

THE MEDICAL SCHOOLS OF SCOTLAND.

SKETCHES

OF THE

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No. VI.

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ON a general review of the subjects to be included in a portrait-gallery of the Edinburgh school, I was in doubt which of them should occupy the first place in the collection, until recollecting that "age was honourable," the Spartan reminiscence kicked the beam, and I at once yielded to the claims of seniority and the precepts of Lycurgus. Fortunately the merits of the venerable personage to attention, whose name is inscribed above, conspire with his years to shield me from the imputation of a partial exercise of selection, and to tranquilize any uneasy emotion which his precedence might produce in the breasts of his respective colleagues. He has passed that period of life when an estimate of his labours can be supposed capable of awakening feelings of rivalry in the minds of men contending for popularity in the meridian era of youth and ambition. Thus removed from the sphere of competition, the light of his fame may be contemplated without blinking, and the sun-set of his days looked upon without exciting any other sentiment than a placid aspiration to follow in the course illuminated by his evening ray. The halo which encircles the brows of "eighty-two," however brilliant, borrows from the reflection of its impending extinction a melancholy tinge, which is but too well calculated to sooth even the yearnings of envy into tranquil admiration. To obviate, however, all apprehension of priority of notice being considered a sign of superiority, I hereby solemnly promise, on the "inviolable styx" of my inkstand, that after the present occasion, I shall write the names of the whole school on slips of paper, toss them some day or other, before witness, in my Tartan bonnet after dinner, and let chance in future decide the order of succession. The almost equal splendour with which this galaxy of academicians shines, renders the adoption of some such expedient a matter of justice to each, and its declaration imperative as an object of defence against the suspicions of this jealous world. I would wish, indeed, on this account, to introduce them all into one great historical picture standing in a circle, where the "first would be last, and the last would be first," but as such a *starite coronis* delineation would extend at least

over a brace of LANCETS, I cannot help thinking that its readers would stare aghest at its pages, even for one week, being devoted to a panoramic exhibition of professors heads, and, that turning nervous at the sight, might wish the entire group, with their biographer included, had but one neck, that they might decapitate the whole with a single blow. Having given the subject all the consideration which its importance demanded, I may, perhaps, proceed without further remark, than that the plan projected is the best adapted to secure all the ends proposed in the present proceeding.

There are few, probably, of my readers who have not performed a pilgrimage to Edinburgh, and experienced the dreary sensations which accompany the opening of a winter campaign of lectures and note-taking, of grinding and graduating, in that celebrated emporium of the medical sciences. Many of them, with such an arduous undertaking before them, must have felt the usual resolution, on those occasions, of working hard for one year and having done with the business, almost vanish on casting their eye at the College or the hospital, enveloped in wreaths of snow or the thick folds of a fog just freshly wafted from the waves of the Forth on a December morning. The prospect of the situation in the army or the navy, of being snugly installed, one day or other, in the dispensary at home, aided by all the devices of hosiery, camlets, and comforters, can scarcely keep the spirit from sinking under the pressure of so many mental and physical evils. It was on a day of this kind, cooled down to zero by the evaporation of my garments, and labouring under a burthen of dampness and curiosity, that I made my way to a theatre in the University to see the subject of this paper, whose years and reputation had raised him in my mind, to the dignity of being considered the master of the school of Edinburgh. Having ascended three or four flights of stone stairs, dimly discernible by one sickly lamp, which seemed to wage a very unequal conflict with the surrounding darkness, I arrived in an apartment characteristically terminating this sepulchral passage. The black colourless walls, just as the trowel had left them, appeared to sympathize in big round drops of moisture distilling down their sides, with the humidity of the external atmosphere. A half-starved gas lamp jetted out against the low ceiling, affording as much light as made itself viable; and in a corner opposite a half-empty stove roared in awful unison with the "pelting of the pitiless storm" outside, reminding one of fire rather than communicating its heat; while the "drip, drip," as Mr. Wordsworth has it, of an umbrella fixed up here and there to drain against

the next shower, diffused throughout the room the very music of desolation. At the moment I could have submitted the gas-fitter to the slow torture of being consumed alive by his own contrivance, and bared the inventor of stoves in his own apparatus, as Phalaris did with the manufacturer of the brazen bull. The gloominess of the place passed like contagion to my mind, but there was nothing in the architecture of this cell, or its other circumstances, worthy of my resentment; so turning to the living figures of the scene, I began to reflect on their feelings, pursuits, and destinies, to keep my fancy from stiffening into an icicle. There were but a few of them thinly sprinkled over the benches, their blanched features scarcely visible behind muffled collars; and however at variance the fact may seem with probability, some of them must have dined early, from the very sensible odour of Glenlivet which breathed round the room. I afterwards learned, however, that the fragrance of the mountain alembic was by no means incompatible with the spirit of philosophy, and that a "tass of Highland" not unfrequently, on a cold day, preceded a prelection. Though apparently insensible to their present and future miseries, I could not help commiserating their fate. The partial success of some, the entire failure of others; contrasted with the time and labour expended on those illusory prizes which tempt the medical student in their pursuit, thickened into a gloomy perspective in my imagination. How many hours, the choicest of his life, may be wasted over the midnight lamp in collecting information which may never be called into exercise after an examination of some sixty minutes; and when this barrier is crossed, what court is not to be paid to a patron to secure a place, and when secured, what toils await its possession! Suppose the successful suitor on the deck of a man of war, or an itinerant appendage to a regiment, what temporary advantages can reconcile him to the prospect of half-pay at the end of twenty years service, should he have the good, or rather the bad, fortune of escaping death by climate or dissipation, and to become the inheritor of a big liver and fifty pounds a year? Or place him in the country, or the capitol, commencing the duties of a private practice, what drudgery has he not to suffer—what personal sacrifices not to make—what accidents may not prevent his success? See him toil through lanes and alleys to climb to the corinthian capital of society in the squares, or drive twenty miles for a guinea in the provinces; repress every emotion of the heart and sally of the imagination; weigh every phrase that falls from his lips, and movement of his person; and say then, if this artificial state of existence, this me-

tamorphose of the man into a machine, is to be compensated by the most brilliant success? or, if all the arts which enlighten the mind, refine the sensibility, and improve the judgment, are to be acquired that the possessor may become a more useful and wealthy impostor? The nights of study—the days of grinding—the terror of rejection—the hat in hand to the patron—the months at sea without seeing any thing more civilised than a shark or a sailor—the long marches of an infantry corps to be buried in country barracks—the testing of your skill on cooks and butlers before being permitted to practise on their masters—the riding of a steeple chase for a pound note—the chronic hepatitis, and the pension scarcely enough to supply blue pill—oxalic acid beckoning to the bowl, and security against such evils—all crowded into the picture, conjured up by this melancholy scene, just as my knees knocked together, as if to elicit some latent heat by percussion, and the shadow of a human figure moving along the wall, dissipated my reverie of the ills of professional life. Turning round to inspect the source of the apparition, I perceived by the light of a taper, carried in the hands of a servant, the aged form of Dr. Duncan advancing to the desk. There was a unity of character in the person, the place, and the manner of his entrance, which threw over the whole an air of dramatic illusion, as if the spectacle had been got up to represent the obsequies of medicine, and at the moment I could have reverently knelt down and received the benediction of the "good, old man," as the most suitable boon which he could confer. The medium through which he was seen, contributed, perhaps, to this deception; for on a closer inspection there were few characteristics of senility discoverable about his person. Though considerably stooped, he walked with rather a firm step; and through the folds of his official robe were apparent the remains of a frame in singular preservation, and indicating much constitutional strength in early life. The temperature of the day seemed not to have paled the hale, ruddy blush which still overspread his countenance, or to have chilled the ardour with which he unfolded his manuscript on ascending the platform. The plaudits of the few auditors present infused an air of triumph into his features, aided perhaps by the consciousness of its being about his fiftieth anniversary salutation in the capacity of a professor of the healing art. His eye responded to these greetings in a grateful roll of satisfaction, and his whole mien manifested that he felt himself in his natural element. With the light which this exhilaration of the heart threw into his face, its peculiarities became evident, but they were traces of chronic,

rather than of mental, impression. The furrows were certainly deep, though not worn by intellectual exertion, and instead of that commanding cast which age and study communicate to the physiognomy of old men, an expressive unimpressive acuteness was present. The momentary elation of feeling, however, soon collapsed, and on uttering the first sentence, it was apparent that although time had respected the system, its functions had been impaired. Borrowing the tone of his address from his own circumstances, he dilated on the years which he had lectured; the number of pupils whom he had instructed; the celebrity of the colleagues with whom he had served; the glory of the University; and a variety of other interesting garrulity, in which, as might be expected, was mingled the agreeable egotism of a "laudator temporis acti." The recollection of the past turned his attention to futurity, and with a look and tone of resigned indifference, he remarked that the present session might be the last of his labours. He then proceeded to his lecture, but though his sight seems little diminished, a further supply of light had to be furnished to render the manuscript legible, the perusal of which dwindled down to an almost inaudible susurration. The effort to articulate was obviously painful, and only produced a series of interrupted sounds of infantile weakness. Sensible, perhaps of these circumstances, he limited his discourse to half an hour, and dismissed the class amidst another round of applause. His exit excited a mixed sensation of admiration and pity; admiration for the physical energies which he displayed—pity for their misapplication in undertaking the laborious task of addressing an audience. The situation in which an imprudent attachment to office had placed him, could only remind the spectator of the fate of Tithonus suffering for his ambitious aspirations after immortality. The hour had gone by when he could have hoped to command the attention of a class of modern students, who, in listening to his discourse, must have looked upon it much in the same light as upon the remnant from the wardrobe of a century, compared with the cut of the day in Prince's Street. Years had given, seemingly, a degree of rigidity to his knowledge, which resisted the impression of modern improvements in medicine. Old age, indeed, is rarely susceptible of a new stamp, as if the mind were subject to ossification as well as the arteries. We can, it is true, well admire the gossip of years in private, but those powers which give pleasure by the fireside, when exhibited in public, only awaken feelings of pity for their infirmity. It is at best but the picture of Priam reciting the deeds of other days to his compa-

nions, and subsequently snatching the buckler and javelin to arm for the fight. In the one case we can listen to the aged warrior with complacent delight; in the other, as we see the weapon fall powerless from his hand, our compassion for his failure is excited, and the description of the mutual progress of mind and body from their infancy to decay by Lucretius brought to our memory:—

*Præterea, gigni pariter cum corpore, et una
Crescere sentimus, pariterque senescere
mentem.*

*Nam velet in formo pueri, teneroque yagantur
Corpore, sic animi sequitur sententia
tenuis.*

*Inde ubi robustis adolevit viribus ætas,
Consilium quoque majus, et auctior est
animi vis.*

*Post ubi jam validis quassatum est viribus
ævi*

*Corpus, et obtusis ceciderunt viribus artus:
Claudicat ingenium, delirat lingua quæ,
mensque;*

Omnia deficiunt, atque uno tempore desunt.

Subsequent visits only tended to confirm the preceding observations. From his discourses on those occasions, it was evident he had survived the wreck of the old school, and that, although presenting one of its best specimens, he would have better consulted its reputation and his own, by an earlier retirement. Yet it was quite instructive and amusing to hear him dissert on technicalities of learned and lengthened sound, in the manufacture of which our ancestors had wasted so much Latin, Greek, and ingenuity. Theories, elaborate and romantic to others as an epic poem or a fairy tale, were to him as credible and comprehensible as a demonstration in Euclid. He expounded, with apparent satisfaction and facility, the several members and dependencies of one of those hypothetical crystallisations of the fancy, strung together by an occasional fact, and sparkling in the darkness of conjecture, like a necklace of glass beads on the breast of an Ethiopian. A familiarity with the classics of medical literature, and perhaps the fashion of his day, gave him an unlimited command over the use of authorities, which sprung up in every page of his composition in all the luxuriance of quotation. An accomplished adept in the mysteries of systems, orders, genera, and species, he delighted to trace a disease through all its family defections and titles, from its baptism by Hippocrates, down to the standard of pathological heraldry by Cullen. Not but he seems to have glanced over the labours of the moderns, but it is rather with an eye of compassion for their barbarous mutilations of the old school, to whose composite style he

still returned with pleasure from such digressions. By a strange inversion of the rule of adapting the subject to the capabilities of the speaker, physiology has been assigned to him, a subject in which he never seems to have been a proficient. The only efforts which he has made in this science are confined to some peculiar notions on animal heat, and a theory of menstruation, which still minister to his pride and amusement. Neither of them, however, appears to have extended beyond the benches of the lecture room, and they will most probably expire with their parent. As an author, he has not been fortunate, though excessively voluminous; but the value of his productions bears no proportion to their number. I scarcely know one of them which the reader would recognise, were it drawn forth from its obscurity for a critical notice. Considering himself in some measure the guardian of medicine in Edinburgh, he has dispensed his patronage in countless pamphlets, which have alighted with the occasions that gave them birth. No question relating to the University, the Royal Infirmary, or medicine generally, which he did not consider himself bound to discuss; and no sooner was any alteration proposed in either, than a pamphlet issued forth to stop the tide of innovation. Habit has so identified his feelings with the institutes and ceremonies of the College, that the slightest change fills his mind with anticipations of its utter destruction. Whether this partiality for antiquated usages originates in conviction, personal consideration, or delusion, it is scarcely worth while to investigate, and may compendiously be said to be the consequence of perhaps these several causes operating conjointly, for time has a surprising influence in reconciling the judgment with self-interest, there being, generally, a metastasis of the heart to the head about the great climacteric. In private life, however, and his intercourse with the students, society cannot furnish a more amiable individual. Into the views of the latter he enters freely, communicates with them as with his equals in rank and years, and occasionally indulges them with his conversation at his own house. The form of admission to his hospitality is highly characteristic of that regularity of life, which has preserved his health inviolate to such a length of years, the invitation card being inscribed with the philosophic motto of "Come at six, go at eight." Winter and summer he may be seen at an early hour walking in the environs of the city, inspecting its improvements, or scaling its heights to enjoy the surrounding views, for which he still retains all his original predilections. Such a constant observance of temperance and exercise has secured him the enjoyment of

corporeal health without a pain; while a no less active exertion of benevolence in relieving the miseries of the poor, by the establishment of some charitable institutions in the city, may well give an equal serenity to his mind. It is, perhaps, in the character of citizen, rather than of a philosopher, that he appears to most advantage; and if he has not the satisfaction of leaving behind him any labours or discoveries in science to perpetuate his name, he may at least enjoy the perhaps more substantial reflection of having alleviated much human misery, and of daily receiving the benedictions of hundreds of his grateful fellow creatures.

SCOTUS.

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