

CRUSADING AGAINST THE CITY'S "UNETHICAL" DENTISTS

The Day of the Bargain Dental Parlor Where Patients Were Maltreated and Fleeced Is Passing.



Teaching Children How to Take Care of the Teeth.

THE day of the dental "parlor," where everything from tooth pulling to bridgework is advertised at bargain rates, is on the wane. This report was made recently, not by the men of science, who have been fighting this type of pestilential practitioner, but by drummers in dentists' supplies, who have hitherto found the "painless palaces" among their largest customers.

The protection of the public from malpractice at the hands of the so-called unethical dentists is one of the most difficult of the problems which the members in good standing of the profession have to meet. The violations of professional morals may range anywhere from swindling a servant girl out of a few hard-earned dollars to actual malpractice which may result in serious illness and even death.

There are in the City of New York a certain number of the unlicensed practitioners as yet either undetected or against whom no legal proof has been found. The estimate ranges anywhere from 20 to 5,000, depending on the person to whom one applies for information. Upright and honorable dentists practicing in the poorer sections of the city, who have to compete with their unethical brethren, are apt to see the figures looming large, whereas those whose business it is to apprehend and prosecute the offenders discount largely the prevalence of the offense.

One thing, however, is certain. In 1900, 233 complaints were received by the Law Committee of the New York State Dental Society, although conclusive evidence was obtained in only twenty-one new cases, aside from several old hands reappearing in the trade. Concerning this state of affairs, the counsel for the Law Committee remarked that there is an unfortunate difference between moral certitude and legal proof, but that of the cases prosecuted by the Law Committee since the passage of the laws regulating dentistry convictions have been produced in 90 per cent. of the actions, an average high enough to make the everlasting fame of any public prosecuting attorney.

The ordinary citizen who imagines that a dentist's sign necessarily guarantees that the owner is a graduate of dental courses fulfilling the Regents' requirements of this State will be amazed to learn that within the last few years several barbers, a shoemaker, a patent medicine mixer, a street musician, a plumber, a janitor, a cleaner and dyer, a wheelwright, and a veterinarian have been arrested for essaying the forceps and the drill without further training.

This list is preposterous enough to be funny if the results were not so frequently disastrous. To arrest a man for filling teeth with lead, as they did some years ago in Brooklyn, sounds like a comic opera, but the reverse of the picture is not at all humorous. For instance, a compounder of patent medicines at 100 Rivington Street, in attempting to remove a tooth, broke two others. In 1898 a man stepped into a place at Twenty-third Street and Second Avenue to have a tooth pulled and died from loss of blood. Patrolman Jacob Ott of the West Forty-seventh Street Precinct met his death the same way. More recently Rebecca Kalish of 32 Goerck Street died as the result of improper administration of gas, and a woman of Mills lost her voice from the effects of a narcotic incorrectly used as a substitute for the nitrous oxide. A little girl named Ellen Kelly was taken to a "parlor" in Grand Street to have some teeth out and died as the result.

To turn to the more grotesque, "Boggio Santa Lucia," as he called himself, residing at 15 Broome Street, combined dentistry with minstrelsy. Armed with a flute he made his rounds in the Italian tenement districts, attracting patients by his plaintive serenades. Having made this tribute to the aesthetic "Boggio Santa Lucia" got down to his real work. Unfortunately on one fatal May 7 the minstrel-dentist was arrested for breaking a compatriot's jaw in the course of an extraction.

A thoroughly typical case came up recently. A carpenter of Norwalk, Conn., went to a local practitioner some months ago to have something done for a troublesome tooth. The dentist noted that it was in bad shape and would need careful

treatment, which would probably cost \$12. The man said he would think about it, and took the next train down to New York. Being a thrifty soul, \$12 for one tooth seemed a trifle high, so, turning in at a large and flourishing dentist's sign, he was delighted to find a man who would fix him up for just half the sum.

The man returned to Norwalk with a fine new gold crown, highly pleased with his bargain. Several weeks thereafter the carpenter noticed that there was something wrong with his jaw. Finally, in agony, he went to his own local doctor, who found him suffering from a bad abscess, for which he has had to be treated ever since. The bargain doctor in New York had capped the gold tooth without treating it sufficiently, and the new gold crown was hardly better than ten-cent quality, so that, even at cut rates, the dentist had made a fine profit.

The laws of the State of New York designed to protect people from this sort of thing are stricter than those of many other States. The requirements for a licensed practitioner are thirty-six Regents' counts, equivalent to the regular high school course, and after that three years of dental training, or two of medicine followed by two of dentistry. A man wishing to practice in any town must register himself with the County Clerk. Fines for neglect or evasion of these requirements are provided, while the prosecution of the matter is placed in the hands of the Law Committee of the State Association of Dentists.

At the time when the law was passed, back in the eighties, a minority opinion among the professionals, supported to a large extent by public opinion, found it ridiculous to deny a man the right to practice because he failed to qualify in Latin or mathematics. On the other hand, the foremost dentists insisted that their profession should require as good a general and technical training as that of physicians, for correct dentistry was equally important to good health and malpractice was frequently as disastrous. Since that time the general public opinion has swung around to the advanced position rather more thoroughly in a city the size of New York than in some of the smaller up-State communities.

Possibly the favorite swindle of the unethical brethren is the crown game, which was practiced on the Norwalk carpenter. Within the last year a man was convicted of this offense for the third time.



Tooth Brush Drill in a Children's School.

"The pathetic part of the situation," said an uptown dentist working in a better class tenement neighborhood, "is that most of the victims are either too poor or too ignorant to obtain legal redress. Among the poorer people a tooth is generally pretty far gone before any attention is paid to it, so that the only recourse would be capping. Crowning itself is comparatively simple; any one with a little skill or practice can learn to cap on a crown. The real test of skill, however, is in treating and curing the tooth properly before the crown is put on, and this is the part usually omitted in the dental parlors."

With the air shut out by the crown it may be weeks, months, or even a year before the results are perceived, and then it is unlikely that a servant girl or a newly arrived immigrant connects the pain in the jaw with the perfectly good-looking crown. There is legal redress if the victim can afford to prosecute. The

York State laws require more of a general education preceding the dental studies than is demanded elsewhere, some perfectly reputable graduates of schools outside the State find themselves unable to meet the Regents' requirements. While it is of course illegal for a man in that position to practice in this city, still some of the men under this heading are good and capable dentists even if they can't pass in German or algebra.

Next comes the foreign offenders, a large group, working chiefly among their own countrymen and consequently not easily to be detected. In Russia students and professionals are allowed greater freedom in their comings and goings than the ordinary mortal, so that many young men and women avail themselves of this opportunity, although they may not intend to follow the profession in after life.

The dentistry course is the easiest in this direction. Opportunity to practice, though, is rather meagre, for in the coun-

try regions of that land of distress the village blacksmith is said to be frequently the sole representative of dental science.

Should the Russian emigrate to this country, however, he immediately finds out that dentistry here is a remunerative occupation and his Russian diploma looks sufficiently impressive to those of his patients who know enough to ask for one. It is a matter of fact that one man was found practicing with a veterinary certificate boldly affixed to his wall, his clients failing to notice the slight difference in sheepskins.

Sometimes among the foreigners there is no pretense whatsoever to learning. A cleaner and dyer in Delancey Street was found doing dentistry as a side line,

sometimes runs as low as \$20 a week, so that this sort of employment has little to offer the competent or ambitious.

It is generally by way of the dentists' mechanics that the unlicensed work begins. It is perfectly legitimate for dentists to have in their offices mechanics to attend to the business of making teeth and plates. Now, a bright young man, after working around the office for some time, picks up the rudiments of the craft, and the chances are that before long his services will be enlisted either by his employer or that he will be opening a place on his own account.

Men in no wise connected with the science of dentistry start offices purely as a commercial venture, and until re-

cently these have been veritable silver mines. Sometimes one man owns a string of them. This came out rather amusingly in court, when a man sued to recover money deposited for some bridge work. The bargain had been made for \$60, of which \$40 was to be paid in advance. When the bridge came it wouldn't fit, so that the man returned it in disgust, and counting his \$40 as lost, went elsewhere. He chose another place at random, and the same preliminaries were gone through—so much for the work and so much to be deposited. When the second bridge came, lo and behold! it was the same old one that the man had had before. Then the victim saw that he had been swindled, and it came out in court that the same person owned the two establishments.

A clear proof of the prosperity of these places has been the cheerfulness with which the old offenders have paid retracted fines of \$300 or \$500, only to open again in another location or under another name. Here is the history of one of the notorious practitioners: "S. R." was married in 1897, pretending to his bride that he was both a doctor and a dentist, but was convicted shortly afterward of practicing medicine unlawfully, for which he served sixty days. In 1898 he was convicted of bigamy, and when released set up shop as a dentist under an alias. For this he was caught and fined in 1901. In 1906 a dentist by the name of Alfred Smith was prosecuted for illegal practice and bigamy. During the trial he was identified as the original "S. R.," and is now supposed to be serving out his second sentence for bigamy.

When, during the eighties, the present law regulating dentistry was passed, the execution was put into the hands of the Law Committee of the Dental Society of the State, of which Dr. William Carr of New York has been for many years the Chairman. Dentistry being so much newer a science than medicine the association was far from being either as powerful or as wealthy as the medical bodies of the same standing, so that Dr. Carr is known frequently to have aided the work of the Law Committee out of his own means.

When it comes to the actual methods of



The Women Have Invaded the Dental Field with Excellent Results.

detection and conviction, the prime requisite is like the old receipt for pigeon people, "First, catch your bird." Different persons have been employed, as detectives, so that they will not be known, and sometimes amateur sleuths have done the work.

Some years ago a poor woman came to Dr. Carr and asked where she could have her teeth pulled, since she had no money to pay for the operation. At that time the professional detectives had handed in a list of five suspects, but as the committee never prosecutes on the uncorroborated statements of professional detectives, more evidence was necessary. The poor woman had eight teeth to be removed, so Dr. Carr suggested a scheme by which she could make a little out of her necessity. He handed her the names of the five suspects, and offered her \$1 apiece for each tooth offered on the altar, and \$1 for each arrest following. In this way five offenders were caught.

The rule of the committee, never to prosecute on the detective's word alone, has sometimes been criticised by those who object to the delay necessary in getting further witnesses, but the counsel retained by the committee attributes the 50 per cent. of convictions largely to this principle.

There have been dental departments established at four dispensaries in Manhattan. At the Vanderbilt, plain pullings can be had for 10 cents apiece, extractions with gas at 25 cents, while fillings range from 25 cents to \$1, depending on the size of the cavity and the material with which it is to be filled.

Further uptown is the Free Dental Clinic for Children in East 121st Street. There are also three clinics maintained by the Children's Aid Society in their schools in Sullivan, Worth, and West Fifty-third Streets. These are entirely free, but are for the use of children.