The Painless Operation

High up under the dome of Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital, far removed from the wards so that the screams of sufferers under the knife will not horrify the ward patients, is the Hospital’s famed operating amphitheatre. Many a medical student dreads the operations he is privileged to watch, frequently faints. But one day last week Dr. John C. Warren, Boston surgeon, led a group of surgeons and students (class of 1847) up the long stairs, eager, hurrying.

For there beckoned an interesting experiment—surgery without pain. Dr. William Thomas Green Morton, 27-year old Boston dentist, thought it possible, had experimented to that end with ether, a volatile, pungent chemical compound capable of producing insensibility. He had tried it on animals, on himself, then on his patients while extracting the roots of decayed teeth. Finally he had obtained permission from Dr. Warren to let him test his drug before an audience. One Gilbert Abbott, with a tumor on his neck, was to be the first trial.

At 11 a.m. the last privileged student hurried into the amphitheatre. Experimentee Abbott, fidgeting on the operating-table, looked anxiously at the clock. Casual talk ceased, sudden silence prevailed as the minute-hand crawled past the hour, and Dr. Morton did not appear. “He and his anesthetic! Humbugs both, no doubt!” mumbled a doctor. It became five minutes past eleven, ten, then a quarter after. The patient stirred uneasily, Dr. Warren selected an instrument, advanced to the table—useless to delay proceedings any longer. As his knife poised for the incision, Dr. Morton, breathless, apologetic, rushed in. He held in one hand a curious globe-and-tube apparatus.

In eager concentration, tensely expectant, the waiting group of surgeons and students watched while the newcomer—a charlatan perhaps, a genius possibly—adjusted his peculiar inhaling apparatus to the patient’s mouth and with tense composure administered his anesthetic. Veiled skepticism revealed itself when the patient reacted suddenly in wild exhilaration, but this exuberance subsided, relaxation took its place, then unconsciousness. Skepticism was routed, amazement paramount. Said Dentist Morton to Surgeon Warren: “Your patient is ready.”

Dr. Warren began to operate, proceeded quickly, in five minutes had finished. From the patient came no cry of pain, no agony of distress, only slight movements, mumbled words as from one who stirson the borderland of sleep ....

“This, gentlemen,” exclaimed Surgeon Warren, “is no humbug.”

Awake, Gilbert Abbott said, “I felt no pain.” So, in part, had TIME been published in October, 1846, would TIME have reported the first public demonstration of ether as a surgical anesthetic. So, too, would TIME have reported how one Dr. Crawford Williamson Long, of Georgia, came forward later saying that he had used ether four years previous, had given it up as impractical .... So, too, would TIME have reported the bitter persecution that came to Dentist Morton when he patented his discovery as “Letheon”; the seizure of “Letheon” by the U.S. Government for its own uses; the claims of Dr. Charles T. Jackson, the Boston chemist from whom Dentist Morton had obtained his ether; the division of the Paris Academy of Medicine’s 5,000 franc Monthyon Prize for 1852 between these two, with Morton proudly refusing his share; the long Congressional investigations resulting in nothing, and Dentist Morton’s death in poverty in 1865.