

Singleton (J. W.)

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MEDICAL HEROISM

OF 1878.

BY

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MEDICAL HEROISM OF 1878.

Lovers of ancient history dwell with rapture on the recital of the peerless valor of Greek and Roman soldiers, as they were marched from one field of slaughter to another, to be crowned with bays of victory or heroically endure the agonies of defeat. They present for our admiration the heroic deeds of Cæsar and Pompey, of Marc Anthony and Brutus, of Scipio and Hannibal, and of Alexander, who marshaled their mighty hosts to glory or the grave on gory battle-fields in search of conquest or of power, that usurpers and tyrants might lord it over the lives and liberties of their fellow-men. The world's vast record book is full of the wrongs that have been perpetrated against the rights of mankind, and the calamities that have been cruelly visited upon the human family. Though no compliment to modern civilization, it is the truth of history, that society in all ages has given more permanent applause to brilliant bloodshed than to golden deeds of benevolence, philanthropy and self-sacrifice. Why this has always been so is a question that presents itself to every reflecting mind, and demands the serious consideration of all lovers of our race. It may be the fault of our sinful nature, that the brave soldier rushing to battle and to triumph in a wicked cause, wins greater renown than the faithful physician who falls in front of the fight against pestilence, or the humble priest who ministers comfort and consolation at the gates of death. Some men yet contend, that after all our efforts to humanize and ennoble our kind, we are still in the bonds of selfishness, "and all uncharitableness," without any substantial sympathy or fraternity for each other. But this I do not believe. I cherish an abiding faith in the inherent nobility of mankind. I contend that there is no sin or evil under which men suffer that has not its compensating good in the means of its mitigation or relief. The human family, and especially *educated* humanity, is much better than bitter-hearted misanthropists pretend to believe, as the recent history of our great and beloved common country abundantly testifies. That men have in a great measure ceased to glory in deeds of violence, and the sad conse-

quence of misdoing; that they are rapidly binding themselves together "with hooks of steel," for the general good; that through the teachings of divine inspiration and the guidance of a nobler social philosophy, they are slowly recognizing the sublime truth that "God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth.

From this heaven-born truth has sprung the universal faith and hope in men for which all lovers in mankind should be devoutly thankful, for its perfect development will constitute an epoch in the drawing of an era in the history of the world, which will lead it to health, safety, joy and happiness, and ultimately to a glorious deliverance from sin and from evil of every kind. We should, therefore, be profoundly grateful to that kind Providence which has permitted us to exist as factors in such an age; an age of the grandest moral heroism, in the midst of events which though they may make men weep, yet cause the angels to rejoice over the nobility of human nature. They tell us of the "golden age," the "silver" and the "iron age," but in the fullness of our hearts, let us call this the *age of human sympathy*. It is the commencement of man's social redemption and the amelioration of the present and future condition of our children and our children's children, to the remotest posterity; in the charmed circle and firm solidarity of universal love, as one in a common *faith* and *hope*, a common protection in danger and suffering; and in the ministration of relief, when affliction and sorrow shall come upon us. Ancient philosophers had but a faint conception of the common fatherhood of God and the common brotherhood of man.

Though Confucius may have dimly shadowed forth the substance of the Golden Rule, four thousand years ago, it was left to Jesus Christ in his "Sermon on the Mount," to give eternal significance to the divine precept, "therefore, whatever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them." For the last eighteen hundred years, whenever and wherever men have obeyed this God-given injunction, they have been blessed of Heaven and loved by their fellow-men. To-day, the world lies under the shadow of its benign influence, because it was born of God, for the good of the human race! May it live and flourish forever!

There was much that was grandly heroic, and worthy of all imitation in the earliest ages, but contrasting the glories of

ancient days, and even of the middle ages, with the triumphs of the present, we find that in the former, the battle was *against life*, while in the nineteenth century it is *for life*. While it was once the pride of Cæsar's followers on the field of slaughter to show how a Roman soldier could do his duty, bravely and to the death, it is the glory of modern civilization to furnish hosts of noble and devoted men, who are willing to labor, suffer and die (if necessary) for their fellow-creatures. St. Paul truly said of the age in which he lived: "greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend;" but were Paul, the last, but not the least, of those inspired messengers, who were sent to bear the glad tidings of salvation to a sin-crushed world, living to-day, he would see that a man can lay down his life, not only for his friend, but for strangers. He would behold gallant and self-sacrificing men and women, full of the holy zeal of God-like philanthropy, throwing themselves with brave and generous impulse into the breach between human life and the horrors of a death plague, and saying to the afflicted, in the language of Pythias to Damon, "if I cannot live to save you, I will die to accompany you. He might see men going from place to place in search of the plague-stricken, and in the exercise of the tender offices of relief, heroically exclaiming, in the words of the brave old Regulus, when he knew that the extremest tortures and death awaited him in the land of the enemy: "It is my duty to go, let the gods take care of the rest;" feeling that it is better to die honorably in the defence of our brother man, than to enjoy the pleasures of ignoble ease and safety for many years.

The story of the Russian servant whose master's carriage was overtaken by the wolves in the wilderness, is worthy of being recalled here. That gallant and faithful serf, in order to appease the rapacious hunger of the wolves even for a time, that his lord's horses might remain untouched, and he saved from a violent death, willingly threw himself among the blood-thirsty animals, and the nobleman was borne to a place of safety. Many of us no doubt remember to have heard of the brave pilot of Lake Erie, who, when the steamer was on fire, and swift destruction threatened its cargo of living freight, held fast to the wheel, in the very jaws of the flames, safely piloted the vessel to the shore and saved the lives of her passengers, at the cost of his own fearful agony and death. And then, too, the never-

to-be-forgotten example of the dauntless Flewellyn, the surgeon of the ill-fated Alabama. When that Confederate war-vessel received her death-wound from the guns of the Kearsage, and was slowly sinking beneath the waves, her chief medical officer had frequent opportunities to save his life, by passing on the life-boat to the schooner Greyhound. But no; he heard the cries of the suffering, and remained with his helplessly wounded comrades, and, almost in sight of his home and his loved ones, whom he had not seen for two long years, sunk beneath the waves of the English Channel, in the silent companionship of those he had loved and served so well.

Speaking from a worldly and selfish standpoint, such cases of apparently reckless personal sacrifice, seem foolish in themselves, but when we consider the spirit of self-abnegation, and the animus of sublime moral heroism that prompts them, we cannot but regard such actions as among the strongest arguments that can be offered in support of the immortality of the human soul. Such examples of heroic devotion to the grand idea of man's personal honor, dignity and devotion, ennoble human nature, bind the good and the brave of all nations together in the bonds of common sympathy, and make us proud that we are men. They make us feel that "there is nothing so noble as forgetfulness of self," and the scale of our love and admiration for mankind, ascends rapidly when we thus consider the noble and precious deeds of which our fellow-men are capable, for they are truly "the golden and the priceless jewels of history, and the salt of life." They make us exclaim in the beautiful words of Charles Kingsley:

"Still the race of hero-spirits
 Pass the lamp from hand to hand,
 Age from age the world inherits,
 Wife and child and fatherland!
 Still the youthful hero gathers
 Fiery joy from wold and wood,
 He will dare as dared his fathers,
 Give him only cause as good!"

Socrates was right when he said to his judges in contemplation of his probable death at the hands of the Greeks (and the sentiment expressed by that wise philosopher thousands of years ago is as applicable to us as it was to him upon the day of its utter-

ance): "A man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying. He ought to consider whether in doing anything, he is doing right or wrong, acting the part of a good man or a bad man, and having decided what is right, *he should do right* at the peril of his life." The word "duty" has been said to be "the sublimest in the English language." When a man reaches that degree of self-abnegation, that he is wholly devoted to the performance of his duty to his fellow-men he is no longer an ordinary man, but fit for the companionship of the Gods.

The sublime moral spectacle of the sacrifice of such a man in the perilous attempt to save others, is enough to make the angels weep, and drape the world in solemn black! It is written that a few, and occasionally many, must, in the very nature of things, be sacrificed for the good of the multitude. The loss may be great and horrible at times, and, for the moment, shock the tender sensibilities of the whole world; but, nevertheless, the offering must be made, whether it appease the hungry Moloch of destruction or not. It is our duty to try to save those who are in peril, even at the risk of our own lives.

When the Indian princess sucked the poison of the deadly cobra from the arm of her lord, upon the instant in which he was bitten, and died from its effects, she did it that he might live for his country and his tribe, though she herself perished in her act of self-devotion. It was a nobly grand and heroic action that stands recorded in the shining record of events "that were not born to die." And so may the members of our beloved profession ever be ready to fly to the relief of our fellow-men when bitten by the serpent of disease and pestilence, and, with the best means at our command, work bravely and faithfully to extract the poisonous distillments that have been emplanting in their tortured bodies, or, failing in our attempt to save them from destruction, comfort them "through the valley and shadow of death," even to the portals of the tomb. In the words of the sainted Dr. Slater, "Duty is better than life." When we, as medical men, voluntarily accept the sacred responsibilities of the physician's life, we do so in full realization of the fact that *fidelity to the human race is the chief corner-stone of our professional honor*. We can not afford to be cowards in time of great public danger and distress. As watchful sentinels around the citadel of common safety, we must be "faithful unto death," if we would justly

merit the plaudit of "well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Fully twenty thousand of our fellow-citizens in the Southern States have perished with yellow fever in 1878. Many of the fairest portions of the beautiful South have been worse than decimated by the plague in the last four months. More than a hundred of our medical brethren have found untimely graves in their heroic efforts to save others from the horrors of "the Black Death" which has been running riot in the fairest country under the sun. The story of Grenada, New Orleans, Memphis, Holly Springs, Greenville and Hickman can never be forgotten while pity has a tear to shed for the loved and the lost, and men can sing praises to the immortal actions of the brave and the good!

For four long and painful months this terrible enemy to human life held high carnival in a goodly portion of five States south of the Ohio river, and even invaded territory north of that line heretofore exempt from the dread monster of the African jungles. Now that the storm of pestilence has happily passed away, and the blighting incubus of a great and sorrowful affliction has been lifted by the kindly hand of a merciful Providence from the abodes of our Southern brethren, and even while the shadow of the dark and common sorrow rests as a mournful blight upon "the land of the magnolia and the palm," let us survey the battle-fields upon which our hero-brothers have fought with varying fortunes, and sum up the imperishable results of the terrible contest through which they have passed. Never in the history of our common country have we had more substantial evidences of a common sympathy among the people of these American States, than those which have been shown by our sad experience since the first day of July, 1878. Never in the history of medical science and art have we had juster and nobler reasons to be proud of the moral grandeur and nobility of our profession. Never before has the spirit of our national brotherhood been developed to such an extent as to make us feel and know that there is ever a chord in the American heart which needs only to be touched by the magic power of sympathy to cause it to yield the most precious fruits of benevolence and charity. While it has been the sad lot of the South to suffer and to mourn, as "Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted because they were not," it has been the holy privilege of the North to succor and relieve. And now that the wasting simoon of human destruction has passed from Southern habitations, and we recount the loss of life

and the ruin of homes that can never be restored, there is not one of us who does not feel, in the midst of his grief, prouder of his profession than ever before; prouder of this Republic and its people, as one in common charity, one in common fraternity and common solidarity of mutual interests, loving dependence and brotherly protection.

Those of us who lived near the pathway of the hurricane of pestilence that so lately swept through the South have seen how nobly grand have been the efforts of the great and powerful North to relieve the distress of her Southern sisters. The treasures of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts have mingled with the heart-offerings of Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia and Maryland. Munificent donations have been thrown into the lap of Southern sorrow, and, bedewed with tears of gratitude, they have caused the inmates of many a Southern home to rejoice even on the confines of death. The Howard Association has come nobly to the front in obedience to the call of duty, and many of its best and bravest men have given up their precious lives in their holy work. The Young Men's Christian Association has proved a faithful and energetic auxiliary in the great effort of human benefaction. All these are gratifying facts concerning the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. But there is something more to be told of it: The revelation of our nation's brotherhood will form a chapter in the history of our beloved Republic that will be read in after years by admiring millions, and prove an honor that can never die. This glorious record of a wide, noble, common philanthropy in danger and suffering will do more to cement the hearts of the American people in the bonds of a common affection than all our customs, laws, language and armies combined, because it springs from the all-protecting and all-saving principle of the Golden Rule—love to God and fraternity for mankind!

The noble contest to save the lives and promote the happiness of our fellow-citizens was a struggle in which there was no gladiatorial bloodshed to defile the dead and shame the living; no Isthmian pine wreaths to encircle the brows of victors in honor of the number they had slain in the bloody battle of man against man, or man against beast. No, no! It was a brave and gallant fight to save life, and not to destroy; one in which even the vanquished were victors in the holiest cause in which men could labor and die—the cause of suffering humanity.

At the battle of Rocroy, in 1643, when the last of the old Spanish infantry under Captain Gonzala de Cordova were all cut off, they were found standing fast, to a man, not one having broken ranks. And so we behold, encircled by the halo of unfading glory, the shining hosts of those who have fallen in defence of human life! One by one they went forth, as ministers of mercy, to duty and to death. One by one they gallantly fell at their posts while the conflict was raging with relentless fury; and, crowned with fadeless laurels, they passed silently to "the great beyond" amid the benedictions of the saved and the blessings of the dying. Who were the principal actors in this melancholy drama? Were they only Southerners? No! Were they only Northerners? No! Were they American physicians? Yes, most gloriously yes! Their humanhood was bounded by no geographical or sectional lines—no mountains, no rivers, no chilling snows or sunny plains. The holy charter of their God-like philanthropy embraced within its merciful domain the whole world. It was circumscribed by no lines, no language, no creed or condition, but that of the welfare of the human race, the health and safety of a common people, and their speedy deliverance from danger and death. Who would not be an American doctor? From all parts of our country they came to the rescue, as American citizens, proud of a common republic, forgetful of the unhappy past, overflowing with the divine spirit of brotherly charity, as devoted exemplars of American medicine and faithful friends of mankind.

It is said that "history repeats itself." The remark is often true in an ordinary or general sense; but no age, clime or country has ever before witnessed the sublime spectacle of a whole nation devoted to the work of benevolence, and whole States, large cities, and even villages contending for the honors of munificence in their generous-hearted offerings to thousands in danger and distress.

Ancient heroism may vaunt its blood-stained trophies of victories won upon the fields of sanguinary strife. Modern historians record with admiration the "charge of the gallant six hundred," but more glorious and grandly heroic is the perilous voyage of the relief boat "Chambers" and her brave volunteer crew, under the command of the fearless Benner, down "the Father of Waters," through "the valley and shadow of death," to the relief of our Southern brethren from plague and starvation.

Such manifestations of the brave and gallant sympathy of a whole people is American, wholly American! There is not room enough anywhere else on the face of the earth for such deeds of moral sublimity and noble self-sacrifice. Such philanthropy is God-born in a land long enough, broad enough, and rich enough for its stupendous growth. Its executors are Americans, with American brains and American hearts, making American heroes whose grand record can never be erased from the fond admiration and loving remembrance of their grateful countrymen. Such heroes as the nobly gifted and deeply lamented Dr. John Lay Cook of Henderson, Kentucky, who fell at Hickman, October 1, 1878, fighting for mankind, and other heroic medical men from the North, South, East and West, who gave their lives for the good of others, during the summer and fall of 1878, in the Southern States, while bravely battling against the attacks of the devouring monster which was preying with pitiless voracity upon the vitals of their fellow-men. Such men have illustrated in their noble lives and sacredly sacrificial death the sublime moral heroism of the present enlightened age. They made themselves the immortal heroes of a fierce conflict in which the loud artillery and rattling musketry of war were not heard, and the groans of the suffering and dying were not caused by the abuse of human power or passion, for they were the faithful and fearless soldiers in the van-guard of humanity, who fought to overcome an enemy that lurked unseen to mortal eyes, masked in bowers of blooming beauty, and was yet "more terrible than an army with banners." Brave and noble spirits! Gallant and fearless exemplars of duty in the humanhood of the world! Live forever in Creation's great heart!

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