Da Costa (J. M.)
The higher professional life

(8.)

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS,

DELIVERED APRIL 2, 1883,

By J. M. DA COSTA, M.D.

THE

HIGHER PROFESSIONAL LIFE:

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

TO THE

GRADUATING CLASS OF JEFFERSON MEDICAL COLLEGE,

PHILADELPHIA,

DELIVERED APRIL 2, 1883,

BY J. M. DA COSTA, M.D.,

PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

PHILADELPHIA:
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.
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THE HIGHER PROFESSIONAL LIFE.

PLEASANT faces, warm wishes, greet you on every side. Every one in this brilliant assembly is overflowing with kindly feelings. Mothers, sisters, brothers, friends, are joyously vying with one another to make the day one of gratification to you. As the representative of the Faculty for this hour, can I do otherwise than catch the tone of prevailing sentiment? May not one of us, after months of labor in common, assure you, truthfully for all, gladly for himself, that we congratulate you with all our hearts, and that we share with those nearest to you the pleasure that the honors you coveted have been won?

On an occasion like the present it is regarded as obligatory to say something as a parting word in the way of counsel and general advice. Instead of adhering to this custom, I shall offer you a few remarks on the kind of life you have chosen, and on the higher life which full success demands of you. The diploma just placed in your hands has made each of you a Doctor of Medicine, *singula jura, honores, et privilegia.* What these rights and privileges are you are soon to realize, and, unless I am much mistaken, you are all quite willing to realize them with the least possible delay. But I am not going to speak to you of rights and privileges, or of the popular notions of a physician's vocation, but of what it really is, as known to those who lead it. Certainly it is not

an easy pursuit. It is a life of constant hard work, of many anxieties. To those who patiently wait for their chance in large cities, and to whom gradually success comes, there comes also with that success an amount of labor which makes them strangers to their own firesides and their own children. We all have our trials, no matter how placed. Interference, silly suggestion, blame, calumny, preference given to the shallow pretender, are the least of these, and the most easily borne. But who credits us with the awful responsibilities? Who takes into account the struggle of our failures? Who thinks of the wear on our sympathies? Who knows the humble toil, the physical labor, the mental strain, of him whose name may be in every mouth in a metropolis?

And the life of that most deserving and most hardly worked of any of us, the country practitioner, what is it but toil, toil, especially if his field of work be some sparsely-settled portion of the country? In "The Surgeon's Daughter," Sir Walter Scott tells us that he heard the celebrated traveller Mungo Park, who had been a country medical practitioner, give the preference to travelling as a discoverer in Africa to wandering in his former capacity by day and by night in the wilds of his native land. He mentioned having ridden forty miles, sat up all night, and successfully assisted a woman under the influence of the primitive curse, for which his sole remuneration was a draught of buttermilk and a roasted potato. There are many parts of our country where similar things are daily happening. The enormous distances, the terrible roads, the lonely rides, the exposure in all weathers, the going back at any hour, at the call of every one, over long paths just traversed,—these make up much of the life of many a country practitioner. I declare I hold them to be true heroes, when

I regard their hard existence, their pure pathetic lives; when I recall their cheerfulness and manliness; when I see them, generously forgetful of self, answering every call with alacrity; when I think of the warm heart that beats so steadfastly under the fuzzy damp coat; when I know that the lantern that guides them in a dark night to the house of distress is but like their own calm purpose and resolve shining forth to guide and comfort others.

But this is the hard side of the life you have chosen. The bright side is very bright. To be the welcome visitor; the one to whom all turn in trouble, and to whom family secrets are confided with the freest faith that they will be sacredly guarded; to be eagerly sought in hours of danger and of anguish and feel that you have the power of relieving; to be the hope of many, the friend of all,—this surely makes a splendid calling. And to be benevolent and charitable beyond those of most other vocations; to become imbued with the feeling that to refuse to relieve suffering is a disgrace; to be taught by the very exercise of daily pursuits the virtues which make men great and good,—these certainly are benefits for which you must thank Providence, that has led you into so useful and worthy a life.

One decided compensation for much discomfort is speedily ours: knowledge of the world comes to us quickly. We soon become philosophers. Shams have fewer attractions for us: we are too much behind the scenes to be much impressed with the pageantry of life. We learn to see men and women as they are; and we appreciate how much more evenly the gifts of Heaven are distributed than the superficial observer thinks. Nature is just, not generous. My lady who rolls past in her carriage with her little blanketed pet dog on the cushion alongside, making indo-

lence the occupation of her life, grows fat and puffy, is a prey to nervousness, and passes restless nights. The washerwoman, who works hard, sleeps well. The head of a great banking-house, his shoulders bowed with the weight of millions, anxiously leads his sedentary life, is apt to eat largely of food which his weakened nervous energies will not let him digest, and learns to envy the hardy son of toil, who gets up with the birds, labors in the open air all day, and has the digestive powers of an ostrich. No! Fortune is not the partial jade she is represented to be. How often do we see that

> "She either gives a stomach, and no food,—
> Such are the poor, in health; or else a feast,
> And takes away the stomach,—such are the rich,
> That have abundance, and enjoy it not!"—2 *Henry IV.*, iv. 4.

But it is not my intention to speak to you solely of what the physician's life brings with it in its cares, its sorrows, its pleasures, its compensations. I know that you will experience them all. I take it for granted that you will reach the success which industry and perseverance are sure to attain; that you will become devoutly thankful for a life which keeps you away from many temptations, and affords the freest scope to your highest moral qualities; that, in short, every one before me will become the busy, the popular, the good, the beloved doctor in his community. But, this accomplished, is it to be all? Is it to be the summit of all endeavor? No; the time will come when, should you aim at nothing more, the intellectual side of your nature will starve. There must be something beyond; there must be other attempts, if you are to feel that as a man you have taken a man's part in life. The secret of happy life lies in belief. The secret of all great success in life lies in aspiration. All higher

life is constant aspiration: in morals, for the true and good; in literature, for the elevating and instructive; in art, for the beautiful; in science, for the unknown. The thing to be dreaded in professional life is that we gradually become more and more incrusted with commonplace. There is but one way of avoiding this, and the mental wasting that follows it,—to have aspiration beyond our immediate pursuits. This may be of more than one kind, according to tastes, opportunities, natural gifts.

To most of us, perhaps, the easiest and most congenial way of interesting ourselves in problems which are comparatively unsolved, and which we approach with the desire of adding something to existing knowledge, lies in the close study of what we come across in our daily employment, in grouping the results, in analyzing them, in endeavoring to discover the general law which binds isolated facts together. To those attached to public institutions it is comparatively easy to engage in this kind of study, as well as a duty, for large opportunities constitute an obligation and a trust. But even for those who are merely concerned with the every-day occupations of professional life there are ample chances. Is there not, for instance, still a great deal to be learned of the first beginnings of disease, of the very points, therefore, which the family physician has the best means of studying? The way in which hereditary affections are modified through the agencies acting in our multiple and changing society is another fruitful subject of inquiry. Still another is the development of new diseases, or of new types of diseases, by different states of civilization, and by new industries springing up, and the manner in which special climates on this great continent influence constitutional taints as well as the ordinary chronic maladies. Here are problems which any thinker with the opportunities, and they

are constantly presenting themselves to all, can aid in elucidating.

There are other fields of science in which original inquiry gives great results, and to which those specially gifted with abilities for experiment may turn. Not to speak simply of the solution of physiological questions; or of observations in the sciences linked to medicine, as botany or comparative anatomy; or of the valuable researches which are adding year by year to our knowledge of remedies, there are those splendid provinces of thought and experiment which have made the names of Darwin and Pasteur immortal. Take Darwin, absorbed in but one idea, by combined hypothesis and experiment to make Nature reveal the laws of her secret working; now spending years in watching the minutest processes of animal life, now devising the most ingenious experiments, now launching forth broad generalizations, which, whether we agree with them or not, have started fresh thoughts in the minds of all thinkers. Look at the wonderful labors of Pasteur. See France, in alarm at the threatened extinction of her silk-culture, turning to her son of genius, and witness the wonderful sagacity with which he detected the cause in organisms coming from without the silk-worm; found, by experiment, how to render them innocuous; and in so doing not only revived the languishing industry of his country and saved her untold millions, but also laid the foundation of a system of research into the causes of disease in man and in the higher animals, which has already resulted in many a glorious triumph as regards prevention, which has led in his hands to rendering the fatal splenic fever of sheep and cattle almost innocuous and to putting a stop to the cholera of fowls, and which promises to give us the long-sought-for antidote for hydrophobia. Think of the wide

applicability these researches and the "culture experiments" may be found to have in ascertaining the true cause and means of prevention of scarlet fever and of other acute specific diseases. Take the last great discovery in this line, that of Koch, of the minute germs found in consumption. Look at all these great results, —and they are but the forerunners of others as great, —and you see some of the benefits of experimental inquiry; and perhaps an idea may also be formed of the keen delight it must have been to work out these conclusions. It is true that favoring fortune in the one case, and the enlightened liberality of government in the others, supplied the means for that leisure which is necessary to sustained and productive research. It is true also that few of us are Darwins, Pasteurs, or Kochs. But we can all humbly imitate them in smaller ways, and share with them some of the pleasure which such investigations give. It may be helpful, it is not essential, to dwell in great centres to take part in this kind of work. It is not necessary for the highest success in anything to be surrounded by multitudes. The London of Queen Elizabeth numbered only one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants, but it produced Bacon and Shakespeare. Jenner was a country practitioner, full of the spirit of investigation, and it is to his love of it that you and I are perhaps indebted for our lives; and in consequence of his great discovery, that I can look around on hundreds of charming faces unseamed by the scars of smallpox.

Yes, Science will make her home wherever she is welcome. She will gladly come to your hearth if you cherish her. And I behold her among you the source of much happiness. I picture to myself the home of some of you where she has made a settlement; and I see a modest country-house becoming famous as another garden-spot in

the world of ideas. There is certainly much happiness in scientific aims, though they can be carried out only during leisure hours. There is an absence of the bitter struggles of those who live only for greed. And then there is the beauty of an ever-widening horizon. It is in science as in nature. As the wanderer leaves the level ground, new ranges of hills, new streams, new forests, are seen. The ascent continues; the crags are loftier, the golden lights more golden, the shadows deeper. Still higher, a gorgeous panorama is before him; at his feet lie grassy fields, pathless woods, and outstretched lakes, around him are splendid mountain-tops, gilded by the sun. As he looks keenly, more and more come into view. Everywhere

"Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise."

Nor is the mental vision of the trained investigator limited to the obvious facts the eye and ear discern. His mind goes beyond them, and has noble conceptions of great truths. His eye gazes into the unseen with a singular clearness of sight; echoes from the world of knowledge beyond reach his ear; he catches the sound of the waves as they break on the shores of the distant, undiscernible sea.

In our profession it is most likely that the scientific investigation of nature will, in one form or other, be the predominant pursuit to which men aiming at higher studies will turn. But even among us there are those for whom literature has greater attractions than science, and who will devote themselves to it in all their leisure hours. I am not speaking of purely professional literature; for to keep ourselves acquainted with the additions to existing knowledge is, I hold, part of our sacred duty to our patients. I mean general literature. It is fascinating, but in our profession it is unfortunate if its

pursuit stifle the love and pursuit of science. Yet I am far from thinking that general literature should be neglected. Nay, I maintain that attention to it has a much higher value than to make merely men of charm and of general knowledge. I think that the cultivation of the humane letters has the most distinct bearing on the cultivation and appreciation of science. Science is nothing without imagination; and imagination is most readily kept fresh by literature. What little good is there in a mere descriptive person, and in the small facts which with painful toil he accumulates. But let these facts be welded together by thought, their bearing traced by imagination, experiments devised by the mind projecting itself in advance of them, and the plodder is likely to become the great discoverer. True, the solution of the problem may be different from what was first imagined; yet it is on one of the paths traced by imagination that the hidden evidence will be found. And to him who has kept his imagination alive, and in whom constant exercise strengthens the powers of observation, the recognition of the truth comes more and more speedily,—it becomes almost an instinct.

But there are other uses of the cultivation of literature to the man of science. He can become the disseminator of truths in a manner which is otherwise denied him. He can make himself understood, and the influence of what he has to say felt, as none but a man of culture can. The world will not stop to fathom obscure meanings, but it likes to be instructed, if the instruction come in plain language and with some grace of expression. It is not moved to take an interest through colorless thoughts, or, to use Cicero's telling words, *tenui quodam exsanguine sermone*, in topics discussed in tame and bloodless phraseology. Above all, it will not be a patient listener if all

you know, however valuable, is flung at it at once. It resents the intrusion and flings it back. Let us always be mindful of Bacon's wise saying, "If you have a handful of truths, open but one finger at a time."

There are many other sides to the advantage of literary culture to the professional man which might be dwelt upon. But to consider them would lead me too far away. Only one more will be mentioned,—the pleasure, the rest it is. What change of thought, what repose, the love of literature brings! What delight in forming lasting, loving associations with the best minds! what satisfaction in keeping company with pleasing, with great ideas! No wonder reading may become absorbing. It may become a passion, as it was with Cervantes, who tells us himself that it led him to reading even the torn bits of printed paper in the streets.

But there are other sources of exertion for those aiming at a higher professional life than the cultivation of science or of literature. There is the chance, which to some will prove the most attractive, and the most to their taste, of mixing in the great movements which are to benefit mankind, and of making their influence felt in them. Can there be, to him who likes to work on men, a finer pursuit than to interest himself in promoting temperance? Who knows better than a physician what miseries intemperance entails? Who oftener sees the wrecked households, the broken lives, the physical evils, caused by it? I take up a recent English journal, and find that a most efficient committee, appointed to inquire into the mortality referable to alcohol, reports a long list of its ravages, among them a fourfold increase in the deaths from diseases of the liver and chylopoetic viscera, a twofold increase from disease of the kidney. I look at the last report of the Pennsylvania Hospital, and see that in its Insane Depart-

ment, out of eight thousand six hundred and seventy-three cases, eight hundred and sixty-three were due to this curse, only one cause on the list, "ill health of various kinds," exceeding it. What a field, then, for philanthropic exertion, and what a field also for personal influence!

Then there is that highest expression of the development of modern medical science, sanitation and preventive medicine. What greater work for any one than to busy himself in this? What interest in a community higher than to avert disease and death?

The profession of medicine, with the manifold opportunities it has of observing mankind, on a small scale and a large scale, in all its moods and needs, and with the laws of nature it sees at work, ought to be far more than it is the profession of great movements. Here is one in which it can take the most vivid interest and exert the greatest power. Let me not be misunderstood. I know it is impossible for the individual doctor immersed in his daily work to become an active sanitarian in particular directions. For this there must be special officers, whom the community should liberally remunerate and encourage. But any one can identify himself with this movement of preserving health and life; we can all help it along and give direction to it by guiding popular thought. We can all aid in bringing nearer the great future to which preventive medicine must lead.

Of course people must be first made to see sanitation in its importance. Nothing is ever accomplished without something of the spirit of the fanatic; and it is needed here. It is difficult to arouse full concern in this matter; it is difficult to contend with the surging forces of special interests; it is difficult to penetrate the deep ignorance which attends the subject. One of the greatest obstacles

is to make every one understand that pure water, pure air, general cleanliness, the prevention of decomposition, the stamping out of the germs of disease, affect him and his individually. Neglect to attend to all this is always thought of as acting only upon our neighbors, and as proving disastrous to them, not to us. La Rochefoucauld's well-known maxim, that we all have strength enough to bear the misfortunes of others, receives nowhere a better illustration than here. Appeals to mere self-interest may have weight with those in whom the spirit of the shopkeeper is stronger than that of good citizenship. Tell them some of the facts you know. Point out to them that it has been calculated by the English Board of Health that the failure to prevent the deaths and serious illness due to preventable diseases entails on England annually a direct loss of ninety-six millions of dollars,—more than the interest on her public debt. Show them that the Commission appointed at the instance of Congress to investigate the epidemic of yellow fever in New Orleans reckons the losses to the city for one year at upwards of fifteen millions; and that a competent authority, in a paper in the Reports of the American Public Health Association for 1880, from which I have quoted some of these facts, estimates that this same epidemic resulted in a loss to the part of the country it attacked of fully two hundred millions, a sum nearly equal to one-third of our annual exports; point also to the blight that has befallen Memphis; to the manner in which the springs of industry are dried up when smallpox prevails in our large cities, and how business shuns them, and self-interest alone is likely to make zealous sanitarians.

Then in sanitation, as in every other great movement, we encounter those who can see no use for change in anything. Did not their ancestors live and flourish in full ignorance of sanitary precautions? why should not they?

There they are, ready to defend everything that has always existed; to assert that to attack any evil is to trifle with the groundwork of society.

But ignorance is still the greatest drawback to the spread of sanitation and preventive medicine. Even among the educated a kind of good-natured indifference is found in place of desire for knowledge. It is, perhaps, the ignorance and general indifference which are responsible for the obtuse state of mind and the lack of appreciation of their work, which are not rarely found among those whose duty it is to enforce the law. That such, unfortunately, exist cannot be denied. Thus, I read the other day that not long ago in a neighboring city, before a legislative committee, a health inspector—who had been, however, a keeper of a grog-shop—was asked, "What will best prevent smallpox?" and answered, "Coffee; burnt in the room." And a colleague of his, when questioned as to what the branch which he was supposed specially to understand, hygiene, is, replied, "A mist arising from low grounds." You smile. But there are persons of all kinds, in official life as well as out of it. There is greatness in everything. There are fools so great that, like the great folks Thackeray speaks of, one has a mild shock of awe and tremor whenever one looks at them.

But neither the ignorance nor the indifference will last. The great body of the people in all civilized lands is being touched with friendly interest. It is beginning to seek information, and to look to us for it. Our duty is to have the knowledge and to give it. It is a remark of Matthew Arnold's, that on mankind in the mass a movement, once started, is apt to impose itself by routine. The movement has begun, routine will continue it. And you must be in the van, enlightening, pleading. There are diseases of which the cause is unknown. Providence has

not yet allowed us to fathom it. They cannot be prevented by anything; they must still remain. But there are numbers of which the cause has been ascertained, and which could be wholly done away with or be reduced to narrow limits. Who, then, is responsible for their existence? A narrow public sentiment which begrudges the cost of their extermination, which will furnish nothing for the most useful investigations; the supine authorities who make no adequate exertion, and who turn a deaf ear to the voice of science and of humanity. There is in this matter a terrible responsibility somewhere. To allow a single life to be sacrificed that would have been saved by more thoughtful arrangements and by making use of what the science of the day has clearly established, is cruel and criminal. It is not carelessness, but murder. Plead, then, in season and out of season. You are not urging the solution of a problem, but care for human lives. Plead for the helpless infant whose blood is being tainted by the pollutions decomposing in a July sun. Plead for the struggling worker on whom a subtle influence has fastened, weakening his energies, and making the support of those dear to him a harder and harder, an almost impossible task. Plead for the woman whose children one by one have suffocated before her eyes from the terrible poison of diphtheria. Plead for the father who sees the pride of his household, the darling of his old age, die a miserable death from typhoid fever. Plead, and you will have at your back the haggard mother with her childless, outstretched arms grasping now wildly nothing but the air; the strong man bowed with grief whose heart is dead. Plead with all your might. Plead, plead! your voice is but the echo of the voice of sorrow; you are only asking in sorrow's name for justice.

There are thus many ways in which the aspirations of

a higher professional life may be realized in useful or in great work. Some of these can be followed actively only when success has brought comparative leisure; but all can be kept in mind; one or all can be aimed at throughout our careers and according to our individual strength. In so doing we shall live a life full of interest, a life of noble pursuits.

> "We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not breaths;
> In feelings, not in figures on a dial.
> We should count time by heart-throbs. He most lives
> Who thinks most—feels the noblest—acts the best."

But, friends, the hour has come at which we must part. The past, with its quiet traditions, is to give way to the future, with its stirring action. The hands are moving on the dial towards the completed hour, marking for the last time the minutes for us in common; and these few moments are all that separate our joint narrow endeavors from the larger life which is to be all your own. Let it be your own in the same spirit in which in long bygone years, at the end also of their period of probation, the aspiring youth received with the solemn investure the tokens of knighthood. The golden spurs and the sword were simply the outer signs of their dignity. The manly sentiments, the sense of honor, the courtesy, the desire for heroic enterprises, the valor, the loyalty, were the real qualifications to be jealously guarded through life. There are no Lancelots, no Rolands, no Sidneys, no Bayards, now. But the sense of chivalry is the same; only in our times its spirit is even higher. In place of wild adventure it seeks that which is most generally helpful to mankind. *Soyèz preux, hardi et loyal* was the exhortation with which knighthood was conferred. Also, "Be a good knight in the name of God." So may it be to each of you! Be

brave in the unfaltering discharge of duty and in constancy to the right; be bold in search of truth and in its enunciation; be loyal to your profession, your comrades, and your College. Sound, trumpets, sound! "Be brave, bold, and loyal!" "Be a good knight in the name of God!"