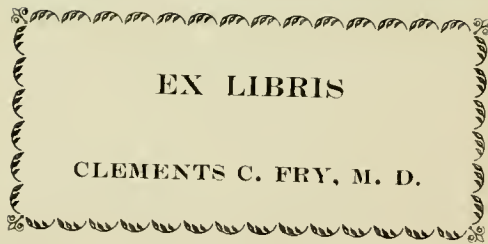




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THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF PAIN: A POEM READ  
OCTOBER SIXTEENTH, MDCCCXCVI, AT THE COM-  
MEMORATION OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE FIRST PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION OF SUR-  
GICAL ANÆSTHESIA. BY S. WEIR MITCHELL, M. D.







## THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF PAIN.

**F**ORGIVE a moment, if a friend's regret,  
Delay the task your honouring kindness set.  
I miss one face to all men ever dear;  
I miss one voice that all men loved to hear.  
How glad were I to sit with you apart  
Could the dead master use his higher art  
To lift on wings of ever lightsome mirth  
The burdened muse above the dust of earth,  
To stamp with jests the heavy ore of thought,  
To give a day, with proud remembrance fraught  
The vital pathos of that Holmes-spun art  
Which knew so well to reach the common heart  
Alas! for me, for you, that fatal hour!  
Gone is the master! Ah! not mine the power  
To gild with jests, that almost win a tear,  
The thronging memories that are with us here.

The Birth of Pain! Let centuries roll away;  
Come back with me to nature's primal day.  
What mighty forces pledged the dust to life!  
What awful will decreed its silent strife!  
Till through vast ages rose on hill and plain,  
Life's saddest voice, the birthright wail of pain.  
The keener sense, and ever growing mind,  
Served but to add a torment twice refined,  
As life, more tender, as it grew more sweet,  
The cruel links of sorrow found complete  
When yearning love to conscious pity grown  
Felt the mad pain thrills, that were not its own.

What will implacable, beyond our ken,  
Set this stern fiat for the tribes of men!  
This none shall 'scape, who share our human fates:  
One stern democracy of anguish waits  
By poor men's cots—within the rich man's gates.

What purpose hath it? Nay, thy quest is vain:  
Earth hath no answer: If the baffled brain  
Cries, 'tis to warn, to punish—Ah, refrain!  
When writhes the child beneath the surgeon's hand,  
What soul shall hope that pain to understand?  
Lo! Science falters o'er the hopeless task,  
And Love and Faith in vain an answer ask,  
When thrilling nerves demand what good is wrought  
Where torture clogs the very source of thought.

Lo! Mercy ever broadening down the years  
Seeks but to count a lessening sum of tears.  
The rack is gone—the torture chamber lies  
A sorry show for shuddering tourist eyes.  
How useless pain, both church and state have learned  
Since the last witch, or patient martyr burned.  
Yet still, forever, he who strove to gain  
By swift despatch a shorter lease for pain  
Saw the grim theatre, and 'neath his knife  
Felt the keen torture, in the quivering life.  
A word for him who, silent, grave, serene,  
The thought-stirred master of that tragic scene,  
Recorded pity through the hand of skill,  
Heard not a cry, but, ever conscious, still  
In mercy merciless, swift, bold, intent,  
Felt the slow moments that in torture went  
While 'neath his touch, as none to-day has seen,  
In anguish shook life's agonized machine.  
The task is o'er; the precious blood is stayed;  
But double price the hour of tension paid.  
A pitying hand is on the sufferer's brow—  
"Thank God 'tis over." Few who face me now  
Recall this memory. Let the curtain fall,  
Far gladder days shall know this storied hall!

Though Science patient as the fruitful years,  
Still taught our art to close some fount of tears,

Yet who that served this sacred home of pain  
Could e'er have dreamed one scarce-imagined gain  
Or hoped a day would bring his fearful art  
No need to steel the ever kindly heart.

So fled the years! while haply here or there  
Some trust delusive left the old despair;  
Some comet thought—flashed fitful through the night  
No lasting record, and no constant light.  
Then radiant morning broke, and ampler hope  
To art and science gave illumined scope.

What Angel bore the Christ-like gift inspired!  
What love divine with noblest courage fired  
One eager soul that paid in bitter tears  
For the glad helping of unnumbered fears,  
From the strange record of creation tore  
The sentence sad, each sorrowing mother bore,  
Struck from the roll of pangs one awful sum,  
Made pain a dream, and suffering gently dumb!

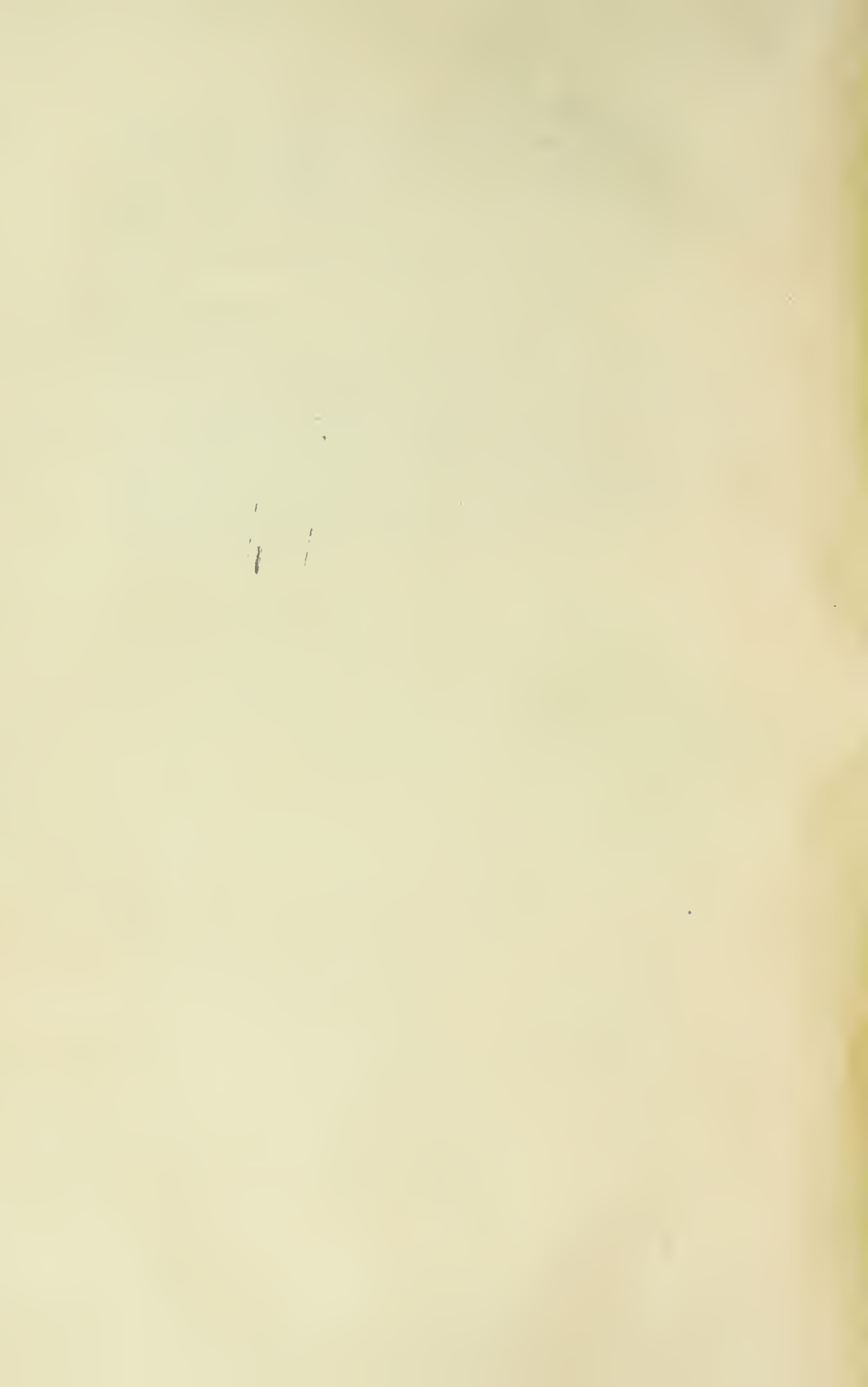
Whatever triumphs still shall hold the mind,  
Whatever gift shall yet enrich mankind,  
Ah! here, no hour shall strike through all the years,  
No hour as sweet, as when hope, doubt and fears,  
'Mid deepening stillness, watched one eager brain,  
With God-like will, decree the Death of Pain.

How did we thank him? Ah! no joy-bells rang,  
No pæans greeted, and no poet sang,  
No cannon thundered, from the guarded strand  
This mighty victory to a grateful land!  
We took the gift, so humbly, simply given,  
And coldly selfish—left our debt to Heaven.  
How shall we thank him? Hush! A gladder hour  
Has struck for him, a wiser, juster power  
Shall know full well how fitly to reward  
The generous soul, that found the world so hard.

Oh! fruitful Mother—you, whose thronging states,  
Shall deal not vainly with man's changing fates,  
Of freeborn thought, or war's heroic deeds  
Much have your proud hands given, but nought exceeds  
This heaven-sent answer to the cry of prayer,  
This priceless gift which all mankind may share.

A solemn hour for such as gravely pause  
To note the process of creation's laws!  
Ah, surely, He, whose dark, unfathomed Mind  
With prescient thought, the scheme of life designed,  
Who bade His highest creature slowly rise  
Spurred by sad needs, and lured by many a prize  
Saw, with a God's pure joy, His ripening plan  
His highest mercy brought by man to man.







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Birth and death  
of pain.

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