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CAN LAWYERS BE HONEST?

George Q. Richmond
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This is no new subject. For a century has the question been put and on either side have been entered a multitude of defenders and distinguished zealots found in both ranks.

Every lawyer discovers in early practice that the average man bears the legal profession a prejudice and the admission of this prejudice does not abash its holder though his personal experience may cause him to respect and even admire the attorney with whom he has business dealings—yet, lawyers as lawyers he unhesitatingly denounces. Though other professions fare well at his hands, an opportunity to decry the legal profession is never overlooked.

Some analyzing minds distinguish the lawyer from the man and criticize only professional acts. The nature of a lawyer's employment arouses the enmity of his neighbor and makes him the target for his shafts of ridicule and arrows of abuse, while the work of other professions is appealing to his good will.

A minister labors for the salvation of souls. He gently leads the way from error to the path of righteousness and virtue. He spares words of comfort to the criminal. He whispers words of cheer to the widow and the orphan and all of his claims cannot be disputed unless from the spirit land shall return an opponent who knows.

The intelligent, skillful physician should and does receive favor and good will of the community in which he labors, but adverse comment has no proof and his buried blunders will not rise to daunt him.

How different is the lawyer's lot! His chief occupation assails the man's tender spot—his pocket. His

noblest victory is another's sore defeat and his grandest triumph means perhaps financial ruin to his foe.

Temptation lies in wait for him on every side. Base, sordid and designing men seek to use his skill. His sternest duty compels association with the most depraved. Envy, greed and malice strike hands to block his path.

The greater his eminence the more bitter his opposition. The more unsullied his reputation the more determined becomes malignity to tarnish it. Defeat brings him no sympathizing friend. Whatever error he commits Dame Rumor sends her fastest messenger to spread abroad.

It cannot be denied that some dishonest men practice law, yet there never was profession, class, society or association that failed to gather discreditable members, and it is gross injustice to visit upon the entire membership the sins of the disreputable few.

When a minister falls from grace we do not revile the clergy. When a doctor seeks the ruin of his patient we do not shut out the medical profession from our homes.

But when some miserable pettifogger betrays a client it is classed as another example of those "rascally lawyers," and yet no one knows better than the lawyer that it pays to be honest.

While we admit lawyers are not saints or paragons of excellence, we do claim their merit and integrity will average with that of any class. Within their ranks have stood man's greatest benefactors and upon their leaders fame has laid her priceless crown. The greatest and most sacred trusts are reposed with them. Fidelity is compelled by their occupation.

A lawyer's duty often requires of him supreme indifference to the sentiment of the community, and lawyers know the people better than the people know themselves. Every well informed person knows that no class of men is subjected to such frequent and powerful temptations to dishonesty as the average attorney. When others readily yield he stubbornly refuses to surrender. He not only protects himself from dishonor but many times compels his client to be honest. There is no profession where from motives of policy alone it so well pays to be honest as that of the law.