

Memoir of Edmund Randolph Peaslee : read before the New Hampshire Medical Society, at its annual convention held in Concord, June 18 and 19, 1878 / by Horace T. Hanks.

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MEMOIR

OF

EDMUND RANDOLPH PEASLEE, M.D., LL.D.

READ BEFORE THE

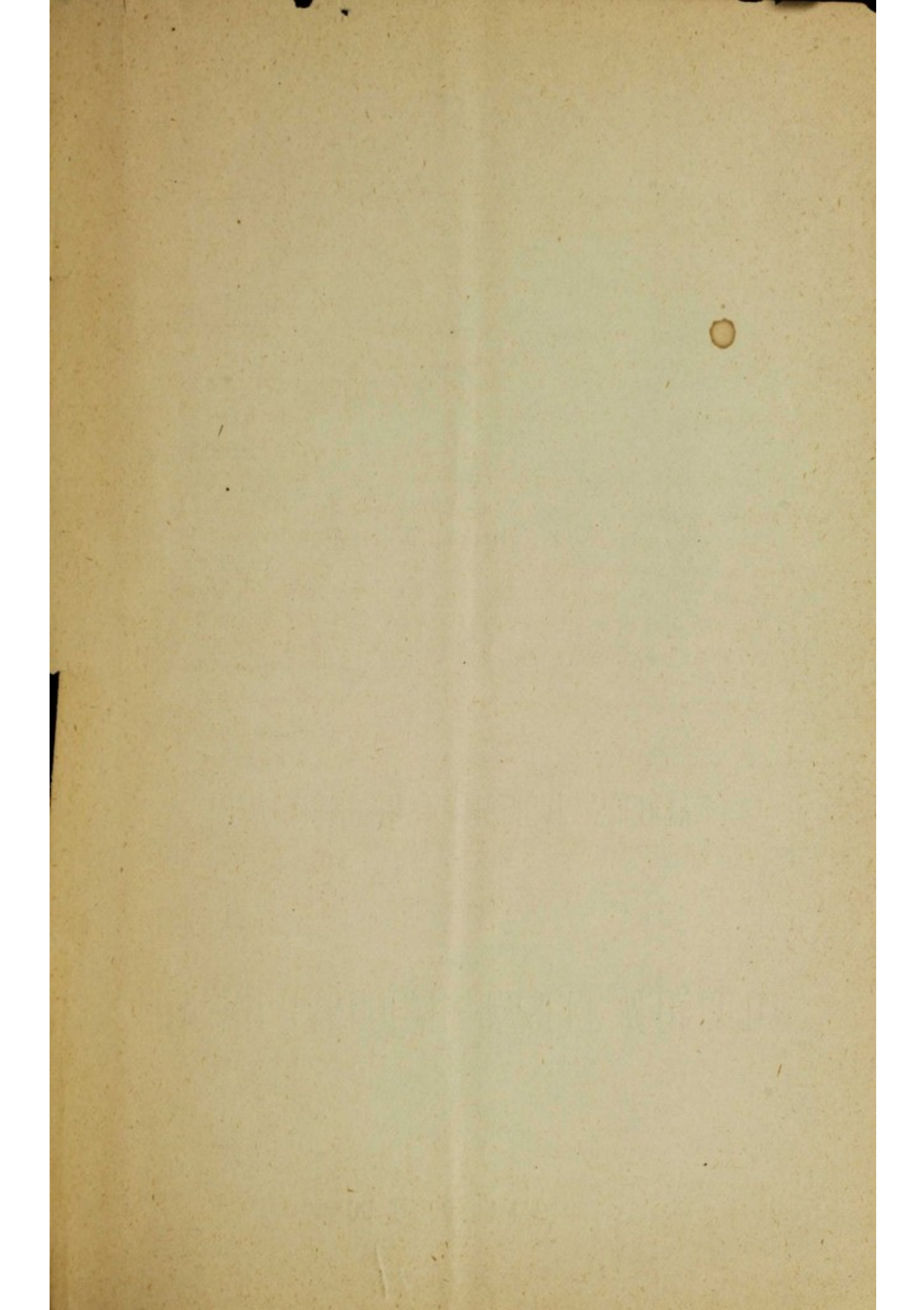
NEW HAMPSHIRE MEDICAL SOCIETY,

AT ITS

ANNUAL CONVENTION HELD IN CONCORD. JUNE 18 AND 19, 1878.

BY H. T. HANKS, M. D.

1878.



IN MEMORIAM.

Mr. President, Fellows of the New Hampshire Medical Society, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Twenty-six years ago this month the president of this society began his address with these words:

“It is the privilege of every individual, however humble, to aspire to the highest excellence in his particular vocation; and each will thus attain to a far higher point than he otherwise would have done. Still more: it is the *duty* of every one to strive to adorn and improve the profession he has adopted.

* * * Moreover, every individual, however humble, may reasonably expect to advance his profession in some degree, provided he engages in it with proper aims and preparations.”

Further on, in arranging the address under four heads, he made the following points:

“I. That the first duty which medical men owe to themselves is a thorough medical education.

“II. That they ought to keep up with the times by habits of professional reading and study, after entering the actual practice of medicine.

“III. They should acquire the history of the progress of the science of medicine in the past.

“IV. Finally, if one would adorn and benefit the profession in the highest sense, he must be an honorable, upright, and truly Christian man.”

And in summing up this memorable address, the speaker further said, in conclusion,—

“With such aims and qualifications as have been specified, every medical man may hope, if life and health be spared, to become in his degree an ‘ornament and a help’ to his profession. * * Let us then strive to do something *worthy* of an existence at the present era of *unexampled scientific and practical progress.*”

He then closed, by quoting Longfellow’s beautiful stanzas :

“Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

“Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o’er life’s solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, may take heart again.”

This was what your president, Edmund Randolph Peaslee, believed twenty-six years ago, as shown in this able and practical address. It was as indicative of his scholarly mind and his honorable and earnest convictions, as his actual presence must have been at that time before this body of professional gentlemen. Had I time to quote more freely, reviewing it in the light of his life and death, we should be impressed with it as almost prophetic of his own subsequent career. It has been said that a man’s faults die with him ;—but how shall we express the perfection of character of a man, living and mingling in the daily strife of a professional life so exacting as is ours, and yet acknowledged by his professional brethren as singularly free from the faults of petty jealousies and emulations so common to medical men? We who knew him owe it to ourselves, and to the profession we represent, to promulgate the lesson of his memory and the tradition of his example for the benefit of those who may come after us. While his direct personal influence has ceased, there will yet remain, as a monument to his well-directed industry, his erudition, and his modesty, the valuable additions which medical literature has received from his brain and facile pen.

Born in this state, connected with its schools and its societies,

and well known to the greater number of New Hampshire physicians, it would seem a peculiar privilege that you, gentlemen of this society, can claim so fraternal a relation with such an eminent physician and model man. I feel incompetent to do full justice to the breadth of his culture and character, having known him for the past ten years only, in New York, which was but *one* field of his labors and successes. Ten years ago, when I first went to New York, I carried letters of introduction from the late Dr. Alfred Hitchcock, of Fitchburg, Mass, to Dr. Peaslee and Dr. Willard Parker. I had known Prof. Peaslee, by reputation and through his writings, for a number of years, but never shall I forget the first impression I formed of him, so surely and steadily did it afterwards settle into a proven conclusion. So calm, so honest, so pure was the appearance of the man, and so straightforward his pleasant conversation, I felt that I could rely upon his counsel, advice, and friendship so long as I was worthy. During my life in New York I have often met him professionally, in the different medical societies, and socially; and my estimate of his worth as a physician, a gentleman, a scholar, and a Christian, has grown with each additional opportunity thus afforded for judging him. I have always deemed it an honor to call him a personal friend; and I would bear to you my affectionate testimony of his remarkable cast of intellect and his recognized weight of character, as apparent in all his words, his deeds, and his influence.

Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet, of New York, who is especially interested in gynecology, and a co-laborer of Prof. Peaslee in the New York State Women's Hospital, thus pays tribute to his memory in the *American Journal of Obstetrics* for April, 1878:

“Dr. Peaslee was so evenly balanced, that we look in vain for the rough points of human nature which generally stamp men of character. In appearance, he was as fragile and as cold as an icicle from his own native land; but appearances in his case were deceptive. He was not wanting in endurance, as we have seen; and from my own personal knowledge I can say he possessed a generous and kindly nature. He was the type of a man whose whole action of life was based on a deep religious conviction: he was, consequently, truthful, with the

incentive always to discharge his duty from a sense of duty, regardless of consequences. To do what he thought was right prompted every action of his life. He was as free from cant and as tolerant of the views of others as any man I ever saw."

I could add similar testimony in eulogy of Prof. Peaslee from many of his colleagues and eminent members of the profession; but I will not occupy the time except with a few words from a memorial read before the New York Academy of Medicine by Dr. Fordyce Barker:

"My own acquaintance with Dr. Peaslee began in 1845, when I became his colleague as the incumbent of another chair in Bowdoin college. Although he was then a young man, yet, as he was my senior by some years, and had already a great reputation as a teacher and a surgeon in New England, I studied him closely, and then formed an estimate of him which an acquaintance and friendship of thirty-three years have not changed in any essential particulars. I then regarded him as one of the best educated men in all branches of the profession that I had ever met, whether in this country or in Europe."

A biographical statistical sketch of Prof. Peaslee is due this society of his native state. Dr. Edmund Randolph Peaslee was the son of Hon. James Peaslee and Abigail his wife, and was born in Newton, Rockingham county, N. H., Jan. 22, 1814. He was educated at New Hampton and Atkinson academies, and graduated from Dartmouth college in 1836, at the head of his class, ranking equal with Samuel C. Bartlett, the present president of Dartmouth. As his father died when Edmund was but a lad, it was only by the most careful and judicious management of the slender patrimony, by his mother, that he was enabled to continue his studies in compliance with the last wishes of his father and his own tastes. His aged mother is still living, and bears loving testimony to the industry and frugality and filial affection of her son. For one year after graduation he taught as principal of the academy at Lebanon; afterwards he was tutor at Dartmouth for two years and attended the medical lectures, and studied with Dr. Noah Worcester, of Hanover, at the same time. He subsequently entered the medical department of Yale, and finally received his diploma from this college in 1840. He then visited Europe for

the purpose of pursuing his studies still further—a circumstance not so common with young men at that period as at the present day. He was called home, however, the following year, to give the course of lectures on anatomy and physiology, as successor to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, at Dartmouth Medical College, where his talents and ability were already recognized and appreciated. From this time until his death Prof. Peaslee was connected with this college as lecturer, his last chair being that of gynecology. In July, 1841, he married Martha, eldest daughter of Stephen Kendrick, of Lebanon, N. H., and settled in Hanover to practice his profession. Here he began his close observations, as evinced by the careful record of some of his remarkable and successful cases, and his contributions to medical literature. About this time, without undue excitement, but actuated by a profound religious conviction and a desire to follow the example of Christ, he was baptized by immersion at Lebanon, and immediately joined the Congregational church at Hanover.

In 1843, he was appointed professor of anatomy and surgery in Bowdoin college, Maine, which position he held for seventeen years. In 1851 he was appointed professor of anatomy and physiology in the New York Medical College, and about the same time became editor of the *American Medical Monthly*, which contains many of his contributions. In 1853 he was transferred to the chair of physiology and general pathology, at which time he was almost a pioneer in this country in advocating and teaching the use of the microscope.

Later he was appointed lecturer on obstetrics and diseases of women, in the same college. In 1858 he removed to New York city, and resigned his positions in the Maine and New York colleges in 1860. Prof. Peaslee then devoted himself to the practice of his profession, which had become very large, and to his medical lectures at Hanover. His beloved *Alma Mater*, Dartmouth, conferred upon him, in 1859, the degree of LL. D., and he became a trustee in 1869.

He was greatly interested in the welfare of Dartmouth, and rejoiced at all bequests and donations. Although the munificent gift to the college by Judge Stoughton was directly through the warm personal friendship and gratitude which the donor

had for Prof. Phelps, yet the presence in New York of Prof. Peaslee, his moral and intellectual worth in the metropolis, and his personal influence with Judge Stoughton and the men who were his immediate personal friends, had very much to do in keeping up the good opinion which the judge entertained for the faculty of Dartmouth. To-day New Hampshire may well be proud of the Dartmouth museum.

So, too, the stamp of Peaslee is found upon the faculty of the college at the present time. Among the members of the staff are to be found six of Prof. Peaslee's former pupils or assistants.

From 1858 to 1865 he was the attending physician for diseases of women at Demilt Dispensary, where even now occasionally old patients of his will return for some attendance from the writer, who occupies the same chair, and speak of Dr. Peaslee's faithfulness and skill. In this department, having so wide a range of observation, he especially turned his attention to the subject of gynecology, from which field he was destined, subsequently, to step into the very front rank of his profession.

During the war he was surgeon to the New England Hospital in New York, and to the New York State Hospital. In 1872 he was appointed attending surgeon to the Women's Hospital of the state of New York, and was professor, for a short time, at the Albany Medical College. In 1874 he was appointed professor of gynecology in Bellevue Hospital Medical College, which chair he occupied until the time of his last illness. Once, when referring to the somewhat checkered success of a neighboring medical college, he gave me a reason for its lack of continued prosperity, at the same time a hint as to his own conviction of the duty of a professor in a medical college. He said,—
 “ They will never have a successful medical school there until some of the more influential members of the faculty learn that no professional fee is in itself large enough to compensate a professor for disappointing his class. Nothing but illness in one's own family should ever keep a man from fulfilling his engagement in the college.” He always knew when he was to be absent from his class and made the necessary arrangements for another professor to take his hour. His last illness was the first illness that kept him from fulfilling his duties to a medical class in college.

Another notable fact of Prof. Peaslee's career as a lecturer is, that he had lectured at different times on every topic included in the profession of medicine, with the exception of chemistry, and might well be considered a master of each branch. His courses of lectures numbered over seventy, consisting of those given in different chairs and in five different colleges, besides private courses of lectures in his earlier days, lectures and addresses before various societies, etc. In his later years his attention in practice, writing, and lecturing was directed to the subject of gynecology, especially the branch of ovariectomy. His work, published in 1872, on ovarian tumors, contains 557 pages, and is an acknowledged authority upon the subject, and will stand alone, both for his own original investigation, and for settling upon Dr. Ephraim McDowell, an American, the *nationality*, if I may so speak, of this heroic and life-saving operation.

Prof. Peaslee's literary contributions at first consisted of records of cases, of operations, and of addresses before medical classes, which were preserved and published, and of those before medical and literary societies. The exact data of his earliest are uncertain, as they were published later and irregularly; but I may venture to say that a "Report of a Case of Rupture of the Bladder," in 1849, was perhaps the earliest. An address before the Bowdoin Medical College, in 1848, was published later. In 1851, he accomplished a successful removal of both ovaries. This operation was the first recorded case of the successful removal of both ovaries through one large abdominal section. The patient was a young lady of West Claremont, N. H., and the niece, by marriage, of the first patient on whom ovariectomy was performed in America, which was in July, 1820, thirty years previous. Prof. Peaslee related, in the *New Hampshire Journal of Medicine* for 1851, the method of diagnosis, giving a minute description of every step of the operation, and a careful history of the after-treatment, etc. In conclusion, there are some of the best hints respecting the method of diagnosis and operation that can even now be found in any language.

In 1851, before the Maine Medical School, he delivered an able address on the "Comparative Intellectual Standing of the Medical Profession." The following year, an address to the

New York Medical College was published; and in the *New York Journal of Medicine*, a case of amputation at the shoulder joint. In 1854, a monograph on the "Pathology, etc., of Infantile Laryngo Tracheal Croup" appeared in the *American Medical Monthly*, and also a monograph on "Fœtal Circulation," which at that time was quite a new research. In 1855, Prof. Peaslee reported a case of "Removal of the entire uterus, with subsequent death." In 1855, Peaslee's *Human Histology* was published, a volume of 616 pages, and was the first systematic work of the kind in the English language, and embraced, besides his own ideas, compilations from foreign authors. In 1860, he published papers on "Uterine Displacements, Ovarian Tumors, and their treatment other than by ovariectomy." In 1864, before the New York Academy of Medicine, he read a paper on "Ovariectomy." The following year he published the statistics of 150 cases of ovariectomy. In the same year he read a paper before the New York State Medical Society, entitled "Retroflexions of the Unimpregnated Uterus." In 1867, an article on "Ovariectomy: when and how to perform it," was published in the *New York Medical Gazette*. In June, 1870, a "History of Ovariectomy," and "A Sketch of the Life of Dr. Ephraim McDowell," were read before the Medical Journal Association. In July, 1870, appeared an article on "Intra-uterine Medication." In August, 1870, in the *American Journal of Obstetrics*, was published "Intra-Peritoneal Injections."

In 1872, he published the crowning work of his life,—“Ovarian Tumors and Ovariectomy,” already mentioned. In January, 1876, reports of very excellent lectures on “Congestions and Inflammations of the Uterus,” before the class at Bellevue Hospital Medical College, were published in the *New York Medical Record*. June 1, 1876, he read before the New York Academy of Medicine an able paper on “Incision and Dissection of the Cervix Uteri.”

Prof Peaslee was a diligent student up to the last days of his life. He studied German, Spanish, and Italian during his active practice in New York, and was able to read medical works in these languages. The French language he had acquired early in life, and he was able to converse fluently in it. His breadth of culture extended beyond the confines of his profes-

sion, and at the time of his illness he was critically reading a work on architecture. He was gifted with some mental qualities which are frequently unattainable by special training. He could attentively listen to a conversation or reading, and write upon another subject at the same time. He always read while riding from house to house in his daily rounds. Many will, for a long time, retain a vivid recollection of that pale, thoughtful face bent over a book, as he was driven through the streets in his unostentatious coupé.

As a lecturer Peaslee was scholarly rather than eloquent. He ever strove to bring his listeners up to his standard, rather than to let himself down to their level. He had no arts or tricks to catch their attention and elicit applause. His whole aim was to instruct, and not to amuse.

His ideas on congestion and inflammation of the uterus, as delivered in lectures at Bellevue Hospital Medical College, in January, 1876, and reported in the *Medical Record*, I believe, are more nearly correct than any others that have been given to the profession. These theories were conclusions which had been slowly but surely impressing themselves upon his mind. They were not published to the world before they were half digested, but after having been carefully considered, as only a thorough microscopist and pathologist can. Could his lectures on this subject, as published in the *Record*, be thoroughly studied by the profession, I believe his nomenclature would be adopted, and his ideas of the pathology would be received as correct; and, as a consequence, we should have a more rational method of treatment resorted to by the profession at large, who, though they do not claim to be gynecologists, yet are called upon to treat a large proportion of all the uterine diseases in this country.

Peaslee's paper on "Incision and Discision of the Cervix Uteri," probably was subjected to as thorough reading and criticism as anything he ever wrote; and he expected as much for it. It was a plain and honest protest against the too common mode of operations for flexions of the cervix and body of the uterus. The good effects of this paper have undoubtedly been felt all over the country, and will continue to exercise a wholesome influence against the too common method of recklessly slitting up the cervix uteri.

Prof. Peaslee believed in the good influence of various medical societies, especially upon young members of the profession. He was an active member of several societies, and enjoyed and took part in the discussions and interchange of thought.

There was something beautiful in Peaslee's method of discussing any medical topic at the various societies. His points and conclusions were always well and distinctly taken and maintained. He never spoke at random. He seldom was obliged to qualify, and never to take back, his statements. He was not afraid of giving offence to any man in defending what he believed to be the truth. Once, when his motives were impugned and his honor called in question as to the treatment of a certain case, I remember how he arose to answer the attack, and won over the large audience, almost to a man, as he calmly closed his reply with these words: "Any one who states that I deceived this patient by professing to do what I was not doing, I will not stoop to answer: I hold such a one in profound contempt."

He was, at various times during his life, president of the New Hampshire State Medical Society, president of the New York Academy of Medicine (in which he took a deep interest, at his death bequeathing a handsome sum to the association), president of the Medical Society of the county of New York, president of the New York Obstetrical Society, president of the New York Pathological Society, and at the time of his death was president of the American Gynecological Society, trustee of Dartmouth college, trustee of the New York Academy of Medicine, Corresponding Fellow of the Obstetrical Society of Berlin, Honorary Fellow of the Obstetrical Societies of London, Boston, and Louisville.

Prof. Peaslee was a consistent Christian, and at the time of his death a member of the Madison Square Presbyterian church, so long presided over by the Rev. Dr. Adams. He was a man respected, trusted, and loved in this church, which numbered among its members some of the very best minds in the great metropolis. His Christianity and moral character were always manifest in all his printed addresses, and no student, who listened to him during a course of lectures, needed to inquire if Prof. Peaslee was a Christian.

Peaslee's life was crowded full of work of all kinds. His success was certain from the first, as his large clientele from all parts of New England trusted in his local reputation. Besides, his patients, individually impressed with a sense of his earnestness of purpose and sincerity, felt assured that through him they were receiving all that could be found in America in the way of skilful and intelligent treatment. Another element of his success in every department was due, as any physician can appreciate, to a faithful, devoted wife. Proud and appreciative of her husband, Mrs. Peaslee, I am told by those who knew well the home relations, guarded his health with wonderful forethought, many times refusing to allow the doctor to be disturbed until he should have had his needed rest. None but a physician's wife can understand, in the exigencies of an extensive practice, how much care is needful to prevent unnecessary and untimely interruptions.

Dr. Peaslee's personal appearance was rather remarkable. Tall, thin, and very pale, with very white hair, he gave the impression of feebleness. But his powers of endurance were as great as those of many a robust-looking man. His serious face would light up in conversation or argument with a surprising quickness, showing the enthusiasm and earnestness of the man. Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, America's most humorous physician, in writing to Dr. Barker of Dr. Peaslee's appearance, in 1841, said,—“ He looked then as if his circulating capital might be a hundred or two red globules, with twice as many white ones, in half a pint of serum ; yet he outlived scores of prize-fighters, and looked better when I saw him some months ago than as I remembered him then.”

Dr. Peaslee died from pneumonia, Jan. 21, 1878, after an illness of five days. He was attended constantly by Dr. Janvrin, his partner, and seen frequently in consultation by Dr. Barker and Dr. Austen Flint, Sen. Although he himself had said he could never survive an attack of this kind, he was not considered dangerously ill until a few hours before his death. He leaves his beloved wife and two children, a son and daughter. The son, Dr. Edward H. Peaslee, was pursuing his studies in Europe at the time of his father's death. He is a young man liberally educated, and of good promise.

Another remarkable fact concerning Prof. Peaslee is, that he only lived to complete within one day his sixty-third year, having said many times, that the most trying periods in the life of a hard-working city physician are his forty-second and sixty-third years. He appreciated for others the penalty which one must pay for overwork, but he did not spare himself under the accumulated pressure of his last week of active life.

The funeral services, on Jan. 25, at the Madison Square church, were largely attended. Rev. Drs. Adams and Tucker paid high tribute to the memory of this faithful member of their church. His remains were deposited, temporarily, in Woodlawn, but have been removed to the family grounds at Hanover.

Dr. Peaslee accumulated during his life, from his large practice and judicious investments, a sum approaching a quarter of a million of dollars. In his last will and testament he remembers several medical associations, and his beloved Alma Mater, Dartmouth college.

He was with you, New Hampshire physicians, in his infancy and youth and mature manhood, and never ceased to be thoughtful of you even while living in another state; and to-day, as would seem most fitting, his body rests in New Hampshire soil.

May the memory of his calm, peaceful face, the breadth and symmetry of his education, his quiet, thoughtful words, his faithful teachings, his untiring industry, his Christianity and moral worth, and, finally, his success in everything that constitutes *true* success, stimulate all of us to nobler work and higher aims in the profession he has adorned and we have chosen.

“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding.

“For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than of fine gold.

“She is more precious than rubies; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.

“Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and honor.

“Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

