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ART. XXXIV.—THE OPERATION OF THE TREPHINE AND ITS VALUE—MEDICO-LEGALLY CONSIDERED.

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The appearance of the following paper is due to circumstances arising out of the trial of a man named Beaucaire, indicted for the murder of one Rousseau, at the criminal term held in this city in March, 1844. Rousseau exhibited before death all the symptoms of compression of the brain from extravasated blood, in a most unequivocal manner. After receiving the blow of a poker on the left temple, and recovering from the stun or concussion consequent upon it, he repaired to the police station-house, a distance of about fifty yards from the tavern in which the altercation between the parties took place; there entered a deposition with the chief constable against his antagonist; returned to the tavern, and finally went to his bed in an upper room; events which occurred between 7 and 8 o'clock P.M. Early next morning he was found by the inmates of the house in his bed, insensible. About 7 A.M., a medical gentleman was summoned, who, finding him labouring under every symptom of compression, bled him freely, and adopted some other collateral treatment. About noon I was requested to visit him. He was completely comatose and evidently moribund. He died in half an hour after, after having been seen by a third medical gentleman, who also in consequence of his state did not deem any operative interference proper. There was a slight wound on the left temple. On examining it with a probe, I was not able to detect any fracture. An inquest was held on the body, which was attended by the two medical gentlemen alluded to. Their report states that a small fissure was observed about half an inch posterior to the external wound, and below this, between the skull and dura mater, a coagulum of extravasated blood was found.

At the trial, a difference of opinion, as to the result of operative interference in the case, was expressed by the medical witnesses. I considered it "possible, but not probable," that the patient would have been saved had the trephine been applied; the other medical gen-

tlemen testifying that they considered it not only "possible, but highly probable."

The difference of opinions thus expressed had a decided reference to the value of the operation in the particular case which called them forth; but at the same time this very difference of opinion has always, since that occasion, been deemed by me of sufficient importance to warrant an inquiry into the general question of the value of the operation, under any of the circumstances in which it may, or should be performed; and the remarks which I may have occasion to make are with the sole view of elucidating this point.

In regard to the employment of the trephine, modern surgery stands in striking contrast to that of the last century. Then an injury of the head, with the development of no more urgent symptoms than some "uncomfortable sensations," was a sufficient pretext for the operation; at the present day, the evidences demanding it require to be explicit, and the character of the cases is more restricted. We have learned, from the practice of former surgeons, in their indiscriminate employment of the instrument, the enormous loss which the bony protective covering of the brain may sustain without destruction of life. Modern surgery views these cases as exceptions to the rule, and instead of taxing the recuperative powers of the system to repair in many instances an additional injury, calls them to her aid in the first instance, and frequently succeeds in obviating the necessity of a direct operative interference. Time was, when the skull was unceremoniously perforated, to prevent inflammatory action after injury of the head. The time has come to know, that the probabilities of inflammatory action are thereby considerably increased. Time was, when every depression of the bony plate required immediate elevation. The time has come, and has demonstrated, that such an occurrence is not always incompatible with the due performance of every cerebral function, reprobating a too meddling practice. Time was, when compression from supposed extravasation was treated by an instant recourse to the trephine. Instances are not wanting demonstrative of the fact, that by the adoption of proper constitutional treatment, such accumulations have been apparently absorbed. In fine, instances of the operation are now as rare, as they for-