

Clarke (Ed. H.)

THE VALUE OF A DIPLOMA.

A

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Medical Graduates of Harvard University,

AT THE

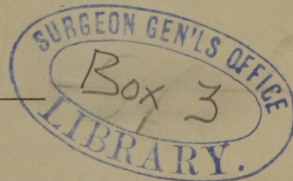
MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL COLLEGE

IN BOSTON,

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 1860.

By EDWARD H. CLARKE, M.D.

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## A D D R E S S .

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GENTLEMEN, GRADUATES OF THE MEDICAL CLASS :

THE gathering of any assembly, the performance of any ceremony, inevitably suggests an inquiry into the reason of the gathering, into the meaning of the ceremony. The audience, which has listened to you to-day, raises the question of the reason of their coming here; the ceremony, in which you have taken so prominent a part, of itself propounds the question of its meaning and use. It would be a superficial answer to such inquiries, to say, that the audience of this hour came here to learn how well or ill you can recite a medical essay, or to ascertain how much or how little your teachers have taught you, or how much or how little you have taught yourselves, of medicine. Equally superficial would it be to say that the ceremony, which has just been enacted, the bestowal of Diplomas upon you by the distinguished head of Harvard University, means that you have ended your medical studies, by receiving a doctor's degree.

There is a reason for the presence of this audience—a real and substantial one—which, if you open your eyes to see it, reaches down to, and takes

hold of whatever is vital and true in your profession. There is a meaning in the ceremony of conferring a medical degree, and in the degree itself, which, however it may be hidden, however you may forget it, takes hold of, and belongs to whatever is worthy and noble in the science and art of medicine. It is this reality, which, consciously or unconsciously, has drawn an audience here to-day, and not the mere curiosity of seeing how a new-fledged doctor can flap his untried wings; or of learning with how smooth a phrase, you can recite some of the mysteries of health and disease. It is this reality, that gives to the Diploma you have just received, its substantial value, and invests the simple ceremony of its bestowal with a profound interest. It *is because* of the reality which attaches to medicine itself; because, in our social and providential order; in our Christian civilization and development; it is because medicine, in all these, has a substantial and most important place; because it is a vital thing, as much so as the church, or the school, or the press, that your Diploma has any worth, that this audience have come here to-day. It is because your profession is a reality, and not a sham.

If this be so, your diploma is a sacred thing, and not a decoration, or a toy. It is a symbol of what is worth more than gold or silver. It carries with it a meaning, whose depth and breadth it would be well for you to explore and comprehend. It is invested with a nameless, but real virtue, which should cause it to be sacredly cherished. I find, then, a sufficient theme for my brief address to you, in the parchment

which you hold in your hands ; in the diploma you have have just received ; in the degree you have just now taken.

I have called your diploma symbolic of whatever is true and essential ; of whatever is vital in your profession. It is so. It is significant of the fact that underlies the science of medicine, and justifies the existence of a medical class or profession. To consider a diploma from this point of view would be to make it a text for discussing the value of medical science and art in our civilization, or in any possible civilization ; it would be to enter a plea in behalf of medicine, and, taking hold of the core and heart of the matter, to show the absolute necessity of its existence.

This would be a work of supererogation. Fortunately for you, I propose no such profound discussion. None doubt the necessity or value of medical science, or medical men, however much they may decry the one, or satirize the other. What I ask your attention to, as not inappropriate to this hour of your entrance into the medical communion, and of farewell to medical pupilage, and as not unworthy of your consideration, is a few thoughts, that naturally cluster about the insignia, that mark your chosen profession ; the flag, under which you sail ; the banner, which you uphold.

I select this subject the more willingly, because at the present time, and especially in this country, there is a growing tendency to disparage whatever marks any select body ; to despise all titles, however nobly earned or honorably bestowed. Particularly is this true

of the title, by which you will henceforth be known, the unpretending one of *Medicinæ Doctor*. Moreover, it is a title which you can never lay aside. Once having acquired it, it will stick to you through evil report and good report. You may become anything else you can—poet, lawyer, grocer, mechanic, statesman, politician, president—and you will find that the doctor never will leave you. Once receive a medical diploma, and the *M.D.* is printed on your skin, so legibly that all can read it, and branded in so deep, that no metamorphosis of tissue can erase it. It behooves you, then, to know well its meaning.

There was a time, and that not long ago—I do not say that the present is not such a time—when a Medical Degree had an unquestioned value. But, if it has lost that value, if its significance and vitality have died out of it, let us carry it no longer. Away with what is only a bauble, or a vain show. But, if there is virtue in it, if it rests on a fact, and is not a sham, then cherish it and wear it proudly.

In reality, the only value which your Diploma possesses, now-a-days, consists in its intrinsic merits. No factitious charms, or talismanic powers, or mysterious virtues, surround it. It derives no authority from law. Indeed, legislation has done its utmost to make it common, and deprive it of all external value. The butcher of whom you get your dinner, the cobbler that patches your well-worn shoes, the hostler that cleans the horse, your expectant fees are so soon to furnish you with, all, or any of these may write *M.D.* against their name, with none to forbid, or make them afraid. Fortunate, indeed, will you

be, wherever you offer your services to the waiting public, whether in city or village, or in some distant western clearing, if you do not find, in close proximity to your modest and classic sign, some other aspirant, masculine or feminine, for medical responsibilities and labors and fees, who (though altogether innocent of the slightest medical preparation) puts M.D. upon his or her card, with as bold a front as yourself. Yet the law extends no more protection to your substantial claim to a Doctor's title, than to the shadowy one of the Empiric. Under the Ægis of the law, both are alike valuable, or valueless. Legally, then, your Diploma is worth nothing. It gives to you no legal weight, invests you with no peculiar authority. So far as the law goes, you may as well burn your parchment, as keep it. But more than this, the law does not recognize any authority in the source from which your diploma comes. There is nothing in the law to prevent your neighbor, John Smith, from bestowing a diploma upon John Smith, Jr., and the latter may offer to kill and cure the sick, by its authority, without encountering any legal obstacle. In winning your diploma, therefore, you have gained something of real and substantial value, doubtless; but nothing which the law, in these reformatory and democratic days, recognizes as authoritative.

I have already intimated, that John Smith, or John Brown, or any other equally eminent man, may sell or give a diploma, and commit no legal offence. In fact, the country swarms with Schools, Colleges, and Institutions of every name and grade, that manufac-

ture degrees by the wholesale, and grant them for the asking. This may be an unwelcome statement, but it is nevertheless true. You may as well look the fact in the face, for you must accept it. Throughout the length and breadth of our land, and not only in large cities, the great centres of population and business, of education and science, but in small villages, and on mountain-tops, and in prairie wildernesses, there are schools of all sorts—Regular, I am sorry to say, as well as Irregular, Botanic, Homœopathic, Mesmeric, Eclectic, Spiritual, and I know not of what other names—that yearly bestow thousands of medical diplomas, upon as many grateful recipients. Mark you, I do not say that all these diplomas, so lavishly given away, are equally valuable; I only say that a diploma, without regard to its intrinsic merits, can be as easily got as sheepskin. It is no more difficult to get merely the title of Dr. than of Captain; and as many obtain one as the other, and with as good a right.

And thus it happens, in this country, that while the law gives to the parchment you hold no authority, or intrinsic worth, neither can you claim for it any value, because a degree of M.D. is rare, or obtained with difficulty. Whatever importance it carries with it, belongs to it, apart from any legal enactment or difficulty of acquisition. More than this, you must not expect that the possession of a degree will add anything to the estimation in which you are held by a certain portion, and that a large one, of the community, even in your capacity as a guide for the sick. Indeed, there are those, and you will meet



with many such, who will hold you disqualified to take care of and treat diseases, simply because you have sought, and earned, and won a diploma from a respectable source.

I do not wish to exaggerate the matter, and I do not think I do, when I tell you, honestly and soberly, that the degree of M.D. not only does not, of itself, give to you any legal authority, or position, but it *may be* so easily got, as to carry with it no moral force, and even when obtained from the best sources, may be an impediment in the way of getting what you all are anxious for, business.

If all this is truth, and not fancy, what is the value, and what the use of a degree? This is the inquiry with which I started, and which I propose to answer. I have already hinted that it has a substantial value. In reality it possesses a vital significance. It has a real place, and is worth all the labor you have spent in winning it; and this, too, apart from its significance as the symbol of a profession, which meets one of the great wants, one of the primal and ever-present necessities of humanity.

If you only look deep enough, you will see that the circumstances I have just mentioned, which seem to discredit and depreciate a diploma, are really testimonies to its worth. The law does not protect that which is able to protect itself. Whether this is good policy or not, whether it is for the best good of patients who are physicked, as well for the doctors who physic, I will not stop to inquire. But the fact that a diploma has any value, in the midst of this free trade in doctors, is no slight tribute to the worth of

your parchment. Again, schools and corporations would not be giving away so many bushels of counterfeit degrees, unless the article, which they counterfeit, was, some how or other, held in estimation. Only the bills of unbroken banks are worth counterfeiting. Only the notes of solid merchants are worth forging. Only what is good in literature or art, in business or politics, is worth imitating. Even the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table cannot scatter the rich jewels of his wit and humor, broadcast over the world, without democrats of the tea table testifying, by their travesties, to the ring of the true metal, which he dispenses. Charlatans of every hue, who deceive and dose the public, would not write M.D. against their name, or implore degrees from hybrid colleges, unless there was a substantial value in the real title.

The value and meaning, then, of a Diploma, what are they? If a degree is not merely a relic of the past, the badge of a worn-out caste; if it is not a hollow shell, out of which the heart has been eaten; if it possesses a vital significance; if the parchment in your hands carries with it a substantial value, it is well for you to see, and recognize its worth.

I have already intimated, that much of its value comes from its being the symbol, the flag of the medical profession, and that I do not propose to urge the acknowledged and necessary claims of that profession. Beyond this, your degree is of great worth, because it confers on you privileges, that are not the less real and honorable from not being upheld by law; and because it imposes upon you obligations

and responsibilities, duties and restraints, that are none the less binding, from the fact that nothing but your honor as a man, and your faith as a christian, engages you to their exact performance. Can there be higher sanctions ?

A medical Diploma, supposing, always, that you have the real article, and not the counterfeit (I need not point out to you the difference between the true and false), admits you into an honorable body, which forms a republic, by itself, of brethren that do not recognize the distinctions of nation or government, of race or sect ; whose antiquity goes back to the mythical period of the human race ; and which, coming down the centuries through the mysteries of Egypt, the Eleusinia of Greece, the culture and pride of Rome, the mingled darkness and light of the middle ages into the larger civilization of to-day, extends over the whole world ; and embraces, in its list of heroes and sages, some of the profoundest intellects, and largest hearts and noblest men, philanthropists, scholars, and martyrs, that the world has ever seen. Is it no privilege to be enrolled as the colleagues, or successors of such men ? to so stand, that the faintest shadow of their lives may fall upon you ? to be placed within the reach of the lightest breath of their enthusiasm and their devotion ? If you do not esteem this a privilege, you are unworthy of your diploma, and God forbid that you should be called a physician.

Another privilege, which your diploma confers upon you, is that it gives you, not the legal right to practise physic, as it is termed—every blacksmith or

pedlar, barber or charlatan, has that legal right as much as you—but it gives you a substantial and admitted claim to the confidence of the better, and most trustworthy, and most intelligent portion of the community. Wherever you may go, you will be supposed, in virtue of that diploma, to be at least an honest man, until, dishonoring the flag you carry, you prove yourself a dishonest one. And let me tell you, that this is no slight privilege, no small matter. Aside from all nobler considerations, and looking at the policy of the matter, it may not enhance your immediate interests to be known beforehand as an honest practitioner, who eschews all subterfuges; but in the long run, you may rest assured that to be so considered, will be for the best interest of your pocket, as well as your reputation and your conscience.

These are privileges, both honorary and substantial, which your diploma confers upon you. But look a little closer at it for a moment. While it confers privileges, it lays upon you obligations and restraints. It puts upon you responsibilities, which you cannot shirk, and binds around you restraints, which you cannot break, at least not until you have broken your honor and thrown away your conscience.

It is all important that you should see these responsibilities and restraints clearly, and accept them fully. For if you are false to them, you are not only false to yourself, but to the University which has graduated you, and to the profession which it is now your privilege to enter, and to the community which it will be your duty to serve.

Your diploma describes each one of you as —

“Vir, ingenio bono ac scientia utili præditus, moribusque probis ornatus . . . qui ad Doctoris gradum admittatur.” Which, by a somewhat free translation, may be rendered a regularly educated physician. Educated; in that statement or certificate of education lies one of your chief responsibilities. Yet, when the Faculty of the Medical Department of Harvard University and its President affixed their signatures to that statement, they did not intend to certify that you know *all*, that is necessary to render you accomplished practitioners; that you have attained the culminating point of medical knowledge; that you have received, digested and assimilated the whole science of medicine; that you are in fact its latest result, its exhaustive product. They do not certify to this. Still your diploma, properly and rightfully calls you educated. Meaning by that expression, that you have received, not the maximum of medical knowledge, but the minimum, with which it is safe for you to go out into the community, as guides for the sick, and protectors of individual or public health. Less than what you know, would render you unsafe practitioners, blind guides. Heaven knows how many such there are now. To authorize you to practise your art with less knowledge than you possess, would be unfaithfulness on the part of the College; not to increase that knowledge, will be unfaithfulness and injustice on your part. The more you can add to your store, the better for you and your patients. Herein, then, is one of the chief responsibilities, that of educating yourselves, which your diploma imposes upon you. At present, you have learnt only the

alphabet of your profession. Now you are to use that alphabet in your own studies. Hitherto you have been under teachers; now you are to teach yourselves. The recorded experience of more than thirty centuries looks up to you. You are to master it, and add to it, by your own study and experience and observation. Your diploma does not mean that your education has ended, but that it has just begun; that you have learned just enough to be safe practitioners—nothing more. But inasmuch as you are called educated, your honor is engaged to carry your education on. Each day and week and month and year of your life, however and wherever you may toil, is to witness your constant, unceasing, and unwearying efforts to enlarge the education you have begun here. While your diploma privileges you to enrol yourselves with men like Boerhaave, Harvey, Sydenham, Møller, Louis, and a host of others, it does not imply that you know all they know, but it does imply that you will strain every nerve, to render yourselves worthy of being put in the same catalogue with them. Your diploma certifies that you have begun the education of a regular physician. Your honor and faith are now pledged to complete that education.

By virtue of your diploma you are not only styled educated, but *regularly* educated. This is a common phrase. It will be often used to distinguish you from other practitioners. Sometimes it will be applied to you as a reproach, and sometimes as an honor. When properly understood, when understood in the sense your diploma uses it, it is expressive of the highest

merit. It does not refer to the form of your education, so much as to its spirit; not so much to its mode, as to its substance. Your education has been regular, i. e. normal, healthy. You have not only gone through a certain curriculum of study, such as experience has shown to be the most advantageous, but in pursuing your studies, you have been taught, more than anything else, to regard yourselves as seekers after truth. Your instructors have not trained you into the ranks of a sect. They have bound you by no medical creed. So far as they were able, they have taught you truth. And now, as you leave their guidance, they ask you to follow them, only so far as they have followed the truth. It is in this spirit, that all the great masters of medicine have lived and wrought and died. It is in this spirit, that you are to pursue your future studies. Whatever is true in Physiology and Pathology and Therapeutics, you are to look for and accept, wherever it may come from, and whatever it may be. This is the animus of a regularly-educated physician. Whenever you depart from this, permitting yourselves to be the slaves of a theory, or a creed, or of mere routine, you become irregular, you go over to the ranks of Charlatanism; and especially, if for the sake of winning popularity, or gaining notoriety, or filling your pockets with larger fees, you desert this broad platform, which is the only support of true and rational medicine, you will imprint an indelible stain on your diploma. You will be false to the spirit of your profession; you will be guilty of the blackest treason, because you will be disloyal to truth.

Milton, in one of the noblest passages of his prose writings, describes Truth as a being, which was sent into this world, complete and perfect in every part, resplendent in beauty, of noble mien, and of commanding and winning aspect. By the rude discords and ill treatment of men, she was broken to pieces, and her mutilated limbs scattered to the four winds of heaven. Since that sad catastrophe, mankind have been trying to pick out from the rubbish and dirt, the disjointed and broken pieces, so as to restore Truth to her pristine beauty. In this great duty of seeking and preserving the least remnant of truth, so as to add to the stock which every age collects, you are to do your part, however humble that part may be. Only in your seeking, you must learn not to mistake error for its opposite, and above all, not to pick up a lie, however fashionable that lie may be, and cling to it, carrying it with you, making your living out of it, and all the time pretend that you have got a bit of truth.

Your diploma, in declaring you to be regularly-educated physicians, not only proclaims that you commenced your education under teachers, that bade you own no master but truth, and imposes on you the obligation of continuing your education with an equally lofty aim, but it lays upon you the duty of practising the art of medicine, with the most rigid regard to the claims of right and honesty. The spirit, which dictates your studies, is to preside over your practice. The distinction, which your diploma confers on you, of being a regular practitioner, you are never to forfeit by any irregularity. And here, regu-



lar means honest and true ; irregular, means dishonesty and deception.

The line, which separates the regular practitioner from the charlatan, is not necessarily drawn by the possession of a diploma. A practitioner, who may have his name inscribed among the medical graduates of Cambridge, Paris, London or Vienna, may prove himself to be, in charlatanism, the rival of Paracelsus or Morison. But in so doing, he forfeits all right to the possession of a diploma. So long as you hold your degree, you are bound to keep within the strictest limits of integrity and honesty. Your diploma forbids your claiming any mysterious virtues for your peculiar modes of practice ; for the drugs you exhibit ; for anything which you have to do, either among your ignorant, or your intelligent patients ; and above all, it forbids you to trifle with the sacred science, whose servant you are, and whose remedial agents you employ, by ever claiming for her a superstitious reverence, which is not her due, or powers which she does not possess. The age of mystery and superstition, of talismans and occult agencies, of necromancy and juggling practices, has passed away from regular medicine. You have no more to do with them, than saints with the devil ; than priests with the black art. Wherever you lack knowledge, you may wisely confess your ignorance. Whenever you are at fault, you may safely tell your patients that you are so, and they will think none the worse of your ability for so honest a statement. But your diploma forbids the concealment of your ignorance, by a mysterious claim of wisdom. I speak of

this particularly, because herein lies your strongest temptation. It is so easy to assume the owl's look of wisdom, by which to deceive some weak-minded patient, that you may be tempted to do it. Frequent are the occasions, when, prescribing some simple application, perhaps like that which the prophet of old prescribed for the Syrian Prince, "wash and be clean," you will be tempted to claim for it some extraordinary efficacy, to shroud it with some mysterious virtue. Never do it. Your diploma forbids it.

It may happen, that circumstances will enable you to steal into the confidence of patients by insinuations against some brother practitioner, possibly a rival; or to acquire business by means, not glaringly reprehensible, yet exceptionable; or to do, or say, by word or look, in the sick-room, that, which, if a brother practitioner were present, you would leave undone or unsaid; or in some way, to swerve, for the sake of gain, from the straight path of honesty. Never do it. Never dally with the temptation a moment. You cease to be a regular physician, when you do. You become a charlatan. Your diploma should be burned.

There is one obligation, which is implied by the language of your diploma, and the spirit of your profession, which I wish not to leave unnoticed. Perhaps I shall come the nearest to my meaning, if I call it courage. You are to be brave men; brave, in the highest and noblest sense; brave, morally and physically. And I thank God, that however else the profession to which I belong may have failed; however derelict any or all of them may have been, in

other matters, in this respect they have been loyal and true. You must go a great way to find a physician, who shrinks from his professional duty, however unremunerative, disgusting, dangerous, or appalling it may be. To this high ideal, your diploma, the standard of your profession, calls you to be loyal. Wherever sickness shows its most terrible form; where disease riots; where contagion and pestilence stalk abroad, there is your post. Death, whatever mask he wears, is to have no terror for you. I do not mean that you are to court opportunities of danger; but that you are never to shrink from any professional duty. No human being can be so degraded, or cursed with a disease so loathsome or fearful, that you can ever refuse to administer to him the succors of medical art. And if your selected post of duty, where you hold yourselves in readiness to act as high priests of the sacred art of healing, is ever visited by pestilence, or by unknown and terrible forms of disease, all others may flee from it, but you must remain, even though it be at the sacrifice of your lives. If you die then, you will die bravely in your harness, amidst the sick and dying you are ministering to. You may die, but you have no right to desert—to preserve an ignoble life by flight. It is the time, when, of all others, the community have the strongest claim on your services. When the storm rages most fiercely, when the danger is most imminent, when the elements conspire to destroy, then is the mariner most needed. The passengers must be saved, even if the officers perish.

Such is something of the value and meaning of a

Diploma. It is no mere decoration ; no bauble. It is the symbol and standard of a profession, which you cannot estimate too highly. It is significant of all that is vital and true and noble in that profession. It is conferred upon you by those, who, when they give it, charge you never to act, or be, unworthy of it. It enrols you in the ranks of a long list of noble men, of every age and nation, making you the descendants of heroes and sages. It presents you with the confidence of the community, and declares that you will be worthy of confidence. It engages for you that your industry shall be commensurate with your strength ; that your honor shall be above reproach ; your honesty unquestioned ; and your devotion to duty, bounded only by your opportunities. Like knights of old, you go forth to show your prowess in the battle of life. The world is "all before you," where to choose your place—not of rest, but of toil. You have gained your spurs. They are clean and bright. See to it, that you never tarnish them.

And so I bid you farewell.