell, but to retrace the steps which conduct us thither, this is the work of immortal virtue."

What difficulties, have they, therefore, to encounter, who would overthrow your empire! The labors of Hercules were nothing to theirs! If the giant of Greece was called upon to cleanse the stables of Augea,—the enemies of *your* craft can never effect their purpose, until they shall have purified, not merely the *stables*, but the very *dog-kennels* of the world!



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