THE HARVEIAN ORATION: ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS, 1881

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ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS.

1881.

BY

A. W. BARCLAY, M.D., CANTAB.,

FELLOW OF THE SAID COLLEGE;
PHYSICIAN TO ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL;
PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL MEDICAL AND CHIRURGICAL SOCIETY.

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MR. PRESIDENT, FELLOWS AND MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS, AND GENTLEMEN,—

Our late President, in assigning to me the office which I have undertaken to fulfil this day, very justly styled it an honourable and onerous task. In his kindness and partiality, he hoped that I might have something to say which would interest such an assembly as usually greets the Harveian orator. It can be no reproach if, in each succeeding year, the well-worn theme becomes more threadbare, and loses some of its original brilliancy. The enjoyment of listening to some of the most gifted of my predecessors must produce a somewhat unfavourable contrast when the work has to be accomplished by feebler hands. I cannot but feel that to give real vitality to my address demands a skill in oratory which I do not possess, an originality of thought to which I can lay no claim. I have purposely avoided looking

back to previous orations. A *pot-pourri* of the thoughts of others is not what I want to produce in this assembly; and I am sure you will forgive me if, on the one hand, I repeat what has already been said so well by others, or if, on the other, I depart from the lines laid down by precedent as those on which this oration should be framed.

Though so far removed from the Harvey of the past, we may surely learn something from observing the way in which the great master worked. It is only by treading in his footprints that any one can hope to gain entrance into that temple of enduring fame in which he will ever hold so high a place. It was, indeed, no mind of ordinary stamp which animated the discoverer of the circulation. It does not appear that he had prepared himself by any special training for the work of his life: indeed, it is quite remarkable that no record of devotion to science in his earlier days is anywhere to be found. It is true that when he entered the University of Cambridge he enrolled his name among the pensioners of Gonville and Caius College; and among the MSS. preserved in its library is the original grant by Queen Elizabeth to the Master and Fellows "of the bodies of two criminals annually, condemned to death and executed in Cambridge or its Castle, free of all charges, to be used for the purpose of dissection, with a view to the increase of the knowledge of medicine, and the

benefit of the health of Her Majesty's lieges, without interference on the part of any of her officials." This grant was obtained by the influence of Dr. Caius, in the sixth year of her reign, just twenty-nine years before Harvey entered as undergraduate. Unfortunately, no record has been kept of whether the privilege thus conferred was ever used, but taken in connection with the existence of medical fellowships, it shows that the College was in those days marked as one specially devoted to medical science; and we may, perhaps, be entitled to assume that some part of Harvey's subsequent career was due to this early training. That when he had finished his terms at Cambridge he left England to study in the school of medicine held in the greatest repute in those days, we all know; and that he brought back from thence a very high testimonial of his skill in anatomy and physiology is also a matter of history; but as yet we find no trace of the first steps of his progress. We can but picture to ourselves what a glorious awakening must have followed that early dawn when the idea first occurred to his mind that the blood propelled from the heart must return to it. "At length," to use his own expression, "by using greater and daily diligence, having frequent recourse to vivi-sections, employing a variety of animals for the purpose, and collating numerous observations, he thought that he had attained to the truth." He

had questioned Nature, and the early dawn had brightened into day.

Harvey's discovery came so soon after the publication of the *Novum Organon*, that it is not surprising to find in his writings phrases almost identical with those of Bacon, proving, as they do, that the general principles of that philosophy were congenial to his mind. But, to my thinking, he was not in any sense a logician, and did not attempt to frame his arguments on any defined rule. His was a mind to which a false argument was impossible; he rejected it, not because he had applied to it any test of its logical fallacy, but simply because, to his clear intellect, the argument itself was unsound. I trust my younger hearers will not misunderstand me. The clear perception of truth, the faculty to analyse, and the power to grasp it in all its bearings, belong but to a few gifted individuals. Even to them, the cultivation of these talents is of the utmost importance; to the great majority of us, such education of mind is absolutely essential if we would arrive at truth. Almost all the mistakes into which men of pure and simple aim have fallen may be traced to the imperfect development of the logical faculty. Without it true theories and correct practice are equally impossible. Where was it, we may well ask, when in Paris half a century ago, patients were actually bled to death in rheumatic fever? Where is it now, in this enlightened

country of ours, as we draw on towards the end of the nineteenth century, when we find the sustaining treatment in enteric fever pushed to such an extreme that the alimentary canal becomes over loaded with undigested aliment, and the consequent tympanitic distension of the bowel bursts the slender bonds, which have hitherto saved from rupture the thinned walls of a deep ulcer, and the patient from a fatal peritonitis? Alas! medical science is ever bending the knee to the idols of fashion and prejudice, forgetful of her high mission, to seek after and follow only the truth.

I think we may trace, in the method in which Harvey first propounded his views, a very early attempt at the inductive mode of reasoning associated with the name of Bacon, which was then but in its infancy. In the light of further knowlege, the discovery of the circulation must be regarded as one of the most brilliant examples of that philosophy, surpassed perhaps only by Newton's magnificent discovery of the laws of gravitation, some seventy years later. All of these great thinkers were working on the same lines; embued with the same spirit; each alike casting aside the dry logic of the schoolmen, which was once replete with life, but had become in their hands an almost unintelligible jargon.

In the recent revival of medical science—based, as it has been, on pathological research—one of