Letters to a Young Physician Just Entering Upon Practice

Jackson James
LETTERS

TO

A YOUNG PHYSICIAN

JUST ENTERING UPON PRACTICE.

BY

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TO

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My dear Friend,—

I have been writing some letters to a young physician, and am about to publish them. I beg leave to introduce them to the public by a letter of dedication to you. To whom can I so properly dedicate them as to my oldest medical friend, one with whom I have lived in close intimacy for more than half a century? Is it not a great satisfaction to look back to the many objects we have pursued, and labors we have performed, together, during this period?

It is not my intention to eulogize you, or to attempt to extend a reputation which has long since spread further than my voice can reach. We have tried an experiment, and I am inclined to state to the young men of our profession what it was, and what have been its results. There will be a little boasting in it; but the young must indulge their seniors in boasting; when they are getting past service, it may be all that is left for them. Allow
me, then, in this public letter to give an account of our experiment.

You and I began our active lives in this city nearly at the same time. It was when Boston had about one sixth of its present population, and I suppose much less than a sixth of its present wealth. We were so circumstanced as to be peculiarly rivals. Our business led us across each other's paths every day for a long series of years. What one gained, the other seemed to lose. It would have been very easy for us to have got up a pretty quarrel at any moment; and having once begun, we might each have got partisans, and all the usual entanglements to such cases appertaining might have followed. Happily, we pursued a different course. We met together with the feelings we had had as fellow-students. We took much delight in consultation and discussion on professional subjects, and were ever ready to help each other. We have, indeed, maintained a strong personal interest in each other's welfare, and promoted each other's happiness. We do not resemble each other in temperament, and cannot see all things alike. From this cause, and not always looking at objects from the same point of view, we often differed in opinion. But we have always agreed to differ. We have not often disputed, and never have quarrelled on account of this difference of opinion, nor on any other account. In our intercourse with the sick, each has given the other credit for what was good in him, instead of studying and publishing the other's faults. In every work for the promotion of medical science, or for elevating the profession, we have coöperated heartily, neither of us trying to push the other aside. And thus it is, that being now, as regards age, in the front rank in our profession,
we have continued to this day on terms of intimacy and friendship. This is something to rejoice in, and something for which we may properly thank God; and I know you will join me in giving thanks reverently.

As we are near the end of our journey, I hope I may be excused for stating this experiment and its results. I would show to young men how grateful these results are. I can say to them that our interests have been promoted by our friendly treatment of each other; that each of us has gained by it much more than either of us could have done by the sharpest quarrels. If they believe me, any two of them, placed side by side, as we were, may be induced to try the plan of a peaceful competition.

Enough, as regards ourselves. As regards the brethren, who have multiplied about us since we began our course, we have much cause for rejoicing. We were pioneers in a country not new, but not much cleared. We were not fully aware of it then, but when we commenced our career, our country had just begun to be assured of prosperity after the hard and exhausting revolution it had undergone. I will not indulge myself in relating to the young all the changes which have taken place since I began business in 1800. I will not point out how much, necessary to elevate the profession, was yet to be done. I cannot be supposed to intimate any deficiency in our predecessors. The community was not rich enough to encourage or aid in works for the public welfare. But the time was coming. We happened to be so situated as to be called to work. *Juniiores ad labores* was, not in words, but in effect, the motto, under which we were brought into service; and our arms, such as they were, with implements quite inferior to such as the present
day can furnish, were occupied in felling the trees. We worked to get up some log houses, useful for a time, but which we pulled down when no longer wanted. We have since then aided in getting up edifices more costly, and destined, I trust, to be permanently useful.

It has been my delight for many years past, as I believe it has been yours, to point out to others what a respectable body of junior practitioners has been rising up around us. Compare the power of distinguishing diseases, and the discretion in treating them, shown in young men of the present day, with the like characteristics of our medical men forty years ago, and you will find the advance to be very honorable. Medical science has been increasing in Europe and in this country. Our younger men have had great masters. Not to mention our own countrymen, they have had Laennec and Louis, and many others among the French; in Great Britain and Ireland too many to be named; and a host of surgeons, of whom you could best give the list. It may be said that it would have been shameful if they had not acquired much. But no such reproach falls on them; on the contrary, it is due to them to say, that they have fully availed themselves of their opportunities. For my own part, in looking at one, and now another, who have succeeded me in office, I think it enough to boast of that I aided in teaching them how to learn. I should be sorry to believe that they had not gone ahead of their predecessor. I only beg that they will allow him to be a sort of honorary member in the corps of young physic.

Let me put an end to this rambling, lest some one smile at the garrulity of old age. I designed this letter not only as a dedication, with reminiscences attached to