Valedictory Address

TO THE

NEWLY MADE MEDICAL GRADUATES OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,

AUGUST 1ST, 1855.

By PROFESSOR SIMPSON.

GENTLEMEN,—It falls this year to my lot to address to you a few farewell remarks, on the part of my medical colleagues and myself, before we now separate—and separate for ever—as professors and pupils. These remarks, however, will be brief; as I know your impatience to be set free from this, the last and only remaining link in the chain of academic restraint. For, though it be true that the absolute shortness of human life is a constant and common theme of regret, yet it is equally true that all of us anxiously press and hasten from one step and stage of human existence upward and onward to the next, sorely begrudging, in this railway race of existence all detentions and delays. You are to-day arrived at what is, perhaps, the most important station in this journey; for you have now reached, and are about to cross, the great boundary line between the light academic life of the young student, and the hard practical life of actual manhood. Ere you pass this line, however, allow me, in right of my office as your promoter, to stand athwart your path for a few minutes, and speak of the prospects, and the obligations which await you on its further side, as medical practitioners.

And, first, let me venture to warn you, in all kindness of spirit, that the bright and brilliant hopes which some, which perhaps most of you entertain of rapid and almost immediate success in medical life, are, I fear, doomed to certain failure. I speak specially of the Graduates amongst you, who are about to engage in civil practice; and these constitute a vast majority of your number. For the painful trammels and degrading neglect to which medical officers in the public services of the British army and navy are still so discreditably subjected, are such as debar and deter men of ability and independent spirit from permanently joining their ranks. Besides, even the very highest grades of the public medical service are scarcely in themselves objects of honourable ambition. The gentleman who is at this moment at the head of the medical department of our great army in the East—a physician, I believe, of high talents and energy, Dr. Hall—undergoes all the enormous responsibilities and work of that office, and all the enormous abuse and obloquy too, connected with the discharge of it, for a salary of two guineas a day—an income far less than that made by many a second- or third-rate village apothecary in England. Most of you, I repeat, are destined for civil practice; and again I warn you, that, as the general rule, such practice rarely or never comes speedily, in a pecuniary form, to the young physician, however high his aspirations, and how-ever great his talents may be. The same fact holds true of most other professions and trades; but it holds, and has ever held, especially true of medicine. We have little or nothing on record to unfold to us the secret history of the early struggles, trials, and difficulties of medical practitioners, except in the published biographies of a few of those men whose supreme talents have ultimately carried them to the very foremost rank of their profession. The history of these princes and chiefs of the medical art, is in every known instance, I believe, an illustration of what I allude to,—the slowness and difficulty with which practice, or at least remunerative practice, gathers around the door of the young physician, especially in our larger communities and cities. A former graduate of this university, Dr. John Cheyne, who, a quarter of a century ago, was by far the busiest, and best employed physician in Dublin, tells us, in his interesting autobiography, that during the first half of his second-year's settlement in the Irish capital, and when he had already reached the thirty-fourth year of his age—(an age which it will be long before some of you yet attain)—his fees only amounted to about three guineas. Nine years subsequently, he was making £5000 annually. Not above one or two physicians in London ever drew, I believe, a larger professional income, or perhaps ever advanced more early into full practice than Dr. Chambers; yet, during the fifth year of his

practice, when he was already thirty-four or thirty-five years of age, he did not receive above £211 in fees. Seventeen years subsequently, his annual professional income is stated to have reached nearly to £9000. His great predecessor in high London practice, Dr. Matthew Baillie, drew above £11,000 in one year; and yet with all the interest of the Hunters and others, to aid him in his outset, his first march upwards was, like that of all others, very slow and difficult, and, to quote the words of his biographer, Dr. Wardrop, before “he found himself fairly established in practice,” he had been already for twelve years physician to St. George's Hospital, and for nearly twenty years a medical lecturer. Dr. Baillie's uncle, the celebrated Dr. William Hunter, who spent a large fortune, gained by his profession alone, upon the collection of that splendid museum which now enriches the University of Glasgow, was so hard-pressed for money during the years of his earlier struggles in London practice, that he was obliged to postpone for a fortnight, the commencement of his third season of lectures, in consequence of not having money enough to pay the expense of the usual class advertisements. Nor have our greatest surgeons been usually more successful than these our greatest physicians, in the first stages of their professional career. In 1788, the son of an English clergyman attended the medical classes of this university, and lived on the third flat in Bristo-street, in a room which cost him six shillings and sixpence a week. In after life, when swaying the surgical sceptre of England, as Sir Astley Cooper, his professional income, in one single year, amounted to £23,000: and yet, during the first twelvemonths after he settled down in London, and was working as a lecturer on anatomy and surgery, his receipts from private practice only amounted to five guineas. The distinguished surgeon who, by Sir Astley's death, was left at the head of the surgical school of London, Sir Benjamin Brodie, did not, as we are told, in a late biographical sketch of him, get into “full practice” till 1825; yet he had been lecturing, practising and publishing since 1805, or for twenty long years previously. “I well remember,” observes Sir Benjamin, in one of his published works, and when speaking of the early struggles and disappointments of young medical practitioners, “I well remember, in relation to myself, how often, in the interval of occupations, I have contemplated, with something like dismay, the prospect which lay before me.” And I believe almost all medical men have had occasion, in early professional life, to participate more or less deeply in that feeling. All my medical colleagues around me, will probably, like myself, be ready to subscribe to the truth of the observation, in their own individual instance. No doubt, also, fate holds in store a similar destiny for you. And, if a period of probation and trial is thus ready to meet you at the outset of professional life, be you also ready, with brave and stout hearts, to meet it.

✱ This impending period, however, of watching and probation, cannot and dare not be with you a period of rest and idleness. On the contrary—if you do not wish to sink even below mediocrity—your pursuit of medical knowledge, during this period, must be increased instead of diminished, redoubled instead of slackened. It must be, in truth, a term of fresh and fervent professional study—of earnest and manful professional work: for, during it, you have to confirm and correct, and, still more, to extend and enlarge your present stock of information, on a thousand different points, and in a thousand different directions.

In the practice of some ancient continental universities, it was formerly the custom to present the medical graduate, on the day on which he gained his doctorship, with a ring, a barrette, an open and a shut book. The ring betokened the solemn espousals of the young graduate to the medical profession. The barrette indicated that he was, at the same time, set apart and consecrated as a priest to science. The open book was given as an emblem of the things already taught to him; while the more significant closed volume, with which he was presented, was meant to typify that far larger and greater extent of professional knowledge which it was yet the study and business of his life to acquire. You have specially to peruse, and fervently pore over, the pages of this shut volume, during the next few important, and to you, indeed, priceless preparatory years of professional life. On the way in which you use or abuse these years of your existence, doubtless, depends in a great measure, your ultimate success or ultimate failure in your professional career. During the next lustrum or two of life, you cannot reasonably hope to collect any large amount of medical fees, but you must collect, during it, a vast storehouse of medical knowledge; you cannot expect to “make money,” but you have each to do what is of still higher ultimate moment—viz., to make for yourselves such a professional

reputation as will, in the end, bring you competence, if not riches; for in that reputation truly lies the whole secret alchemy of professional success. You have, above all, to familiarize yourselves practically, and by incessant study and experience, with the actual phenomena and treatment of diseases. And do not argue yourselves into indolence, and the neglect of this, on the plea that you, forsooth, can have no proper opportunities of doing so. An active heart, and a willing hand, will ever find plenty of work to do. Wherever you may settle down in this world, you will have around you abundance of the sick poor. The professional care and charge of them has always been the heritage of the young physician; and when viewed in all its bearings, it is a rich heritage too. Amid them or others, you must render yourselves familiar with all the many unteachable items and details of actual practice; and you will elaborate and extend the practical knowledge of your profession, as well in attendance upon the pauper as upon the millionaire. For in the richest of your patients you will find, after all, only a sick brother man; and the poorest patient for whom you will ever prescribe is nothing less and nothing more.

There are other matters pertaining more personally to yourselves, which you have specially to attend to during the next few years of your professional probation and preparation. You have, each of you, to endeavour, as far as in you lies, to mould and form your moral and intellectual characters, both as men and as physicians, so that you may be able to discharge, with all possible happiness to yourselves, and with all possible profit to your patients, the personal duties connected with your professional calling. In all your communings, either with your own hearts or with the world, in all your intercourse with men and books and Nature, strive to cultivate and strengthen every good principle and qualification that can adorn the character of the true physician—application, energy, self-reliance, gentleness, cheerfulness. On the other hand, search out, each of you, in a faithful and humble spirit, your own individual faults and deficiencies of character (for who amongst us is free from them?) and early and earnestly strive to correct them. In the language of Chilo, "Man, know yourself!" and again, in the language of a far higher authority, "Physician, heal thyself!" Uproot in your mental characters and habits whatever is evil, and try to replace it with whatever is good. Remember, the garden of the mind is always certain of itself to grow weeds, if you do not train it to grow flowers.

The profession which you have this day espoused is, as I have already strongly stated, beset with early struggles and difficulties; but it is one also in which, to quote the words again of Sir Benjamin Brodie, "no one who uses the means proper for the purpose, will fail to succeed sufficiently to gratify a reasonable ambition." "You must (he adds elsewhere) persevere, and you may do so in the full assurance that the reward will come." Medicine, however, is not a profession which almost ever leads to the actual accumulation of very great wealth. Large fortunes are rarely made in it; far more rarely, I believe, than in any other profession or trade which it is possible to name. If the ambition and object of your hearts, therefore, is the mere acquisition of money, then throw your newly-won medical honours aside, and go at once to the mill, or to the mine, to the counting-house, or to the exchange. They offer far more sure and ready avenues to hoarded wealth than medicine does. But surely the secret of a human being's usefulness and happiness in this life does not really consist, as many seem to fancy, in merely accumulating money. There are other objects and aims far more noble, and far more worthy of the gifts and powers which God has given you in trust. You are educated and destined for higher work, and for holier uses and purposes, than the greedy grubbing up of gold, either out of earth-holes at Ballarat, or out of the pockets of your patients. You have undertaken to-day—and for life service too—a charge and a commission of far more honour and dignity to yourselves, and of far more moment and importance to your species. All, I believe, will willingly grant that the clerical profession stands in unspeakable importance above the medical, and above all other professions, inasmuch as the interests of the soul are infinitely more momentous than the interests of the body, and the concerns of eternity infinitely more weighty than any concerns of time. But the profession which you have this day adopted is, in many respects, the most important secular profession which a man can possibly follow. Its importance depends upon the priceless value of the objects of the physician's constant care and study—viz., the guardianship of the health and of the lives of our brother men, and the defence of the human body and human mind against the attacks and effects of disease. Other pursuits become insignificant in their objects

when placed in contrast with this. The agriculturist bestows all his professional care and study upon the rearing of crops and cattle; the merchant spends his energies and attention upon his goods and his commissions; the engineer upon his iron wheels and rails; the sailor upon his ships and freights; the banker upon his bills and his bonds; and the manufacturer upon his spindles and their products. But what, after all, are machinery and merchandise—shares and stocks—consols and prices-current—or the rates of cargoes and cattle, of corns and cottons, in comparison with the inestimable value and importance of the health and the very lives of those fellow-men who everywhere move and breathe and speak and act around us? What are any, or what are all of these objects, when contrasted with the most precious and valued gift of God to earth—human life? And what would not the greatest and most successful followers of these varied callings give out of their own professional stores, for the restoration of health, and for the prolongation of life, if the first were once lost to them, or the other merely threatened by the dreaded and blighting touch of disease?

Medicine has, I repeat, no large promises of wealth and fortune to offer to its votaries. Nor can it profess either to attract followers to its standard by the hopes of heraldic ranks and titles, or the glitter of coronets. If your souls long after such worldly honours, then leave the sick room and hospital ward, and go in search of them where alone they are to be found—in the senate-room, in the forum, or in the camp. You may have a chance—though not a very great chance—of obtaining such an object if you will successfully devote your life-blood and energies to serve, or mis-serve, your country in connexion with any leading political party—it matters not which, as all are uppermost by turns. Or if, as a lawyer, or rather as a law-pleader, you will particularly distinguish yourself above your fellows, so as to

"make the worse appear
The better reason, to perplex and dash
Maturest counsels"—

then, betimes, the ermined gown of the judge may bedeck your shoulders. But, above all, perhaps, the easiest and surest path at this moment to a corner in the peerage book is, for a man to destroy diligently and successfully, as a soldier, as many as possible of his fellow-men. These, and other such deeds, may gain for you in this world nobility and titles. Medicine, at all events, has no such bribes to offer you; and perhaps it is fortunate, after all, for the purity and character of medical science that it is so. Yet does it not seem strange in the abstract that such should be the settled practice of a community generally reckoned civilized such as ours! In these stirring times, for instance, when there are ringing ever and anon in our ears the sounds of distant battle, and when the minds of young and old are carried away by the

"Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war,"

look for one single moment at the respective claims upon the gratitude of human nature pertaining to the profession of arms and to the profession of physic. And let me cite their relative worth and work in the words of one who belonged to neither of these two professions:—

"How striking is the contrast," says Robert Hall, "betwixt the art of medicine and the art of war! The last of these, war, has for its object the destruction, the first the preservation, of the species. The mind of the warrior teems with the machinations of ruin, and anxiously revolves, amongst different schemes that present themselves, which of them shall scatter destruction to the widest extent, and with the surest aim; his progress is marked by devastation and blood, by depopulated fields and smoking villages, and the laurels that he wins are bedewed with the tears of widows and orphans. The acclamations which he wins from one portion of his species are answered by the curses and execrations of another; and the delusive splendour, the proud and imposing array, with which he continues to gild the horrors of his profession, are but the pomp and retinue of the king of terrors. The art of healing proceeds, with a silence and secrecy like the great processes of nature, to scatter blessings on all within its reach, and the couch of sickness, the silent retreat of sorrow and despair, are the scene of its triumphs." "The mind of a physician," Mr. Hall further observes, "is continually pregnant with expedients for the mitigation of pain, the extinction of disease, and the prolongation of life—a course of thinking which fails not to cultivate and mature the seeds of benevolence. His success is in exact proportion to the benefits he imparts, and his triumphs are signalized by the tears of gratitude, the gratulations of friendship, and the raptures of returning health."

To these eloquent remarks let me only add, that even in the

two relative competitions by the soldier and the physician—the one for the destruction, and the other for the preservation, of the lives of his fellow-men, the efforts of medicine have immensely outstripped the efforts of war.

During the last year there have died directly in battle, or from the effects of war, on the banks of the Alma, and within and around Sebastopol, perhaps some 80,000 or 100,000 men. But amongst the population of the four principal nations engaged in the present war, one single medical discovery—vaccination—saves from otherwise certain death, in every single year, more than double that number of human lives. Indeed, a single drop of contemned cow-pox matter, with its infinite power of multiplication, is far more potent to save human life than all the war-implements and inventions contained in all the arsenals and citadels in the world are potent to destroy it. For making a discovery by which the lives of tens and hundreds of thousands of his fellow-men have thus been, and continue to be, annually saved, the Parliament of Great Britain grudgingly rewarded Dr. Jenner first with ten, and then with twenty thousand pounds. But if, on the contrary, any soldier should at this moment discover a means, or so exercise the present powers of his art, as to destroy effectually, by one fell swoop in war, even fifty or a hundred thousand human lives, he would doubtless be in a very fair way to obtain the coronet and pension of a baron or an earl; and if the human slaughter which he committed were only doubled, or at all events trebled, probably a marquissate or a dukedom might be his reward. Yet how true and terse was the letter of the Syracusan physician, Menecrates, to King Philip of Macedon: "It is," boldly wrote that disciple of Esculapius to the royal warrior—"it is your work to kill men; it is mine to save them." And, begging the pardon of our military friends, I stand here and maintain, that the profession of Menecrates was, and is, a more glorious profession than that of Philip.

The great majority of the newly-made physicians, forming your ranks here to-day, are natives of Europe, and of the British islands. But amongst your numbers are also graduates collected from many other different parts of the world,—from America, from Asia, and from Africa. To this University, situated though it be almost on the uttermost verge of Europe, these gentlemen have come, in search of medical education and medical knowledge, like (if I may use the words of Milton)

"Embassies from regions far remote
In various habits;
Some from farthest south,
Syene, and where the shadow both way falls;
Meroe, Nilotic Isle; and more to East
From India and the Golden Chersonese."

To all of these strangers and natives of other lands, I am sure that you, Mr. Principal and Colleagues, will willingly join me, both in offering our best congratulations on the medical honours which they have this day won, and in wishing them a safe and happy return to those distant homes and hearths, where the warm welcome of many a dear relative and fond friend impatiently awaits them. But there are also, amongst these strangers and sojourners at our University this year, some young graduates who do not belong even to the same section of the great family of man as we ourselves do.

We have all of us, for example, rejoiced on this occasion to welcome here to the "*summi honores medicinae*" one who has come to study medicine from a distance of some 15,000 or 20,000 miles—from a kingdom the most marvellous in the world—a kingdom which, at this present hour, contains within its enchanted wall one whole third of the living human race;—from a community that has remained in nearly the same state of strange stereotyped civilization for the last twenty or thirty centuries, and that knew of the mariners' compass and small-pox inoculation long, long before these great truths were dreamed of by the learned in Europe;—from an empire that was comparatively advanced in various useful arts and sciences, and in medicine amongst the others, in those far distant times when Julius Cæsar first invaded Britain, and when our rude and savage ancestors in these islands were still tattooing their skins with woad, and offering up human sacrifices at the stones of the Druids.

The high station which Dr. Wong Fun has won for himself amongst you, as a most meritorious and modest student, and the high prizes and honours which he has carried off, when he descended with you into the arena of competition in the classroom, afford us every hope, that he, the first Chinese, I believe, who has ever graduated at a European University, will form, amongst his countrymen, a most able representative of the medical arts and sciences of the Western World. I am sure that all of us—professors and graduates—do feel an additional interest in his future career and welfare, seeing that he returns

to his own distant home, not as a physician merely, but also, I believe, as a Christian Medical Missionary; seeing that he carries back with him, not merely a full knowledge of modern European medical science, but carries back with him also—like other messengers of yore, out of the East—"glad tidings of great joy," to scatter amongst his three hundred million of countrymen. And may God, in his Providence, protect and prosper him in his mighty and magnificent mission.

There are further, amongst your ranks to-day, several natives of a kingdom which claims an antiquity higher even than that of China. And amidst the numberless other marvels and glories for which Egypt was formerly famed amongst the ancient nations of the earth, not the least of its many claims for distinction was the great number, as well as the high character, of her physicians. Several of the oldest Greek and Roman poets and writers, from Homer and Herodotus, down to Pliny and Diogenes Laertius, allude, in marked terms, to the highly advanced state of the healing art on the banks of the Nile. In the *Odyssey*, Egypt is described as a country where every physician possessed knowledge above all other men, for

" . . . their patron god imparts
To all the Pharian race his healing arts."

"All places in Egypt," says the father of history, "abound in physicians;" and Plato, when sick and invalided during his travels in that country, is averred to have found almost every Egyptian skilled in the healing art.

But in this, as in other respects, a spirit of change and of desolation has for ages smitten that devoted land. And, in accordance with its predicted doom, its twenty thousand cities have fallen, and the land has been made "destitute of that whereof it was full." When your co-graduates, Dr. Badre, (who, my colleague Dr. Traill informs me, very nearly carried off, a few days ago, his highest class prize,) Dr. Katib, Dr. Mustapha, and Dr. Sovbki, return, as they shortly will do, to their native land, we trust that their remembrance of the ancient glory of Egyptian physic will prove one incentive to them, amongst others, for labouring assiduously and earnestly to diffuse a knowledge of modern medical science amongst their countrymen. And let us fondly hope, that under their patriotic exertions, and under those of their future successors, happily fostered by the patronage of the Egyptian government, the state of medical science and medical art in the ancient kingdom of the Pharaohs and Ptolemies, will become gradually renovated and restored, so that betimes Egyptian physic may, after a long sleep of centuries, rise again, like the fabled Egyptian Phoenix, from its ashes, and become reanimated with new life and vigour.

But I have detained you too long. The moment of our final separation as teachers and students is more than come. I dare not detain you longer from the work that awaits you in the world without. In pursuing and in searching out that work, those assembled here now will speedily be scattered to their relative fields of labour, over many and distant regions of the world. For wherever man dwells, in the city or in the field, Azrael and his pitiless ministers of destruction and disease have taken up their dwelling with him. Wherever man flies—to whatever quarter of this wide earth he tries to escape, bodily sorrow and sickness still unrelentingly follow him. To you he earnestly appeals for help and succour against these enemies of his life and happiness. And we now send you forth from these Halls, authorized by the diplomas which you hold in your hands, to administer to him, under his afflictions and agonies, all the relief which the most advanced resources of medical science are able to impart. We despatch you as Argonauts across the rough sea of life,—not in search of a shadowy golden fleece, but with a far higher and holier commission—viz., to carry hence the rich and blessed gifts of medicine to all ends of the habitable globe; to give, as humble agents under a Higher Power, ease to the suffering, strength to the weak, health to the sick, and sometimes life to the dying; to distribute everywhere freely a knowledge of those means that are best fitted to defend our fellow-man against the assaults of disease, and to quench within him the consuming fire of sickness; to close his wounds, and still his cries of pain and anguish; often to upraise his hopes when his heart is drooping and downcast, and sometimes to elevate him again to the dignity of humanity, when humiliated by the bereavement of reason; to assuage, at least, and alleviate his maladies and miseries when you cannot arrest them; ever to soothe even when you cannot save; always to be guardians of his health, and often arbiters of his fate. And take with you the fervent hopes and prayers of my colleagues and myself, that every success and every happiness may attend upon you in the discharge of these, the sacred and solemn duties of your future lives.