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BY

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OF NEW YORK;

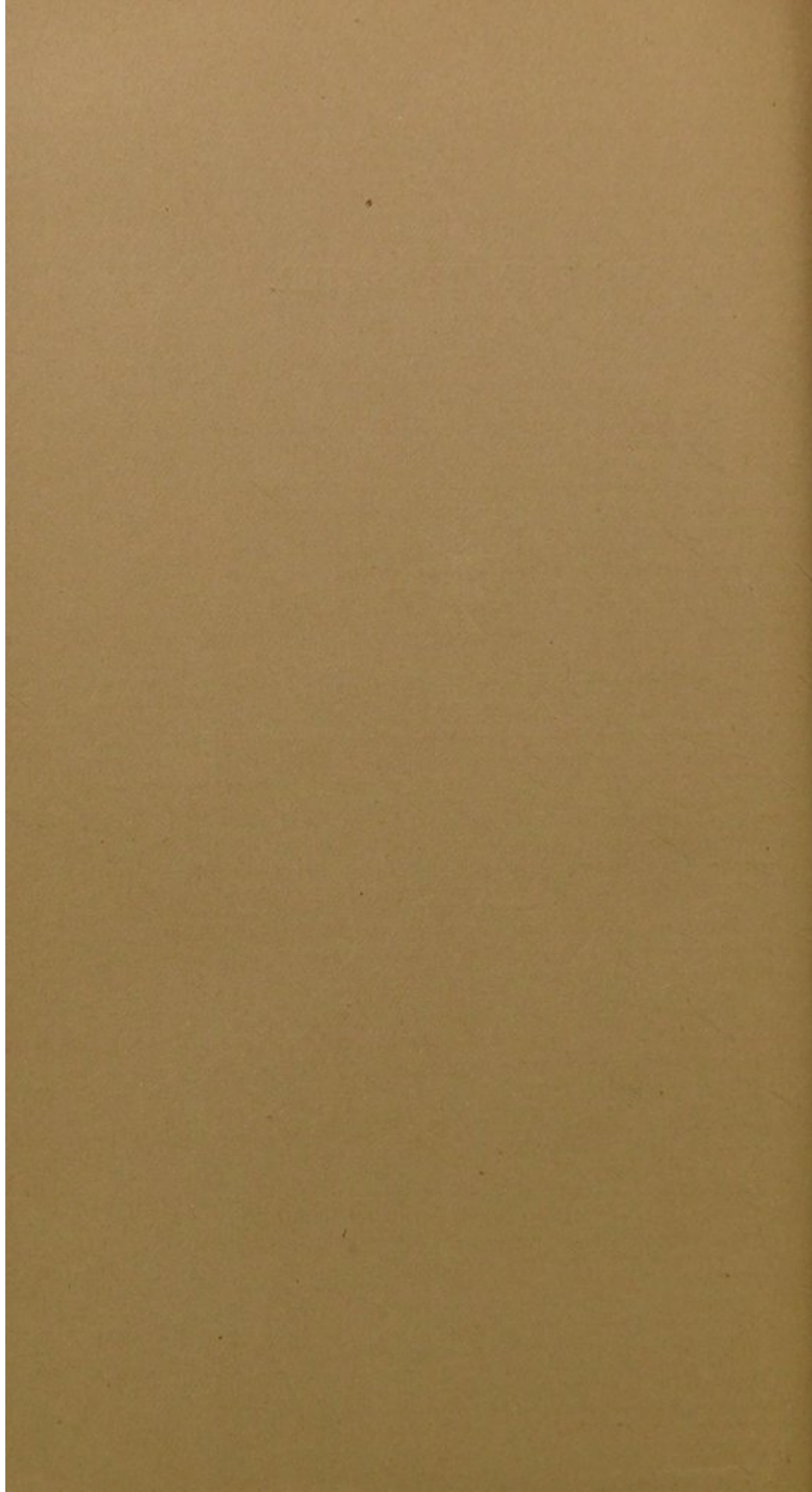
VISITING GYNECOLOGIST TO THE NEW YORK CITY HOSPITAL, BLACKWELL'S
ISLAND.



FROM

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THE COUNTRY DOCTOR.¹

BY FREDERICK HOLME WIGGIN, M.D.,

OF NEW YORK;

VISITING GYNECOLOGIST TO THE NEW YORK CITY HOSPITAL,
BLACKWELL'S ISLAND.

AS occasional introspection into individual life has an acknowledged value, it may be of practical benefit to turn our attention for a time to the consideration of a few points in the daily life of the learned profession to which we have the honor to belong. Therefore, I propose briefly to touch on some points of country medical life, and later to call attention to what I believe to be the needs of this Association to further its development and to bring it to the highest state of efficiency of which it is capable.

It is frequently thought by the country physician that all the professional advantage lies with his city brother; that he alone has opportunities for gaining a fair support from his professional labors, of increasing his store of knowledge, and of adding to the general professional welfare. To one acquainted with the environment of the city physician, and the many difficulties which beset him, which can be overcome in most instances only by years of arduous work before even his living is assured, this feeling is hard to understand, and to such an observer a prosperous village or small town seems a more attractive place in which to pursue the practical work of the physician; for, here are no dispensaries or hospitals casting, when abused, their baleful influence over the community and the profession under the guise of charity; here the public is more or less willing to share the burden of caring for the destitute

¹ President's address delivered before the Litchfield County, Conn., Medical Association at the annual meeting held at Litchfield, October 8, 1895; also read by request at the meeting of the Conn. Medical Society at New Haven, May 28, 1896.

with the physician; here he is able to support himself from the beginning of his professional career, can acquire a pleasant home early in life, and can bring up his family in the country, whence, as President Eliot, of Harvard College, has pointed out, the best students come.

With the large and varied experience which most country physicians have, opportunities for making reputation occur earlier and more frequently out of the city than in it. In the country fees are more certain to be collected, and the country physician's relations to his patients and the community are pleasanter, closer, and more important than they are in a large city. If, on the other hand, country practice involves greater physical exposure and fatigue, the practitioner is spared much of the mental anxiety and financial care of his city brother; and finally, if it is objected that the fees which dwellers in rural districts are able to pay are much smaller than those obtained by city physicians, it may be answered that the personal needs and the general expense of living are less in the country than in the city, while it is a fact that the income of the average city physician is not relatively, or actually, greater than is that received by the average country physician.

As a more intimate acquaintance with country medical life is obtained, one finds less difficulty in understanding why, in the midst of so much that is desirable, the mind of the average country physician is despondent. It is found that here, as elsewhere, the profession has been engaged for many years in educating the public and themselves to believe that medical professional services have little or no pecuniary worth. If the fee table of the local medical society is consulted, the maximum rate of fees seems satisfactory and capable of returning a good income to an industrious physician, and the fees also seem well within the means of the more prosperous members of the community; but a question elicits the answer that charges are based not upon this scale, but upon the minimum

rate, which therefore becomes the standard, and which is often shaded, even for the well-to-do. Consequently services and experience are sold for and believed to be worth only a fraction of their value, and frequently for less than a livery-stable keeper would value the services of a horse for the same time and distance. As a result of this supposed necessity of either meeting competition or retaining personal popularity, the financial results are out of proportion to the efforts expended, and are inadequate. So the physician frequently adds commercial ventures to his professional duties, which, proving lucrative, soon become the vocation, and medicine the avocation. Losses incurred in performing professional duties at ruinous prices are made up on sales of drugs, general merchandise, or farm products. Time which ought to be given up to self-improvement or in resting body and mind is taken up with these outside pursuits, vacations are seldom indulged in, meetings of medical men are gradually neglected, and less and less thought or care is given to the general professional welfare, causing possibly a still further reduction in the fees demanded. Again, accounts are carelessly kept, bills are rendered only at long intervals, and the patient, taking this as an evidence of the physician's prosperity, procrastinates about settling his account. But the worst result of this system of small fees is the gradual deterioration in the quality of the physician's services, who, instead of doing the best work of which he is capable, becomes satisfied to render the poorest, as being all that the patient has paid for. The patient is frequently allowed to make the diagnosis, and under this method the writer has known good men to be credited with serious errors of diagnosis. He has known a case of imperforate hymen, with enlarged uterus and a projecting vaginal tumor, caused by retained menstrual fluid, diagnosed as a case of amenorrhea, and the patient advised that Nature must take its course, which advice was certainly

not worth the 50-cent fee paid for it; of a patient with a large carcinomatous testicle, which weighed over two pounds after its removal, having been told that he was demented when he stated his case. No examination was made, and the patient was dismissed after paying his fee, with the admonition that "some people are always imagining that they have trouble with their privates." The patient then called on the writer, who, after a careful examination, diagnosticated the case and advised operation, which was consented to, and a larger fee demanded, which was cheerfully paid. The writer has known of a case of empyema, occurring in a child of four years, considered and treated as one of worms, because the child stated that his pain was in the region of his navel; and as the 50-cent fee was not supposed to include a physical examination, none was made. He has also known of pleurisy with effusion diagnosticated and treated as influenza because the patient suggested this diagnosis.

Aseptic surgical technic is often made light of as being too expensive for country work. One extreme case treated on these lines, which came under the writer's notice, was that of a patient who had received an injury which crushed one of his fingers. This was amputated with an ordinary pocket-knife, the operation being naturally followed by septic infection, and this, in turn, by amputation of the patient's arm. The final outcome was the death of both the patient and the physician, who had inoculated himself in the careless handling of the wound.

Such experiences, which were common when the writer began his professional career in this locality, some years since, have happily ceased. The ordinary result of working under such a system as has been alluded to, is that after some years of active work and physical hardship, a complete breakdown occurs of mind, body, and, unless wealth has been acquired by some other means, of estate as well. On the other hand, it was found by the writer

that an attempt to render a more careful, and therefore better professional service, was promptly met by willingness on the part of the community to pay more liberally, when the reason for the increased charge was explained. The result of this was that after a few years the income derived from professional work alone was nearly double that received by the writer's predecessor in the same field after twenty-five years of toil. The benefit was certainly not wholly confined to the writer, but extended to all who practised in the neighborhood, and to those who succeeded to the work. If it were possible, without being ungenerous or oppressive, to educate the public to a willingness to pay for a service what it was fairly worth in one locality, it can be done elsewhere.

People are beginning to realize that the country doctor must be a better physician than the city doctor. In the course of a recent editorial in one of the medical journals it was stated that, "Country practice, strange as it may appear, demands a higher grade of professional attainments at the start than those by which a young man makes an ordinary success in the city. The country physician is a marked man from the beginning, is generally known by every one in his town, and must necessarily, at the very outset of his career, set the pace for the remainder of his life."

Be practitioners of medicine only. Bend all your energies to the care of your patients and to self-improvement. Make your patients realize that you are abreast of the times and doing only the best professional work of which you are capable. Attend and take part in the meetings of medical societies. Go from time to time to the city, and see what others are doing, and get out, as Dr. W. H. Thomson aptly puts it, "a new edition of yourself." Take a yearly vacation for bodily and mental recreation, and you will find that your patients will not object to paying a higher fee for your services when you demand it.

Give more thought to the general professional welfare, bearing in mind that if one would elevate himself he must elevate the profession to which he belongs.

There are, of course, various ways in which this may be accomplished, but the most practicable for most of us is by having personal pride in the reputation of the local medical association, and by taking an active part in its work. A serious effort should be made to attend all the meetings. Records of cases should be kept, so that written histories of those of interest can be presented at the meetings for consideration and discussion. It is a common experience for a presiding officer, after asking members if they have not cases of interest to report, and meeting with a negative reply, to hear the same members, after the close of the meeting, recount various experiences of general interest. Each member should be required in turn to write and read a short paper, the chief points of which should be furnished to some of the other members prior to the meeting, so that they can prepare themselves for its discussion.

When a member is honored by an election as a delegate to a local, state, or national association, he should consider it his duty to attend the meeting. Owing largely to the failure of members appointed fellows of the State Society to attend the meetings, this Society has lost much of its prestige, and has of late years exerted little influence on the general professional welfare. Official position should be considered one of honor and trust, and every effort should be made to perform the various prescribed duties by those chosen to fill them. Quarterly meetings should be held regularly in different towns of the county, so that all members may each year have an opportunity of attending a meeting of the Association convenient to their own homes. If the best work of which this Society is capable is to be obtained the annual dues should be increased sufficiently to permit of the employ-

ment of a stenographer, to attend the meetings and report the proceedings. Arrangements could then be made with a medical journal to publish them. It is hard to get men to do their best literary work unless opportunity is afforded to record it. I believe that more effort should be made to develop the social side of these meetings, and the annual dues should admit of the general entertainment being paid for out of the Society's treasury. Were these suggestions carried out there would be little difficulty in maintaining full attendance at the meetings. These days would come to be looked upon as pleasant and profitable; days for consultation, self-improvement, and social enjoyment; and, in time, the Society would become a model for others to follow, whether of city or state.

A society is what its members and officers make it, and nothing more; and to make it prosperous and influential all must join hands, each doing his duty. Individually, you would soon realize the benefit. You would find your interest constantly growing in scientific medicine as you studied systematically in the preparation for the writing of papers or for the purpose of taking part in their discussion, and this would be followed, as the members of the community realized that their doctor was up-to-date, by their increased respect and a willingness to pay more generously for his services. People take us largely at our own valuation. Remember that much original work has been done by country physicians, and that by reason of such efforts great advance has been made all along the line of medical work. Jenner, the discoverer of the protective influence of vaccination; Ephraim McDowell, who in 1809 performed the first successful ovariectomy of which we have record; Joseph Glover, of South Carolina, who in 1813 first successfully performed the operation of hysterectomy; Marion Sims, the father of gynecology, who perfected the technic of his operation for the closure of vesicovaginal fistula in the negro cabins of the South; Nathan

Smith, of New Haven, who was the first to successfully perform an amputation through the knee-joint, and who, without knowing of McDowell's work, successfully performed an ovariectomy in 1821, advancing the technic of the operation by returning the stump into the peritoneal cavity; and Cogswell, of Hartford, who first succeeded in ligating the common carotid artery, were provincial physicians who became world-renowned.

Of McDowell's work, Dr. Dennis has said, in his essay on "The Achievements of American Surgery": "Few men can realize the influence of McDowell's first ovariectomy upon the whole field of abdominal surgery. It is indeed a sublime thought to consider that a man was found with the courage of his convictions to do what no man had ever done, and to operate within the noise of an infuriated mob beneath his windows. This mob would have lynched him if Mrs. Crawford had died. Having escaped the angry mob, he was pointed out as a murderer by his colleagues, and was also condemned by the highest scientific authorities in Europe. In America, therefore, under such circumstances, and under such conditions, the birth of the greatest operation in surgery occurred, an operation destined to save in the future millions of human lives." The *Medico-Chirurgical Review*, speaking of McDowell's achievement, said: "A back settlement of America, Kentucky, has beaten the mother-country, nay, Europe itself, with all the boasted surgeons thereof, in the fearful and formidable operation of gastrotomy with extraction of diseased ovaries."

Finally, Dr. Joseph Eastman of Indianapolis, in responding recently to the toast, "Ephraim McDowell," said: "Kentucky is justly proud of her statesmen, of her orators, and her soldiers, but shall not the achievements of her statesmen succumb at last to the pitiless logic of events? Shall not the voice of her orators grow fainter with coming ages? Shall not the victories of her soldiers

be found at last only in the libraries of students of military campaigns, while the fame of this village surgeon, like the ever-widening waves of the inviolate sea, shall be wafted to the utmost shores of time, hailed alike by all nations, in all ages, for having lessened the burden and prolonged the span of human life?"

