Biographical Notice of the late J. Greely Stevenson

Paper read on the 2d from his sister Jane Williams

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FROM THE BOSTON MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL.

"DIED, June 5th, 1835, at the White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, J. G. Stevenson, M.D. aged 36."

This short sentence contains matter of deep interest alike to many friends, and to the public. In the death of Dr. Stevenson his friends have lost one whom they honored and loved; the public have lost a useful citizen. He would have asked no other memorial than this. He would have been satisfied to have known that he had been thought in any sense faithful to his public and to his private duties. He was singularly averse to all such display as has for its end to draw particular attention to the individual, and still he was constantly directing his mind to what would be widely felt. He was strictly a professional man, a studious and practical physician; but the very offices which these relations involve were always bringing before him matters of various and important concern, and about these he labored to acquire accurate information, and carefully laid up what he learnt, to be beneficially used as opportunity might allow. This interest in what was personal to himself, belonging to his daily occupations, and in what was of a more strictly public nature, was always apparent to those who were at all intimate with him. They saw in him a strong and active interest in present objects, and a preparation steadily acquiring strength for the future. The story of such a life is soon told. But its elements are too interesting to be passed over in a simple enumeration of them. The memory of such a character is good for those who cherish it; and friendship asks to make a record of it in the hope that the good of others may be promoted, while it is indulged in paying its last melancholy tribute.

J. Greely Stevenson was born in Boston, March 28th, 1799. Having received his preparatory education in the Public Writing, Grammar and Latin School of his native town, he was entered at Harvard in 1812, being 13 years of age. He graduated in 1816, and began the study of medi-

cine under the direction of the late Dr. John Gorham. The friendly and affectionate interest taken by Dr. Gorham in his pupil continued unabated to his death, and on that event many of those who had been under his professional care, transferred their confidence at once to his pupil, who retained it undiminished during his life. In memory of his deeply valued instructor, Dr. Stevenson gave to his eldest son his name.

In 1817, Dr. Stevenson was appointed tutor in the Latin School, and very soon succeeded to the place of sub-master. During this time he continued his professional studies. He went to England in May, 1824, and remained abroad till November, 1825, visiting France and Italy. His health had become impaired by a very sedentary life, and in going to Europe he looked for and found among rare opportunities for acquiring knowledge, the means of re-establishing his health. He graduated Doctor in Medicine in Harvard University, February, 1826. The thesis he read and defended on this occasion was on the "Theory of Disease."

From this time we find him actively engaged in the duties of his profession. He was chosen one of the physicians of the Boston Dispensary when fewer physicians than now held the office at the same time, and when of course the practice in this most excellent charity was much more extensive and arduous to the medical officers than it is at present. He prized the advantages offered him by the Dispensary very highly, and long after he had left it, he continued his gratuitous services to many who had been his patients on the charity. The estimation in which he was held in this institution is fully shown by his being appointed one of its Directors. His services in the public school were not forgotten in his after life, when the maturity of his judgment and the great accuracy of his views on all matters of his regard, could be made useful in their application to our system of education. He was chosen one of the School Committee, and devoted to this important office all the time and labor his other duties allowed.

It is in the memory of all, that wherever cholera has first appeared, it has brought alarm and panic with it. As soon as it has touched a country or a continent, dismay has manifested itself. Distance is felt to be no security against its invasions, and death has been in its whole career. In view of these facts it occurred to Dr. Stevenson that great good might be done by an association which should combine numbers, great numbers, and of all classes and of all professions, for the simple and pledged purpose to assist each other in case the disease appeared here, and to offer their aid to the whole community. He talked with some friends upon this subject. The plan was well received, and the *Relief Society* was organized. The city was divided into convenient departments—

committees appointed over these—and under the direction of these were placed all the members residing in the several districts, the committees having had granted to them the fullest powers in disposing of individuals just as the circumstances of cases might demand. The effect of all this was truly good. The disease came, and at first it attacked some numbers, but never many ; but these had the constant care of judicious individuals anxious at all hours to render them most useful assistance. A sense of security came thus to be imparted to the whole community, and this was doubtless among the causes that prevented a wider spread of the desolating epidemic.

Another institution which owed its origin to Dr. Stevenson, and which was earlier in time than the last, was the *Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*. For many years lectures from learned men, on a great variety of topics, have been given before this Society under the direction of its officers, and the public interest in them has been kept up. Its publications have been very useful. It adopted the plan of rendering its instructions easily accessible to all classes, by making the expense of attending on them very small, and this has been followed by succeeding associations. The direct agency of Dr. Stevenson in forming this society, and in aiding to continue its operations through its whole history, deserves a distinct and honorable mention among his efforts for advancing the public good.

To the cause of *Temperance* Dr. Stevenson devoted himself with the same wise zeal which marked his career in all good objects. He was early a member of our State Society, and for some years one of its Secretaries. Nothing but sickness ever kept him from the meetings of the Council. He was anxious that the wise and good of all he knew might lend their aid to this cause. In talking of it one day to a friend, he acknowledged that in looking back on what he had done, of a public nature, he thought his efforts for the *Temperance Reform* came to his remembrance as among those which he could find most pleasure in. The good done here he felt was a great and obvious good, and in the union of men of all countries and all classes, in this cause, he with all its friends looked for its sure success.

Dr. Stevenson died at an age when the individual, if ever, takes his place amongst men; when the mind manifests its power, and the conduct discovers to all the moral character of the individual. He had passed through the discipline which is the lot of self-dependence, and he had passed it honorably and successfully. He was not a man to regret that such had been his lot. Its discipline is severe, and the demands it makes great, and sometimes hard to be borne. Still he felt that in its path, however narrow, occasions were always to be met with which a man may

make useful both to himself and others. The great opportunity for individual progress furnished by such a beginning of life, is the labor, the moral and intellectual labor, it imposes; and success comes to none with such deep, such true enjoyment, as to those who have been, through their whole course, the ministers to their own good progress. In our brief history of his life may be seen how successful he had been. Feeble health, which took him occasionally from necessary occupation, did not depress him. He submitted with almost unexampled cheerfulness to the painful and to the discouraging, and his efficiency always returned along with power.

Dr. Stevenson's character may be gathered from what has been narrated of him. But there were elements in it which claim to be more distinctly noticed. The first and most important of these was the love of truth. He held in abhorrence every form of untruth. However and wherever this was discovered by him, you saw how deeply it affected him. It shook his confidence in the moral nature, and rebuke, silent or openly declared, he always felt it to be his duty to express. With this supreme love of truth there was united what almost always accompanies it, a perfect absence of fear of the individual. Awe of man never entered into the great sentiment of benevolence with which he regarded all men. He possessed true moral courage. These elements, if existing alone, not rarely lead to the repulsive, and frequently the unamiable; but when combined with true kindness, form together the most perfect character. In Dr. Stevenson there was this union. Kindness was as much a part of him as any the strongest of his affections. It extended to everything which could feel its power. He considered kind doing, springing from the desire to promote good, an act of devotion. "When," said he one day, "I take my horse out of the hot sunshine into the shade, that I may add to his comfort, I feel as if I had offered devotion to God. What is it but an act of kindness, a form of love, and on what higher principle than benevolence can man's conduct rest?" This simple anecdote is better than a whole history of character. This spirit of kindness was always with him. It manifested itself in early life. As one of the instructors in the Latin School, it gave to his conduct to his scholars what they never forgot. His requirements were distinctly declared, and rigidly enforced. He was as honest then, to himself and to others, as at the latest period of his life. But his native kindness was present with discipline, and however severe occasion might make this, the boys always loved while they respected him. Their attachment was declared by many acts when he was making his preparations for going to Europe. We hope we may be permitted to name one who never ceased in the

recollection of his school days, to express his sincere respect and unabated affection for Dr. Stevenson, the late Dr. James Jackson, Jr. He felt the moral beauty of his character, and loved to dwell on the season he had passed under his instruction. He, too, is dead. He died in the earliest days of manhood, but his youth was as the ripeness of advanced life. Truly was knowledge gray hairs unto him, and his spotless life was old age.

Dr. Stevenson's mind was steadily and wisely cultivated. His early education was unusually accurate, and the foundation he then laid for classical learning served him in his later studies of ancient literature. His residence in France and Italy made him familiar with the language and writings of those countries, and he came to the study of his profession with a variety in his means of medical learning, which is not very common among our students. He was faithful to his advantages. He was always a student. He read medicine to the last, with his pen in his hand, and his manuscripts show how great was his industry. He took great delight in reading, and he had a remarkable facility in doing this, which enabled him to read a great deal in a short time. His memory was very retentive, and in giving accounts of books, quoting opinions of authors, and stating facts, the greatest accuracy was habitually shown. He had special dislike to exaggeration. His love of truth made everything like this offensive, and hence he was always ready, and happy to report things, whether facts, doctrines, or opinions, just as they were set down or met with, and for the most part in the language in which he had heard or read them. He was thus an industrious and faithful student. His judgment was excellent, and his strong, native understanding, peculiarly fitted him for the profession he had chosen. He collected its facts with great care, saw the differences of things, the true key to all knowledge, distinctly, and was thus enabled to form accurate diagnoses. His progress had begun to be rapid. He deserved the public confidence, and was receiving it, and the best prospects were before him of extensive and honorable professional reputation.

His intellectual and moral qualities, thus imperfectly sketched, were discoverable in his relations with others. In his intercourse with the sick his manner was simple, mild, dignified, and remarkably direct. In his directions to his patients these qualities were always strikingly displayed, so that no important mistake could arise as to the use of remedies by attendants, unless from great forgetfulness or carelessness. The deceptions which the infirmities of disease, the mistaken kindness or indulgence of friends, occasionally gave rise to, and which, though very rarely, proceed from worse motives, Dr. Stevenson always regard-

ed as of too serious moment ever to be passed over unnoticed. At first he treated them mildly, but with such firmness of manner as to show what his thoughts of them were, and if persisted in, he ceased his attendance, and this sometimes at once, and without any remark. He felt that the contract which is tacitly entered into by the physician and patient, made up as it is of the rightful and necessary confidence which must subsist between them,—the belief that what is directed is wisely ordered, and the trust that it will be complied with,—he felt that this relation was severed when the rule was purposely departed from, more especially if the deviation had been concealed, and that he could no longer benefit his patient.

Dr. Stevenson's character was equally declared in his intercourse with society. His address was singularly attractive. This he owed to his moral habits, and his intellectual cultivation. These however were much aided by the benevolent expression of his countenance, and his finely toned voice. The writer speaking of him after the news of his death reached us, to one who had long known him, and whose opinions we all respect, having dwelt on what he thought his distinguishing traits for some time, the individual referred to, remarked, "What you say is all true. Dr. Stevenson was a 'gentleman,' and by this term I mean to express the combination of all the qualities, the kindness, the courtesy, the moral dignity, &c., which we have always found in him." This it was which secured to him the large good will and respect which he enjoyed. He made friends wherever he was, whether in Pisa, in Italy, where he resided some time, and formed friendships which outlived long absence and distance; or in the far south and west of our own continent, where he lately sought for means of renovated health, but where he found his distant grave. The casual companions of his journeyings soon became fond of him, and it is cause of the truest consolation to his friends to know that though so distant from them, in the last weeks and days of his life, he had the kindest attentions of those who travelled with him, when acute suffering and ultimately fatal illness asked those offices which those dearest to us have most power to bestow.

It was said that Dr. Stevenson discovered in early life a tendency to grave disease, but that this seemed to have passed away under the salutary uses of foreign travel. But he could never have been called perfectly healthy. He was apparently robust, and in full flesh, while his countenance was pallid, and more or less difficulty in breathing was produced in ascending heights and on quick motion. Still he kept on, faithful to duty, laboring in a field which required many sacrifices, but yielding to such a mind the most precious fruits. About two years ago he

lost two children, his only sons. It hardly need be said how deeply afflictive these losses were. He braced himself up to duty in the midst and pressure of this accumulated sorrow, and grew firmer in the accomplishment of what was before him, by the discipline under which he so deeply suffered. It was thought however by those who most closely watched him, that he gradually lost health after these events. Perhaps failure had been longer making progress, and now declared itself with more power under the weight of trouble which came upon him. He made no complaint, and however ill and feeble he might look, always answered the inquiries about himself in a cheerful manner, declaring he felt quite well. This same indisposition to complain, to make painful demands on the sympathy of those around him, characterised his whole long illness, and did not desert him even in the day and the hour of death.

More than a year ago Dr. Stevenson was seized with an obscure disease, resembling in many of its symptoms continued fever, and having complicated with these others of less easily determined character. He was confined to bed some weeks, and during convalescence went from home, and continued in the country until health seemed tolerably restored. He however was never perfectly well after this. He suffered from severe pain, and at times great swelling of one of his legs. His stomach was frequently so irritable as not to tolerate food for a day or more, rejecting whatever might be taken, unchanged, and with hardly the least previous nausea. He had also headache at times, soreness of throat, and increasing difficulty of breathing, occasionally accompanied by cough. His nights were sleepless, and his days or most part of them filled up with professional, and not unfrequently hard labor. The winter passed by, and as the spring returned it was judged best by his medical advisers that he should leave home in this very harsh season in New England, and pass some months at the south. Under this advice he went to Charleston, S. Carolina. He gained nothing while there, and finding some of his complaints to be increasing, left Charleston for the White Sulphur Springs in Virginia. His journey was full of suffering. Dropsy, which had been confined to one limb, soon extended itself over the whole body. The difficulty of breathing amounted at times almost to suffocation. In his letters he sometimes spoke of his extreme suffering from this cause. But when he did so, and gave his symptoms in the fullest details, it was after such a manner that you might easily suppose he was stating professionally the case of somebody else, and not his own. So remarkable was this in his letters, that a friend in writing him remarked particularly upon it, and added that this gave him the strongest hope of his ultimate recovery.

His powers of mind remained unweakened to the very last. He was sitting up on the day of his death, and a friend seeing how exhausted he was, and believing from sure signs that he was dying, urged his lying down. He consented, but said he had no other reason for doing so than to gratify this friend. He had in fact that day spoken of making arrangements for proceeding in a carriage to a more elevated spot, where he thought he should certainly breathe more easily. He laid himself down on his bed, closed his eyes as for sleep, and never opened them again. His death came by approaches at last so gentle, that he knew not of its coming; and sunk into his everlasting rest, as tranquilly as if he only slept.

The following is the epitaph on his gravestone :—

"JONATHAN GREELY STEVENSON,

OF BOSTON.

Died 5th June, 1835.—Aged 36 Years.

Were his grave in his native city, it would require no epitaph.

The inscription of his name, there universally known, would suffice to tell, that beneath it repose the remains of a highly gifted, just and generous man,—a pre-eminently learned and skilful physician,—a most active and judicious philanthropist; and of a son, a husband, a father, a brother and a friend, than whom none was ever more devoted, or more devotedly beloved.

He lived in the exercise, and died in the hopes of the faith, that though 'the dust shall return to the earth as it was, the spirit shall return to God who gave it.'"

D. Clapp, Jr. Printer.....184 Washington St.