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“The Stars and Bars”

An Address by

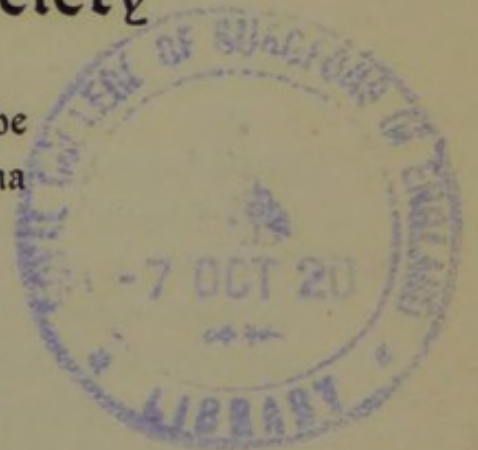
Rudolph Matas, M. D., LL. D.

Before the

Stars and Bars Society

of the School of Medicine of the
Tulane University of Louisiana

Thanksgiving, 1914







The Stars and Bars

Mr. President and Fellows of the Stars and Bars:—

This is Thanksgiving day, an auspicious and well chosen day, which the Brethren of our fraternity have selected for a yearly reckoning of the progress and advancement of their fellows. This day is set aside by national sentiment and usage for thoughtfulness and gratefulness in recognition of the prosperity, peace and bounty that a generous Providence has bestowed upon the American people as a Christian nation. Whatever may be said of the reasons that have prompted our government in maintaining and celebrating an institution so peculiar to the American people, it cannot be gainsaid that it had its origin in the purest motives, and in a faith that unifies mankind in a common brotherhood, foster reverence and loyalty to sacred and human ideals and encourages purity and righteousness among men. It is therefore a good day in which to gladden the hearts of the worthy, who, striving in the arduous paths of labor and duty, are thirsting for a message of encouragement and commendation, and it is likewise a good day in which to halt and to praise those whose achievements have already given them a place among the elect.

It is now nearly eight years since the keys of the "Stars and Bars" have been entrusted to the custody of the ten foremost Senior classmen of the School of Medicine of this University—who thus become the standard bearers of the class on each Thanksgiving day—in virtue solely, be it said, of their merits as established by their individual grades and records. It is only natural and just that this occasion should be keenly anticipated with the joy and gladness that is the right of those who by their earnestness, industry and ability are entitled to the distinction that the key, as an emblem of merit, confers upon each one of its recipients. Such an occasion is too significant and momentous to be regarded with only casual interest by the student body. It is intended as a stimulus and incentive to earnestness in study, to steadiness in work, to honesty of purpose,

intelligent appreciation of opportunity and rectitude of conduct,—and in this light, the keys which symbolically open the gates that lead to the Stars, are coveted by all those who are steadily looking forward and upward for their ultimate reward.

In harmony, therefore, with its intent and purpose, such an occasion as this must partake of the nature of an investiture and a ceremonial which in its very simplicity is fraught with the greatest significance. To be the herald and the messenger of the joyful tidings to those, who by their own efforts have become “Masters of the Keys,” is indeed a delightful privilege which, as one of your Senior teachers, I am happy to exercise in behalf of your approving officers and Faculty.

For is not the commendation and praise of good deeds in others one of the most gracious duties, one of the greatest of human pleasures? Does not the Scripture as expounded by its most renowned apostle exhort us “to render to all their dues; to tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor;” and, are we not enjoined by the same holy authority, “Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same.”

Did not Solomon, that wisest of the seers of antiquity, teach that “ointment and perfume rejoice the heart; so doth the sweetness of man’s friend by hearty praise and council,” or the same thought, interpreted centuries after in the language of the learned Bacon.—“*Nomen bonum instar unguenti fragrantis*,—the praise of men of judgment and sincerity is sweeter than the most fragrant ointments, for it filleth all around and about and will not easily fade away, for the odors of ointments are more durable than those of flowers.” And does not the immortal bard of Avon express the universal recognition of the justness and fitness of praise for worthy deeds when in Coriolanus he makes Cominius say unto the heroic Marcius:

“You shall not be
The grave of your deserving; Rome must know
The value of her own; ’twere a concealment
Worse than a theft; no less than a traducement,
To hide your doings.”

And in a more pious and reverent mood has not a latter day poet-philosopher written:

“The praise of holy men is the promise or praise
from the Master,

A forerunning earnest of thy welcome,—
Well done; faithful Servant,
A rich, melodious note, that droppeth softly in
thine ear,
To tell thee the chords of thy heart are in tune
with the Choirs of Heaven.”

The same gifted author of the proverbial philosophy also tells
us:

“The honest commendation of an equal no one
can scorn and be blameless,
Yet even that fair fame no one can hunt for and
be honored.
If it come accept it and be thankful, and be thou
humble in accepting.”

* * *

“With a friend, praise him when thou canst; for
many a friendship hath decayed.
Like a plant in a crowded corner, for want of
sunshine on its leaves.”

* * *

“Timely given praise is even better than the
merited rebuke of censure,
For the sun is more needful to the plant than the
knife that cutteth out a canker.”

On the other hand we are admonished:

“Praise a fool, and slay him; for the canvas of
his vanity is spread,
His bark is shallow in the water, and a sudden
gust shall sink it;
Praise a wise man, and speed him on his way: for
he carrieth the ballast of humility,
And is glad when his course is cheered by the
sympathy of brethren ashore.”

“The praise of a good man is good, for he holdeth
up the mirror of truth,
That virtue may see her own beauty, and delight
in her own fair face:
The praise of a bad man is evil, for he hideth the
deformity of vice,
Casting the mantle of a queen around the limbs
of a leper.

Praise is rebuked to the man whose conscience
alloweth it not:
And where conscience feeleth it her due, no
praise is better than a little.

He that despiseth the outward appearance, despiseth the esteem of his fellows:
And he that overmuch regardeth it, shall earn only their contempt."

* * *

"There is nothing more potent among men than a gift timely bestowed,
And a gift kept back where it was hoped, separateth chief friends:
For what is a gift but a symbol, giving substance to praise and esteem?
And where is a sharper arrow than the sting of unmerited neglect?"

And finally:

"O kindly feeling heart, be not thou chilled by the thankless,
Neither let the breath of gratitude fan thee into momentary heat.
Do good for good's own sake, looking not to worthiness nor love;
Fling thy grain among the rocks, cast thy bread upon the waters,
His claim be strongest to thy help who is thrown most helplessly upon thee,—
So shalt thou have a better praise, and reap a richer harvest of reward."

But enough has been said in justification of praise for good deeds, if such be needed. I could quote endlessly from the poets and sages of antiquity to prove unnecessarily that which we all recognize, that the praise, commendation and admiration of his fellows,—if not always the *primum movens*, is, and has always been, from the first days of primeval times one of the greatest incitives to human effort and achievements, for

"In all men, from the monarch to the menial,
lurketh lust of fame;
The savage and the sage alike regard their labors proudly;
Yea, in death, the glazing eye is illumed by the hope of reputation,
And the stricken warrior is glad that his wounds are salved with glory."

* * *

"For the thoughtful loveth fame as an earnest of better immortality,
The industrious and deserving as a symbol of just appreciation,

The selfish, as a promise of advancement, at least
to a man's own kin,
And common minds, as a flattering fact that men
have been told of their existance."

Recognizing this undying element in human nature, the rulers of mankind have never failed to provide tangible marks of public approval that could be worn as special badges of distinction by their possessors. From the ancient laurel that crowned the brow of the Greek poet, or the Roman conqueror, to the Victoria cross, the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, the order of the Red Eagle, or the Iron Cross, the Carnegie medal in this country, and other thousands of emblems with which every civilized nation recognizes merit in every career and walk of life, these symbols of human approval are held as precious possessions, and by many of the recipients, as precious as life itself.

It is said, that Marshall Canrobert, of Crimean fame, was lying grievously wounded and helpless on the battle field of Inkermann. As he lay expecting the approach of death, he heard the rush of a Cossack patrol and fearing he would be robbed of his decorations, though feeble and exsanguinated, he gathered strength enough to tear the grand medal of a Commander of the Legion of Honor, which still clung to his breast. Feeling for the large gap in his chest, which had been caused by a saber thrust, he plunged the precious decoration into his own flesh, thereby effectively concealing it. Later, when rescued by his own troops, the decoration was extracted from his wound, and he recovered to serve his country with glory in many other battlefields.

And so it is with the symbolic keys that let down the bars and open the way to the stars, which you, young men of the Senior Class of 1914, have earned for yourselves on this memorable Thanksgiving Day. Keep these keys as precious mementoes of your first success in your early professional career; not so much as rewards for deeds done, but as tokens of encouragement from your peers and your elders in the accomplishments that are expected of you. For the last three years you have traveled over a long and anxious road, through an arid and thorny country. Those of you who have kept in the lead of the caravan have reached the first oasis and are now quenching your parched throats with the cool and refreshing waters of the gushing spring of the desert. Are you to remain and linger here? Nay, none will stay

but those who are lured by the illusion and mirage of their own presumption and vain sufficiency. Nay,

“For the mariner slacketh not his sail, though the
sandal groves of Araby allure him;
And the fragrance of that incense would harm thee,
as when on a summer evening,
The honeyed yellow flowers of the broom oppress
thy charmed sense.”

Nay, my friends, this day only marks the first stop for refreshment on a long march. To-morrow you will tramp again to reach the post where your command will receive its last orders and instructions, before you launch as pioneers in the vast and unknown world of your future destiny. That will be your commencement day, which means the real beginning of your professional career. Then, before you start on your last and longest journey, look once more at this little emblem and reflect. Think of what it stands for; it stands for ability, for sobriety, for integrity, for character, in other words, a good mind, a white soul, and a capacity for work. These are the essential fundamentals for success in any capacity; but in medicine, far more than in any other career, they are the *sine qua non* of happiness as well as success. Those of you who have earned your fellowship in this fraternity are well started in the race, but innumerable pitfalls lie in your way, and woe be to anyone of you who, forgetful of the conditions by which, and through which, he became master of the talisman that is given him today, allows himself to be lured into the forked and somber paths of the evil doer. That day, the key which is now so bright and polished and so pleasant to hold, will tarnish, blacken and blur, and it shall burn and char the impure conscience and soiled fingers of him who holds it in defiance of the trust and honor-binding pledges under which it was given him.

To those who have understood its meaning, this little bit of metal will grow brighter, larger and more precious, as time grows longer and the memories of this occasion loom up in the splendor of the sunset of a well spent and useful life. To each and every one of you, I extend greetings and a hearty welcome into the innermost circle of the fraternity, with the pass word, *Aspera ad astra*: the way to the stars is rugged, but if you have the key, you may learn how to “hitch to a star” and move with it.

Rudolph Matas.

