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THE BLESSED SLEEP

Continued from page 6

who like that sort of thing, that sort of thing is just about what they would like. The practice is not yet obsolete.

THE last chapter in the glorious history of anesthesia was written a few years ago, when we were invited to see Professor Thomas Jonnesco operate at the Postgraduate Hospital, New York. With a long, finely tempered needle, he passed between the spinous processes (the vertebræ comprising the backbone) and injected a solution called stovaine directly into the spinal canal.

See this pale, apprehensive woman, with the ominous "murmur," that suggestive sound which denotes that her heart valves, like a badly fitting door, do not close completely! The back flow of blood, the "insufficiency," contraindicates the use of a general anesthetic. But, while she is to all intents and purposes wideawake, all the region below the point of injection is benumbed. The most extensive operation can be performed with perfect assurance that she will feel no pain,—one of the most sensational feats of modern surgery, and very valuable when ether cannot be given with safety.

Perhaps intraspinal anesthesia will never become very popular until we develop a new race of surgeons, even if the possibility of paralysis and death, which sometimes follow its use, can be entirely removed.

NOT all surgeons possess the iron nerve of Virgil P. Gibney, calmly to chisel through the skull and remove a tumor from the brain, while the conscious but obtunded patient is cognizant of every move.

It savors too much of vivisection, as the antivivisectionists understand it,—subjecting animals to experiment while they are conscious and sentient, a procedure that no true scientist would countenance; for even the most iron-nerved doctor is glad to place a handkerchief or other bandage over the eyes of these patients while the operation is in progress. It has been claimed in favor of this method that some complication, something entirely unexpected, may present itself,—when, for example, the abdomen is opened,—which the surgeon does not care to assume the responsibility of removing without sanction.

In this event it is a very simple matter to uncover the patient's face, tell her all about it, and ask her consent to its removal.

It is awe-inspiring, this marvel of cutting off sensation by an injection into the spinal canal; but it seems too gruesome, too inhuman, unless there are reasons why a general narcotic should not be used. Kidney disease, heart complications, and other organic lesions might interdict the use of ether, chloroform, or nitrous oxide; but, barring something of this nature, there seems no real reason why we should not operate on a thoroughly insensible patient.

The unconscious effort to "hurry through," the tremendous nervous strain on everybody,—even the patient must suffer from apprehension and the nervous shock,—superadd to the shock of the ordeal; for be it known that, while the "unconscious" brain takes no cognizance of what transpires during an operation, yet the nerves are busily engaged trying to convey the intelligence to the "central station," which has been temporarily cut off from the world of feeling.

In fact, this matter has received profound study within recent years, and it is now advocated that whenever possible, as in surgery of the surface or the extremities, in addition to the ether, a hypo of cocaine or some of its derivatives be given. This more completely "cuts off" the area of operation, thereby diminishing the shock. So not only the central station will be isolated, but the wires leading to it will be rendered incapable of transmitting the message of pain.

Since the introduction of the "drop method"—giving ether a few drops at a time, always allowing plenty of oxygen—skilful surgeons practically never lose a patient from the effects of the anesthetic. It has been a wonderful achievement, this Promethean snatching of the "Blessed Sleep" from the abode of the gods. It made possible the performing of operations of the first magnitude. A new race of surgeons sprang into being, men of the magnificent technical attainments of Meigs, Billroth, Sims, and scores of others. They were master craftsmen in their art. Theirs was finer and perfect work, so far as technic went. But, though the operations were successful, the patients died with disheartening frequency.

And how this was subsequently overcome is perhaps the most brilliant of all the Golden Pages recording humanity's progress in the healing art.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—The third of the "Three Big A's in Surgery" will appear in an early issue.

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