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ON

The Progressive and Conserva-
tive Spirit in Medical Science.

BY

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ADDRESS
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THE PROGRESSIVE AND CONSERVATIVE SPIRIT
IN MEDICAL SCIENCE.

In the broad domain of medical science there is room for many laborers; each may cultivate his chosen field for his own profit and for the general good. The historian records the discoveries and inventions of the past, relates the rise and overthrow of theories, and teaches us of the errors, as well as the truths, which have been promulgated. He that collates from reports and statistics furnishes sometimes important, and sometimes unreliable, data upon which to form opinions and theories.

The investigator, whether his researches are in the laboratory or by the sick bed, is often discovering new facts and frequently advancing new theories. These theories are put to the test and approved or condemned, by him who stands in the presence of disease and death, and who, furnished and equipped by the results of the labor of his predecessors, and his own experience, takes the responsibility to act. Knowledge is vast and life is short. Each in his own sphere may act his part.

The advanced thought of to-day is the conservatism of to-morrow. The winnowing sieve of experience separates the grains of truth from the chaff of error; the former is eternal, the latter is the rubbish of the past. The world is full of books, but a not very large volume would contain all well proven facts. The late Prof. Cleaveland, of Bowdoin College, gave as the best definition of science, "Classification and induction." One of his successors defines Natural Science as "that theory which will explain most of the phenomena."



The first definition is correct for exact science only, otherwise we may classify well proven facts, and those, often warped and twisted to prove theories which we have been taught, with what time proves to be but error. We must take the second definition to apply to Medical Science, if indeed it yet can be called a science.

Theories must frequently be changed with increasing knowledge. New facts, both physiological and pathological, require an almost continual readjustment, and often a radical change in theory.

The microscope is revealing hitherto hidden mysteries. Collateral sciences are developing unknown forces, and opening up new fields of investigation, while more scientific observation and careful recording of cases gives us much data upon which to revise long-unchallenged opinions. But not until we can comprehend that seeming impassable barrier, a want of knowledge of the vital force, or can get some conception of the origin and nature of force as applied in the natural sciences, can we expect to attain anything like permanence in our theories. Carlisle says: "Science has done much for us, but it is a poor science that would hide from us the great, deep, sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims as a mere superficial film." "The world," he says, and he might with equal truth have said the human body, "after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle, wonderful, inscrutable, magical and more, to whosoever will think of it." And yet each generation goes building up new theories and fortifying them with facts, both seeming and real, until its successors, or the advanced thinkers of the day, tear them down to build anew.

Against all these innovations stands conservatism, defending the theories of the past as a patriot defends home and country; and not only standing on the defensive, he sometimes attacks what he believes

to be his enemy, with all the power at his command, using even sometimes the sharp sword of ridicule and sarcasm.

Have not these theories stood the crucial test of experience? True, they sometimes failed, but was not the failure merely an exception so conveniently believed necessary to prove the rule, or explained as an accident, which might have been avoided?

These well-tried theories he is loath to give up even when, in the light of new truths, another will explain more of the phenomena.

“ My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are.”

The earnest seeker after truth should be both progressive and conservative.

This is an age of brilliant scientific investigation and dazzling theories, and while we should not be captivated by their mere brilliancy, we should give them an unprejudiced examination and an impartial judgment. Koch, Pasteur, and others, by their investigations and speculations in biological germs, have given a new impetus to scientific thought in its relation to pathological processes. New theories have been founded and old theories threatened. Honest conservatism will not be hasty to accept the new, but it will be ready to listen, to examine, and to acknowledge that which time and experience prove.

All must acknowledge that the practice which has grown out of the germ theory so ably taught by Lister and his zealous disciples, has proved that scrupulous cleanliness is an essential factor to success in all surgical operations, and that when experience has eliminated some of the hasty conclusions, much of value will be left, and that many of the phenomena of pathological processes are best explained on these theories. Scientific thought is ever pro-

gressive. New theories are evolved from the old. "The originals," says Emerson, "are not original."

There should be nothing but generous contention between the progressive and conservative scientist. All new discoveries or innovations upon the customs or thought of the times are liable to encounter an ungrateful and often persecuting spirit. The torture of Galileo, the imprisonment of Columbus, the ridicule and misrepresentation with which the new discoveries of Harvey and Jenner were received by even the scientific men of their day, are only illustrations of the fact; nor can these examples be credited wholly to the ignorance or bigotry of the past; the same spirit often shows itself in some form at the present day.

Some of you gentlemen can remember the abuse heaped upon some of the most eminent surgeons of Boston when they first tested the anæsthetic virtue of sulphuric ether, and this severe criticism, too, by some of the leading medical journals of this country. For the benefit of younger members, I quote one of the many criticisms of that day:

The *Philadelphia Medical Examiner*, after detailing the reports of its trial by Drs. Warren Haywood and Bigelow, says: "We are persuaded that the surgeons of Philadelphia will not be seduced from the high professional path of duty into the quagmire of quackery by this will-o'-the-wisp; and, if any of our respectable dentists should be tempted to try this new patent medicine, we advise them to consider how great must be the influence of an agent over the nervous system, to render a person unconscious of pain—the danger there must necessarily be from such overpowering medication; and that if a fatal result should happen to one of their patients, what would be the effect upon their conscience, their reputation, and business, and how the practice would be likely to be viewed by a Philadelphia court and jury? We cannot close these remarks without again

expressing our deep mortification and regret that the eminent men who have so long adorned the profession in Boston, should have consented for a moment to set so bad an example to their younger brothers as we conceive them to have done in this instance. If such things are to be sanctioned by the profession, there is little need of reform conventions, or any other efforts to elevate the professional character; physicians and quacks will soon constitute one fraternity."

How oddly this sounds when we remember the priceless boon to suffering humanity and the inestimable value to surgical science which the discovery of the anæsthetic virtues of sulphuric ether has been. Shall we not, then, take warning by the past, and, while we may be conservatively slow in accepting new theories or in attempting dangerous experiments, we should be equally careful not to hastily condemn every innovation upon the accepted theories and practices of the past, honestly seeking after truth and fearlessly defending it. The rapid growth of medical societies and their divisions into the various specialties, during the past few years, gives opportunity for full and frequent discussion on topics of interest to the profession. New and old theories must stand on their merits. Their disciples and defenders must at all times be ready to give a reason for their faith and defend it from assault; here each has a chance to question and demand proof, and each has an opportunity to prove, illustrate, and relate his experience. If it possess merit it will withstand all the arguments which can be brought against it, or all the ridicule which may be heaped upon it, and come out like wheat from the winnowing mill or new coins from the mint; but if it is wanting in merit it will soon take its own place among the heaps of useless rubbish with its kindred companions of exploded dogmas and worthless inventions. Such free discussions cannot but be of great value to

true scientific knowledge if carried on with no feeling but that of generous contention and for disinterested purposes.

The past year has been a memorable one in its influence upon society work, and in the impulse which has been given to the scientific study of medicine in this country.

The meeting of the Ninth International Congress, at Washington, bringing together as it did eminent scientific men from different parts of the civilized world, each contributing by his presence, and many by their labors, to enrich the feast of medical scientific thought and fraternal relations. The amount of valuable original work was not small, and if, as Lowell says, "Originality consists quite as much in the power of using to purpose what it finds ready at hand, as in that of producing what is absolutely new," then the amount of original work was indeed vast as well as valuable. Not alone in the work there produced will the influence of the Congress be felt, but by the stimulation to investigation and study which will be felt, may we not hope, for many years to come. The Section of Gynecology was ably sustained, and the enthusiastic attendance upon its meetings proved the interest which was felt in this department of medical science. Much credit was due, and cordially awarded to, the President, Dr. Marcy, an honored member of our Society, whose indefatigable labor and eminent ability in organizing the Section, and whose courteous manner in presiding, did so much to deserve success. He was ably assisted by several other members of our Society, by many eminent gentlemen of this country and from abroad. Notably among those who were interested in this Section and whose acknowledged rank in the profession in the countries which they represented gave great interest to their papers and discussions, were Drs. Martin, of Berlin, Grailly Hewitt, of London, Reed, of Glasgow, Apostoli, of

Paris, and Cordes, of Geneva, with many others of first rank in this and other countries. With this array of talent so well organized, the meetings were interesting and profitable. Among the subjects discussed which have been considered by our Society with interest during the past year, was that of uterine myoma. Its treatment, in suitable cases, by ergot, was ably presented, as also by electricity, which called forth much discussion. Dr. Apostoli's method of using electricity in gynecology was fully explained and discussed. Dr. Martin's operation for vaginal total extirpation of the uterus for carcinoma, which several of you gentlemen had the pleasure of witnessing while he was in Boston, was elaborately explained and illustrated; but space will not permit me to give even a synopsis of what was presented of interest to our Society.

The Gynæcological Society of Boston can and ought to do efficient service in its important and honorable field of labor. Its talents are versatile, its spirit both progressive and conservative. It has in its membership ardent and enthusiastic investigators, men who do not feel obliged to stop where their predecessors did, or to take as proved all they have been taught, but who, with clear heads and steady nerves, are carefully exploring in untrodden paths by the light of advanced scientific thought and with all the appliances of modern art. It has also men with the experience of years upon them, men who have had grand success with old theories, and who have a right, by reason of their past success, to be conservative and hold fixed opinions. Some who have spent much time in the hospitals and laboratories studying their specialties with the best advantages and under the great masters of our art, and some who, although less favored, perhaps, in these respects, have been taught independence and self-reliance from necessity while treating all "the ills which flesh is heir to" in country practice where they

were obliged to act with the best light they had and watch the results with no one to counsel them or share the great responsibilities, and some who have just entered upon the responsible duties for which they have been for years preparing themselves, full of enthusiasm and hope. Our Society is also honored by having in its membership, ladies, possessing not only the education and experience of the sterner sex, but also a keener sense of the wants and of the peculiar nature of the disease of which our specialty calls upon us to treat.

In our list of corresponding members may be found the names of gentlemen who are known the world over, and who are acknowledged as leaders in gynecological studies and practice. With this array of talent working harmoniously together, the possibilities of our Society for good to each member and the communities in which we live, are very great.

