

Selections.

The Jubilee of Anæsthesia.

JUST fifty years ago occurred an event which, passed over or dismissed in a single line by the ordinary historian, was yet fraught with immeasurably greater benefit to mankind than most political, social, or even religious revolutions. On October 16th, 1846, the first surgical operation on a patient under the influence of ether was performed in the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, by Dr. John C. Warren. The ether was administered by a young dentist named Morton, who had already proved its anæsthetic properties in tooth extraction, and the effect was so striking that the operator, in homely but expressive Saxon phrase, declared that here was no humbug. Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, who was present, told a less fortunate colleague that he had seen something that day that would go round the world—a prediction that was speedily verified. The significance of the event lay in the fact that it was the crowning and public proclamation of one of the greatest discoveries in the history of medical science—a discovery whereby, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, “the fierce extremity of suffering has been steeped in the waters of forgetfulness, and the deepest furrow in the knotted brow of agony has been smoothed for ever.”

The discovery is great in itself, and still greater in its consequences. Not only has the victory over pain which it achieved already been the means of saving countless lives and preventing an incalculable amount of suffering, but it has opened up possibilities of development in the science as well as in the art of surgery beyond the wildest dreams of our forerunners. What surgery was before the discovery of anæsthesia there are men still among us who could tell—: if they cared to revive memories so unspeakable. We can get some faint idea from a letter written by the late Dr. George Wilson, who had himself suffered the amputation of a limb in the days when there were no anæsthetics. One extract from his account of the operation will suffice: “Suffering so great as I underwent cannot be expressed in words, and thus, fortunately, cannot be recalled. The particular pangs are now forgotten; but the black whirlwind of emotion, the horror of great darkness, and the sense of desertion by God and man, bordering close upon despair, which swept through my mind and overwhelmed my heart, I can never forget, however gladly I would do so.”

That surgery has been for ever freed from this accompaniment of horror is a blessing which we in these days cannot, perhaps, appreciate