

Brownson (W. G.)

THE COUNTRY DOCTOR:
THE ANNUAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE

The Connecticut Medical Society,

AT HARTFORD,

MAY 24, 1883.

✓ BY

W. G. BROWNSON, A. M., M. D.,

OF

NEW CANAAN, CONN.



Reprint from the New England Medical Monthly.

GOULD & STILES, PRINTERS,
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FELLOWS and Brethren of our Commonwealth,

The trusted guardians of the lives and health

Of half a million of our noble race,
Accept the cordial greeting which the place

And the occasion bid us here extend,
Where noble aims and nobler spirits blend.

How fitting to our chosen mission, here
To meet for counsel each recurring year ;
To garner up for use the ripened fruit
Of past experience ; to wisely suit
The rich and varied lessons of the past
To modern methods, multiform and vast.
How suited to the needs of men of care
To slip the burdens which they daily bear ;
To deftly smooth a furrow from the brow ;
Refresh each heart, renew each sacred vow ;
To stay the whitening of a single hair
On heads too early silvered o'er by care ;

To mirror back the smile we here extend,
 And cross the palm with many a trusted
 friend.

By virtue of the office which I bear,
 In the behalf of those whose trusts I share,
 A hearty welcome let me here extend
 To every Fellow, Delegate and Friend.

And now what shall I say,—what can I say
 Suited to the occasion and the day?

Among my auditors are hoary men
 Already past their three score years and
 ten,

Who long have honored their respective
 spheres;

Riper in wisdom than in gathered years.
 College professors grace our festal board,
 Whose brains and libraries are amply
 stored;

The learned critics who unravel threads
 That sorely puzzle many anxious heads,—
 Our happy specialists with scarce a flaw,
 Experts in counsel and in courts of law;
 All these, whose rare attainments justly
 claim

Our grateful recognition of their fame,
 Need not our praise; their names and
 deeds command

Profound respect throughout our native
 land.

Another class I see, but few are here,
 Though adding to our numbers year by
 year,

Attentive listeners while others teach,
 Whose mission is to practice not to preach,
 The privates in our noble army band,—
 The country doctors scattered through the
 land,

Who bear the knapsack, catch the fiercest
 fire ;

For them I speak,—the rest need not re-
 tire.

Fresh from the college halls our hero
 comes

To enter on his work in rural homes.

His recent past seems like a fitful dream ;

The weeks of rigid application teem

With memories no future can efface,

No words express, no pencil fitly trace.

The chambers of his mem'ry have been
 pressed

For lodgement of the knowledge he pos-
 sessed ;

Knowledge of varied kind, diffuse, ab-
 stract,

From fine spun theory to settled fact,

Chemical formulas, hygienic laws,

The limits of disease, its hidden cause,

Medical jurisprudence, stale and dry

As skeletons of bare anatomy,
 The college quiz and lectures by the score
 Embodied in a dozen books or more,—
 All these, by specious cramming, he must
 gain

And reproduce, his parchment to obtain.
 The ordeal of examination past,
 "Accepted" greets his weary eyes at last;
 Little he cares that purse is empty now,
 A glow of perfect joy rests on his brow.

Rejoice with him who finds a blissful day
 To ease the burden of life's devious way;
 A ray of light and hope to gild the road
 And pierce the veil that shrouds the last
 abode.

Our young M. D. decides to settle down
 For a few years in a small country town,
 Hoping, by patient toil, ere long to gain
 The richer field to which his hopes attain.

You who have walked the road he enters
 here

With careful tread, alternate hope and
 fear,

Each step observed by many eager eyes
 That note too soon his frequent fallacies,
 You who have known in other days with
 me

How blessed was the word of sympathy,

Have known and felt when weary and
distressed

The need of hope, encouragement and
rest,—

Need but the mirror,—not the photograph,
To catch at once the outline of the path.

The months pass on and gather into years ;
With each new day some new demand ap-
pears ;

Demands for knowledge he has not been
taught,

Nor read in books, nor gleaned from mod-
ern thought.

As in the countless millions of the earth,
From present time back to creation's birth,
No two are found alike in every part,
In form and feature, gifts of mind and
heart,

So in our ills, the skillful watcher finds
As wide divergence as in forms or minds ;
In chronic ones he seeks to know the
cause,

And finds it hidden deep in nature's laws ;
Each chapter of life's history must be
Consulted ere he finds the remedy,
Mixed and administered with studied pains,
As brilliant Opie mixed his paints—with
brains.

When we consider all the slender strings
 From which the melody or discord springs,
 When life's frail harp is touched by un-
 seen hands,—

How shall we wisely answer the demands ;
 Touch the right chord, proffer the needed
 boon,

And all the harmonies of life attune ?

The chains of circumstance, with fetters
 bind

Too oft the best endeavors of the mind.

We seek a remedy for human ill,
 Where neither pharmacist's nor doctor's
 skill

Finds the elixir that can stay the drain
 Of wasted energy of nerve and brain.
 Unfortunate surroundings it may be,
 Or some harsh discord in the family,
 Diseased inheritance that poisons life
 And fills its days with bitterness and
 strife,—

Or, worse than all, what hundreds of us see
 In many homes—a grinding poverty ;
 Mothers of babes anæmic, underfed
 And over-worked to gain their scanty
 bread ;—

What wonder if we often fail to please
 Ourselves, or bring to others strength and
 ease ;

What wonder if we envy our compeers,
Whose city practice through a score of
years

Leaves them the care of but the favored
few,

With ample means, and readiness to do
The will of the attendant when expressed,
Either for needed change or needed rest.
Some healing waters flow in distant
lands,—

To test their sovereign virtues, he demands
An extra nurse, a trip across the sea,
A well filled purse, congenial company,
A cottage by the sea, or mountain air,
Release from labor and relief from care.
How wide the contrasts in our earthly
lot,—

How brief the pilgrimage, how soon forgot.

The lessons of experience, as taught
In country practice, oft are dearly bought.
The modest worker in a sterile field,
Needing the scanty harvest it may yield,
Sometimes from doubt, sometimes from
anxious fear,

Wishes an able counsellor were near.
An only child, within whose tender life
Center the fondest hopes of husband, wife
And many friends, seems on the verge of
death ;—

Convulsed with pain; with fitful, rapid
breath,

Clenched hands, eyes sunken, nostrils
stretching wide,—

He scarce can count the pulse's hasty
stride,—

He looks at his thermometer amazed,
Its column to a frightful figure raised;—
Ah, you and I have felt his anxious fear,
And wished some able counsellor were
near

To aid in such extremity, or bear
Of such responsibility a share.

No time to lose, he summons to his aid
His nearest rival; time is quickly made,
And, Jehu like, with foaming steed he
drives,

And at the moment specified arrives.

In manner brusk, pompous in air and
style,

He greets his brother with the blandest
smile,

With new found friends shakes hands with
relish keen,

Happy to see them, happier to be seen.

His conversation he directs to these,
With studied effort to attract and please;
Tells of an anxious case he had last night,
Which by his skill is coming out all right;

Details his treatment in a learned way,
Bold and heroic as we sometimes say ;
Consults his watch, and softly names the
time

When he must see a case with Doctor
Prime ;

A city lady, wealthy and refined,
Attractive both in person and in mind.
His fine impressions made, he condescends
To interview the doctor and the friends ;
And, ere he sees the case, states his belief
That he can soon suggest a prompt relief.
He quickly scans the case, and feigns to
see

At once the lesion and the remedy ;
Tells of a dozen cases he has had
Within a year with symptoms quite as
bad.

And thus this farce of consultation ends ;
What further he discloses to the friends
We ne'er shall know ; but somehow it
transpires,
He gets the case,—his brother soon re-
tires.

The quiet meditations of our friend
Upon this strange proceeding and its end,
Are like the winds across the dreary plain ;
Now harsh and chill, now soft and mild
again.

He feels that rank injustice has been done;
 He asked for bread, he has received a
 stone ;

He fain would hurl it back, and promptly
 say

If called to counsel at some future day,
 This wily brother he would sooner see
 In everlasting infelicity.

His purse and reputation feel the strain,
 His honest heart and character remain.

With firm resolve to do as best he may
 The arduous duties of each coming day,
 He learns to wait ; assured that in the end
 He is not poor whose conscience is his
 friend.

Turn, now, and for a moment, let us trace
 In happier mood a second anxious case.
 Our modest friend, who does not know it
 all,

Again needs counsel ; and within his call,
 Retiring for a time for calm repose,
 Is one of whose exalted rank he knows.

He thinks an operation must be done ;—
 He calls upon his friend,—the kindly tone
 Of cordial welcome which the good man
 gives,

In part his keen solicitude relieves.

Together to the bedside they repair ;

Together scan the case with patient care ;

Together then for conference they retire
 As friend with friend, one aim and one
 desire.

To save the case from an untimely end
 The surgeon's knife its services must lend,
 And, all arranged, our veteran takes his
 place

Simply as an assistant in the case.

To wield the knife he modestly declines ;
 To aid his younger brother he designs ;—
 His very presence nerves the timorous
 hand

To steady work and ready self command.
 With warm congratulations he proceeds ;
 A hint and a suggestion as he needs
 In undertone, so guide, he scarcely knows
 That to his blade the riper judgment goes.
 Relief obtained, success assured, they
 share

The honored garlands which the victors
 wear ;

Rejoicing friends their gratitude express
 In other ways than simple thankfulness ;
 Softly aside our learned counsel pays
 His younger friend the tribute of his
 praise,—

Asks him to call and question if need be,
 And slips into his hand his handsome fee.

If there be happiness for mortals here,

A sweet symposium where care and fear
 May not intrude, our brother now can feel
 A heaven,—where thieves do not break
 through nor steal.

And thus alternate light and shadow fall
 Across the checkered pathway of us all.
 Our lives are like the volumes on our
 shelves;
 Their style and binding show our outer
 selves;
 The gilt or plainer dress our rank or birth;
 Still but the printed page can give them
 worth.

How may we see ourselves, who back-
 ward turn
 The pages of our life-book, and discern
 The country doctor of our boyhood days,—
 With foes and friends to censure or to
 praise.

In saddle or in sulky brown and grim,
 The storm and darkness were alike to
 him,—
 Through weary miles his keen anxiety
 And faithful horse, his only company;
 His saddle-bags and dusty garb might tell
 Each aged sire and school-boy knew him
 well,
 As through the window or the open door

They watched his coming at the appointed
hour.

When coveted success had eased his brain,
He oft could feel the force of the refrain,
"Three faces wears the doctor; when first
sought

An angel's; and a God's, the cure half
wrought,

But when, the cure complete, he seeks his
fee,

The devil is less terrible than he."

'Twas his to know betimes when he had
done

Most faithful service, he had scarce begun
Rejoicing, ere the shafts of malice dread,
Like hailstones fell on his defenceless
head.

Each day he passed some who from jeal-
ousy,

Malice or spite would do him injury :

Each day he stood beside some prostrate
form,

Whose outstretched hand and trusting look
gave warm

And kindly welcome, while he sought to
show

The brighter side and hide the threatened
woe.

'Twas his to know the rapture of success ;

'Twas his to feel the pangs of bitterness,
 When, baffled, he must stand with bated
 breath,
 Dumb and confounded, face to face with
 death.

We take their places ; and survey with
 pride
 The well earned laurels they have laid
 aside.

If their facilities were less than ours,
 We gain advantage, not by added powers
 For better service, but by nobler deeds,—
 More self devotion to our fellows' needs.
 Who does his best within his humble field
 Has gathered honors, which he need not
 yield

To man or angel ; faithful in few things,
 He wears the crown which faithful service
 brings.

None wears another's armor, each his
 own ;

Ours will be measured when our work is
 done.

The prince of Epics from his classic vale
 Beguiles the student with a pleasing tale.
 With festive games the populace to please,
 In memory of his father Anchises,
 Æneas raises with his mighty hand
 A lofty mast, round which the people stand ;

And on its top, held by a slender string.
There sits a timorous dove with folded
wing.

He now invites the archers standing by
To open contest for the mastery :
Four heed the invitation, and prepare
The plaudits and the offered gifts to share.
Then from the well drawn bow an arrow
flies

As lightning cleaves its pathway through
the skies ;

The quivering mast and flapping wings
proclaim

The skilled precision of the archer's aim ;
Beneath the captive's feet, still pinioned
fast,

The arrowhead lies buried in the mast.

Then ardent Mnestheus next, aiming on
high,

Directs alike, his arrow and his eye ;
His arrow cuts the cord,—the captive flees
Toward the dark clouds, high on the
southern breeze.

Quickly Eurytion holds his ready bow,
Calls his lost brother to attest his vow,
Now spied the dove, joyful in azure vault,
His whizzing arrow makes the last assault ;
Transfixed, she leaves her life within the
sky,

Descending 'mid the shouts of victory,
Down, down to earth, now pinioned fast
and warm

The fatal arrow and the lifeless form.

But one remains,—the aged archer stands
Viewing the prizes earned by other hands.
All seems accomplished; yet Acestes next
His arrow toward the heavens straight-
way directs;—

It speeds its way athwart the liquid clouds,
When, lo! a trail of fire its path enshrouds;
On blazing wings it spans the arch on
high

Like shooting stars unfastened from the
sky;

Till quite consumed before their wonder-
ing eyes,

Into the subtle air, it vanishes.

Sicilians and Trojans dumb-struck stand,
While brave Æneas issues his command:
“The Gods, O Father, by this omen rare
Design that you the diadem shall wear;
While others nobly earned and shall re-
ceive

The prizes which with gratitude we give,
Take to thyself as victor over all,

The laurel wreath and famed Anchises'
bowl.”

All victors, yet the multitude proclaim
"The prize is his whose arrow caught the
flame ;"

With one accord to him the prize they
yield,

Who bore it from the well contested field.

As then, so now, and through all coming
time ;

Each grand achievement touches the sub-
lime ;

Within each field of learned labor lies,

For all who will contest, a fitting prize ;

The higher flight demands the higher
aim,—

'Tis only these that catch the heavenly
flame.

Aiming and striving thus, still aiming
high,

Till backward we behold the radiant sky,

Still onward, may we reach the golden
way,

The brighter light of an eternal day.



