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1831

Rappa Lambda Soc
Medical Society of the County of
New York. Committee Appointed to
Investigate the Subject of a Secret Medical
Association

REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE

OF THE

MEDICAL SOCIETY,

OF THE

CITY AND COUNTY OF NEW YORK,

APPOINTED TO INVESTIGATE THE SUBJECT OF A

SECRET MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

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This Secret Society *Kappa Lambda*, with additional members, is still in active operation in this City, and continues to make the effort to control the Medical Institutions, and has become bold enough, by its success, to send in 1858 a delegate to the National Medical Association at Washington City.

REPORT.

The committee appointed to investigate the subject of the existence of a secret association of medical men in the city of New York, said to be for purposes derogatory to the profession, and injurious to the public, Report.

That in undertaking the task assigned them, by the authority of the Medical Society, they supposed it not improbable, that they would be subjected, to the secret enmity of some who might consider their interests affected by an investigation of the subject of this report. They were not prepared however for gross, and unprovoked insult, from any member of the secret association. They confess their mistake, and acknowledge that although moderate in their calculation, they had attributed too much, to the prudence and sense of decorum of certain of the profession.

The committee have examined the subject committed to their investigation with caution and deliberation. Whilst under the influence of a desire to protect from unjust obloquy, they have been actuated by a paramount sense of duty to the Medical Society, and the profession, to state truth, derived from authentic sources of information, and to express opinions deemed fairly inferable from sure premises.

It is to be understood, that an association of medical practitioners was formed in this city about twelve years ago. Who may be strictly called the founders of it, we have been unable to learn.

The number of the original members was but small; Doctors, Thomas Cock, Alexander H. Stevens, John C. Cheeseman, and some others belonged to it, at an early date. New members have since been carefully selected, and gradually introduced, according as they were found to be suitable in any way to promote the objects of the association. The following physicians are now members, viz: Doctors *Thomas Cock, Alexander H. Stevens, John C. Cheeseman, Francis U. Johnson, Stephen Brown, Ansel W. Ives, D. Atkins, Benjamin McVicker, Josiah D. Harris, Peter C. Tappan, John K. Rodgers, Martyn Paine, M. Willet, J. L. Phelps, Stephen Hasbrouck, John Conger, S. W. Moore, J. W. Weed, A. Smith, G. Smith, J. M. Smith, D. W. Kissam, R. K. Hoffman, J. C. Bliss, N. H. Dering, John Torrey*. There are a few more whose names were not suggested to the memory of our informant, one of the members of the association.

Another member of the society, has insisted very strongly upon the circumstance that the institution is not "called Secret Association, but *Kappa Lambda*, a branch of the Parent Society." The committee do not know whether there is any cabalistic meaning in this designation. If any gentleman shall feel curious on this part of the subject, we can only inform them, that it is composed of two letters of the Greek Alphabet, answering to *k*, and *l*, in English, and for further instruction, refer them to those members of the Association, who have been sufficiently educated, to know their name, and to explain its import. With, "*Parent Society*" or any other Societies external of New York—the plan upon which they may be conducted—the characters of their members—the principles upon which they are founded—or the abuses that have grown out of them, we claim no right to interfere. The independent establishment of New York, is amenable to the Medical Society of the city and county, and to it alone the committee shall confine its attention.

The avowed objects of this Association, are the promotion of good fellowship among the members, and the advancement of medical science. The first may be readily allowed, and the means used for securing it, be lauded for ingenuity and aptness. Indeed never has the physiological fact, of the existence of a close sympathy between the heart and stomach, been more experimentally proved. With regard to the second object we remark, that it cannot be so readily admitted. The members when questioned on this particular have hesitated, and have not given direct answers.—

Moreover, besides that the evidence in its favor is deficient, your committee cannot be so uncharitable, or so unjust to the literary character of the gentlemen, as to suppose it possible that after having combined their wit for twelve years, at this day when the inquiry is made; What have you done as an Association for the cause of science, and the honor of the profession? Echo alone should be heard to answer, *what?*

Among other regulations of this association there exist the following prominent requirements, viz. *Secrecy* and *Exclusiveness*. The former extending to the fact of the existence of the Institution, and to its proceedings; whilst the latter is carried so far, as to exclude any candidate proposed who does not receive an unanimous vote, said vote being taken by ballot. Here it is evident, that the honor of every medical gentleman in the city, is deeply concerned. If the persons composing this secret body, repose confidence in the integrity and judgment of each other, then every man who may be proposed a candidate, either with or without his consent, may have his reputation marred in the opinion of the whole fraternity; his rejection implying that something discreditable is known of him, by one or more of the members of the association. The Committee have been informed by the best authority, that *fancy* alone regulates the choice. No explanation is called for, or assigned for black-balling a candidate.

Although it would seem from their own account, that the persons composing this association are not bound by oaths, to aid each other in their professional pursuits, yet it doth appear that the same purpose is answered by a combination based upon the principles that have been mentioned, and is fully secured by the following solemn pledge, which is acknowledged as part of their compact.

"I ——— do solemnly promise, that by all proper means, I will promote the professional respectability and welfare of the members of this association, and vindicate their characters when unjustly assailed, and that I will not demand any pecuniary acknowledgment for such instruction as it may be convenient for me to afford to the son of any indigent member, as may be in the opinion of the society qualified by his previous education, and talents, and moral character, to become a respectable and useful member of the profession, but that I will afford such instruction gratuitously, in conjunction with the members of the society."

We have thus an acknowledgment on the part of the association, that its members are obligated to promote the professional respectability and welfare—to vindicate the character, and provide for the medical education of the posterity of each other. It is here to be remembered that the above extract is taken from an *ex parte* communication that was attempted to be introduced at the anniversary meeting of the medical society, but which was very properly rejected, ample opportunity having been afforded to make explanations, before the appointment of the committee of investigation.

This has never been attempted by the members of the association, although the professional and private character of many of them had been assailed in a periodical publication called the *Lancet*, which terminated in a libel suit, brought by two physicians who had been wrongfully accused of belonging to a secret association of a dishonorable character, but which the other gentlemen named in said publication, have never publicly noticed. It became therefore necessary that the medical society, the organ of the profession, and the guardian of its honor and interests, should investigate this matter.

The committee cannot inform the society, whether the communication above alluded to, contains the *truth* or the *whole truth*. Composed as it is of a quantity of useless and irrelevant matter, that could not have been introduced for any other purpose than to blind and mislead, the pledge that has been extracted is the only portion of it which is peculiar to the association as a distinct body, and is sufficient to show the insidious character of the institution. This quality whilst it increases the injurious influence upon the interests of the profession, renders the liabilities of the members of the association upon exposure less important and dangerous to them, than if they were bound by unlawful oaths to accomplish the same designs.

Your Committee would observe that they respect some of the gentlemen belonging to the secret society, and can only account for the circumstance of their connection with it, by the fact that their unsuspecting integrity has led them to confide too implicitly in the avowal of their more artful associates, or has blinded them as to the natural tendencies of an association like that under consideration. Yet it must be admitted that there are men of policy belonging to it, whose minds are not of so high an order as to overlook the monopolizing effects of their arrangements, and

whose morals are not so high toned, as to prevent them from using a machinery of the kind to the disadvantage of their professional brethren, and their own personal aggrandizement. And we would here remark that this association is devoid of any quality, redeeming it from the opprobrium that has been attached to secret societies.

The masonic institution, venerable for its antiquity, whose foundation is laid in a *sublime and universal charity*, recognizing as brethren, all classes, religions, and conditions of men—extending to them the right hand of fellowship, and aiding and comforting them in their necessities, distresses and extremities—even this society has met with opposition, because in order to accomplish a *great good*, it has been under the necessity of adopting a requirement, considered by some an imperfection of the system, and rendering it obnoxious to public censure. What then must every intelligent and generous-minded man, think of an association for which no such ennobling apology can be made, but which adding the odious feature of exclusiveness, to the suspicious characteristic of secrecy, offers nothing satisfactory in extenuation, and for which no spirit of allowance can offer any other explanation than this, viz:— That it originated in *selfishness*, and has been continued, for the purpose of advancing the pecuniary interests of and making professional reputation for, its members, without submitting to fair and open competition, which decided talents and honorable minds never wish to avoid.

As your Committee has thus candidly expressed an opinion on the subject, it will be proper to enter more into detail, and to show how it has arrived at its conclusions, and would commence by stating that no other explanations are in accordance with the modes of this Association. It is true, that since the discovery of its existence, an attempt has been made by persons implicated, to represent it as solely devoted to professional improvement, and as a club of individuals associated for the encouragement of the amiable feelings of our nature, to be secured by intimacy. But it is impossible for a mind of ordinary perception, at all acquainted with the world, and accustomed to reflection, to be satisfied with an explanation so deficient and inadequate. Were the objects such as have been alleged, why have gentlemen been excluded, whose known reputation for practical skill, and scientific research, was a sufficient guarantee to the members of the club, that by a communion with them they might have acquired useful knowledge, and furthered their honorable design of improving the profession? And how has it happened, that the Association has not called to its aid many physicians much respected in this community for their gentlemanlike manners, their irreproachable and unsuspected professional and private character, and who might have furnished a good example of religious and moral virtue, and materially contributed to the promotion of the other laudable, amiable and generous purpose? The Committee find these questions more difficult to answer, when they consider the difference in the ages, education, associations, morals and manners of the persons composing the Secret Club.

It may perhaps be urged that as its members are of one way of thinking on the subject of the present policy in relation to medical education, in order to continue its harmony, it could not admit gentlemen whose sentiments were not fully understood to be in accordance with the unanimous feeling of the Association. It is sufficient to reply, that several physicians, distinguished for their professional attainments, and particularly remarkable for their devotion to that policy which has resulted in the establishment of the present system of medical education, and moreover whose active exertions and extensive influence, was greatly instrumental in accomplishing the present order of things, have not been deemed fit characters to be introduced into this *good society*. In endeavoring to account for this slight of these personal and political friends, your Committee cannot but conclude, that the superior talents, and independence of character which would have led these gentlemen to take rank according to their supportable pretensions, rendered their admission dangerous to the factitiously important, though intrinsically insignificant power controlling the institution, and dispensing its benefits.

Having thus attempted to solve the mystery of the formation of the secret and exclusive association, it remains to investigate its tendencies, and to point out the evils resulting to the profession and the public from its existence in the community; and these the Committee consider of so grievous a character, as to call for the animadversion of the Medical Society.

By its influence in curtailing a free intercourse with the profession at large, it produces in the minds of its members, a false estimate of their own characters, and an erroneous impression of the characters of those who are uninitiated into their mysteries. This is not only a natural consequence, but may be directly effected by misrep-

resentations made at their meetings, by some evil-minded member, whose mean spirit, shielded by the security of secrecy) does not hesitate to make statements un-able to disproof, and for which he is not responsible. An impression can thus be made on the minds of those present, which may remain ever afterwards, unfavorable to the party thus basely slandered. The injurious effects thus produced are reciprocal. For when men of weak minds have been rendered vain and arrogant, unless they have great power of concealment, they are apt to carry out their feelings in an assuming and contemptuous behavior, towards their equals and superiors. Now with a body of men so skilled in human nature as the medical profession, and so much governed by common sense, we venture to assert that nothing renders a man more justly contemptible and entirely ridiculous. The disrespect thus engendered and mutually felt may be transferred from the profession to the public, and may finally eventuate in degrading the profession so low as almost to preclude the possibility of its ever regaining its pristine rank and respectability.

An association like the one under consideration, is also to be reprobated, inasmuch as it tends to an unjust monopoly of the emoluments and honors of the profession: the more advanced and powerful appropriating the consultations and wealthy practice, whilst to the juniors and less influential is granted that which is less lucrative, and to which the former cannot attend. Advantages like these can be easily secured by an association of men practising an art which is a mystery to the public, without supposing them individually to be possessed of more than ordinary capacity. We observe that even instinct has taught certain animals of comparative weakness and stupidity, the necessity of combination in warding off the attacks of the more powerful. Hence by putting their heads together, and keeping close and compact, they secure themselves against encroachment, and chew the cud in safety. There are others of a more offensive nature, who range in squads, and who sometimes succeed by an united attack in dragging down noble game. They are however particularly fond of a certain kind of flesh. To the profession the Committee would give warning, by reminding them of the Spanish proverb: "If you make sheep of yourselves the wolves will eat you up." But to be more serious; your Committee do consider a combination of men so well calculated to create a monopoly in the profession, as opposed to the spirit of the excellent code of medical ethics adopted by the Medical Society, and destructive to the etiquette, which in a refined community has ever governed the physician and gentleman.

An association of the magnitude of the club under consideration, by acting in concert, by accepting favors from other physicians, who act in good faith, and not reciprocating them, can collect a much larger portion of public patronage, and wield a much greater influence than they are justly entitled to by their real merit.

The extent of the effect produced in this way in the case, before us, the profession alone can judge of, and fully appreciate. The following fact being palpable is sufficient to produce the conviction that there is truth and not suspicion in what has been alleged. It is this—Almost all the professional offices in the city of New York, leading to practice and conferring reputation are monopolized by the Secret Association. For example. In the New York Hospital, the attending physicians and surgeons are Drs. *Thomas Cock, John C. Cheeseman, Francis U. Johnson, Alexander H. Stevens, John K. Rodgers, J. M. Smith, and Valentine Mott*. Dr. Mott was appointed a surgeon of the Hospital before the formation of the Secret Club, of which we are happy to state he is not a member. In the New York City Dispensary, we have as consulting physicians, Drs. *John C. Cheeseman, Francis U. Johnson, Alexander H. Stevens, S. W. Moore, and John A. Smith*. This last gentleman, we have been told, was formerly a member of the Secret Association, but lately retired from it. The physicians of the Lying-in Establishment are, with two exceptions, members of the New York Kappa Lambda. The following are their names, Drs. *Thomas Cock, Francis U. Johnson, Peter C. Tappan, J. C. Bliss, A. W. Ives, Benjamin Mc Vickar, G. Smith, Hersey Bailies, G. Wilkes*. The last two are not members. One of the physicians of the Magdalen Asylum, (Stephen Brown,) is a member of the Secret Club. He has also within a few years past enjoyed the important situations of physician to the Alms House, and attending physician to the New York Hospital. In the Medical College in Barclay street, before the demise of the late President, at one time the Secret Club had in possession *four professorships and the presidency* of the institution. Of the medical trustees *two thirds* are members of the Secret Association.

It is but proper to remark that the offices of Resident Physician and Health Commissioner are not held by members of the Association. But it must be recollected that these situations *ceteris paribus* are conferred upon those medical gentlemen who have

political claims upon the dominant party of the State, which makes frequent appointments. The circumstance of the Association missing these offices is a consequence easily understood and explained.

The Committee are of opinion that the public good is very materially interfered with, by the existence of secret, exclusive, and mutual benefit medical clubs in the community. Not to mention the useless consultations, and the unnecessary numbers invited to attend them, both of which effects the disposition of the members of these clubs to oblige and patronize each other, is calculated to produce, it may happen that the patients who fall into their hands, may be reduced to such an extremity as to render a consultation necessary. If your Committee understand the nature of a consultation, it is not intended to be merely the assembling together of men, who see eye to eye, in order to avoid responsibility, and to increase the expenses of medical attendance, but would rather judge, that their utility in reference to patients, mainly depends upon a free interchange of the opinions of men of skill, and independent minds, who would not be so much impressed with a deference for each other, or their own inter-est, as to forget the most important concern, the patient's safety. Under other circumstances, a consultation is a mere farce, if nothing worse.

In cases requiring surgical operations, the evils of these Associations may be seriously felt. It often happens that gentlemen of the profession are asked to recommend a surgeon to decide upon the propriety of an operation, and to perform it, if necessary. When we learn that a gentleman of our city, celebrated at home and abroad, for his correct judgment in surgery—for the boldness and safety of his operations, does not belong to the Secret Association of New York, how can we account for the circumstance, unless by supposing that he is either not properly appreciated by the members, or else that envy at his distinguished reputation has excluded him? In either case there is reason to fear that in those important cases requiring such a man, he may be set aside and a man of rashness, or otherwise mentally or physically deficient, be substituted. Great damage might thus happen to such as depend upon the impartiality of a prejudiced or unconscientious medical adviser, for an unbiased recommendation.

Another evil likely to result from secret and exclusive Medical Associations, is this.—There are many circumstances of private life, which physicians become acquainted with, through the confidence reposed in them by the public, which should never be transferred from their own bosoms. There are also occurrences happening in the weakness of nature, and under the influence of disease, which men of delicacy of feeling, and a nice sense of honor, are in no danger of revealing, but which gross men are only deterred from communicating by their interest demanding their silence. In Secret Clubs, in moments of relaxation from more grave conversation, anecdotes may be related, the subjects of which would feel much aggrieved did they know that they afforded topics for the conversation, and perhaps amusement, of a number of medical men, met for the purpose of good fellowship, and bound to keep secret whatever transpires among them.

In conclusion, your Committee, after having traced the natural tendencies of a secret, and exclusive society of men, in a profession which is a mystery to the public, who can form no adequate idea upon what slight circumstances, and false foundations, the characters of physicians often rest, would notice the circumstance that has been set forth as counteracting in the present case, the evil tendencies above mentioned.

It has been asserted that the good moral and religious character of some of the persons belonging to the Association, ought to be a sufficient guarantee to the rest of the profession, and should satisfy the public, that they are too pure to act unjustly to their fellow practitioners, or to do them wrong. Your Committee unhesitatingly deny this assertion, as it is not in accordance with the fact, and reject the idea that the principles of those belonging to the club, are any better than those of gentlemen excluded. Indeed the vanity and pride that would make such distinctions in their own favor, and offer such an apology, is not indicative of good sense, or of Christian meekness and humility. Moreover the Committee cannot manifest such ignorance of the human heart, and the history of mankind, as to confide in ostentatious professions of extreme excellence. One of the wisest of men complained that he had found but one honest man out of a thousand. Now supposing physicians to be equally as good moral men as their neighbors, then out of about 300 medical gentlemen in New York, about 30 have been found, which if added to those who may have been overlooked, is too large a proportion in favor of the increase of perfectness, since the days of the great and wise king. The truth is this. Allowing some of these gentlemen to be in general good and clever men, yet we must not forget that human nature is

weak—that there are such things as besetting sins, and that in a trading community, *covetousness* is apt to be most predominant. It is not only the duty of individuals, to strive as much as possible, against the absorbing influence of this passion, but it particularly becomes the duty of communities to prevent this debasing propensity of our nature, from interfering too much with their interests, and the public good. Your Committee would therefore recommend to the Medical Society the publication of this report, in order to neutralize the effects of the Secret Association, by informing the public of its existence and tendencies. At the same time, they would recommend to the members of the profession, a close observation of the traits of character, and the conduct of the members of the Secret Club, so that, if possible, to distinguish the man who has been imposed upon, from him of mean and selfish views, and artful character. The former the Committee would advise to leave the Association as soon as possible. Of the latter they would say to the profession: "*Hic niger est hunc tu caveo.*"

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Published by order of the Medical Society,
 F. WINTHROP WALSH, M. D. *Recording Secretary.*

This Report was approved by the Medical Society almost unanimously, which consisted of 290 Physicians.

