

EXHORTATIONS

TO THE

CANDIDATES FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF

ARTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

EXHORTATION I.

By Robert Leighton

WERE I allowed to speak freely what I sincerely think of most of the affairs of human life, even those that are accounted of the highest importance, and transacted with the greatest eagerness and bustle, I should be apt to say, "that a great noise is made about the merest trifles:" but if you should take this amiss, as a little unseasonable upon the present occasion, and an insult upon your solemnity, I hope you will the more easily forgive me, that I place in the same rank with this philosophical convention of yours, the most famous councils and general assemblies of princes and great men; and say of their golden crowns, as well as your crowns of laurel, "that they are things of no value, and not worth the purchasing." Even the triumphal, inaugural, or nuptial processions of the greatest kings and generals of armies, with whatever pomp and magnificence, as well as art, they may be set off, are, after all, so far true representations of their false, painted, and tinsel happiness, that, while we look at them, they fly away; and, in a very short time, they are followed *by* their funeral processions, which are the triumphs of death over those who have themselves triumphed during their lives. The scenes are shifted, the actors also disappear; and, in the same manner, the greatest shows of this vain world likewise pass away. Let us, that we may lop off the luxuriant branches of our vines, take a nearer view of this object, and remember, that what we now call a laurel crown, will soon be followed by cypress wreaths. It will be also proper to consider how many, who, in their time, were employed as we are now, have long ago acted their parts, and are now consigned to a long oblivion; as also, what vast numbers of the rising generation are following us at the heels, and, as it were, pushing us forward to the same land of forgetfulness; who, while they are hurrying us away, are at the same time hastening thither themselves. All that we see, all that we do, and all that we are, are but mere dreams; and if we are not sensible of this truth, it is because we are still asleep: none but minds that are awake can discern it; they, and they only, can perceive and despise these illusions of the night. What is it, pray, to which, with the most ardent wishes, you have been aspiring throughout the whole course of these four last years? Here you have a cap and a title, and nothing at all more.

But, perhaps, taking this amiss, you secretly blame me in your hearts, and wish me to congratulate you upon the honour you have obtained. I cheerfully comply with your desire, and am willing to explain myself. These small presents are not the principal reward of your labours, nor the chief end of your studies; but honorary marks and badges of that erudition and knowledge wherewith your minds have been stored by the uninterrupted labours of four whole years. But whatever attainments in learning you have reached, I would have you seriously to reflect, how inconsiderable they are, and how little they differ from nothing; nay, if what we know is compared with what we know not, it will be found even vastly

less than nothing: at least, it is an argument of little knowledge, and the sign of a vain and weak mind, to be puffed up with an overbearing opinion of our own knowledge: while on the contrary, it is an evidence of great proficiency in knowledge, to be sensible of our ignorance and inability. "He is the wisest man," says Plato, "who knows himself to be very ill qualified for the attainment of wisdom."

You, young gentlemen, I imagine, entertain good hopes with regard to your future fortune; nor would I discourage those hopes, yet I would gladly moderate them a little by this wholesome advice: lean not upon a broken reed, neither let any one who values his peace, his real dignity and his satisfaction, give himself up to hopes that are uncertain frail, and deceitful. The human race are, perhaps, the only creatures that by this means become a torment to themselves; for, as we always grasp at futurity, we vainly promise ourselves many and great things, in which, as commonly happens, being for the most part disappointed, we must, of necessity, pay for our foolish pleasure with a proportionate degree of pain. Thus, the greatest part of mankind find the whole of this wretched life chequered with delusive joys and real torments, ill-grounded hopes, and fears equally imaginary: amidst these, we live in continual suspense, and die so too.

But a few—alas! a few only, having set their hearts upon heavenly enjoyments, take pleasure in despising with a proper greatness of mind, and trampling upon, the fading enjoyments of this world. These make it their only study, and exert their utmost efforts, that, having the more divine part of their composition weaned from the world and the flesh, they may be brought to a resemblance and union with the holy and supreme God, the Father of spirits, by purity, piety, and an habitual contemplation of divine objects: and this, to be sure, is the principal thing, with a noble ambition whereof I would have your minds inflamed; and whatever profession or manner of life you devote yourselves to, it is my earnest exhortation and request, that you would make this your constant and principal study. Fly, if you have any regard to my advice, fly far from that controversial, contentious school-divinity, which, in fact, consists in fruitless disputes about words and rather deserves the name of vain and foolish talking.

Almost all mankind are constantly catching at something more than they possess, and torment themselves in vain; nor is our rest to be found among these enjoyments of the world, where all things are covered with a deluge of vanity, as with a flood of fluctuating, restless waters; and the soul, flying about, looking in vain for a place on which it may set its foot, most unhappily loses its time, its labour, and itself at last, like the birds in the days of the flood, which having long sought for land, till their strength was quite exhausted, fell down at last, and perished in the waters.

Oh! how greatly preferable to these bushes, and briars, and thorns, are the delightful fields of the gospel, wherein pleasure and profit are agreeably mixed together, whence you may learn the way to everlasting peace; that poverty of spirit, which is the only true riches; that purity of heart, which is our greatest beauty; and that inexpressible satisfaction, which attends the exercise of charity, humility, and meekness! When your minds are stored and adorned with these graces, they will enjoy the most pleasing tranquility, even amidst the noise and tumults of this present life; and you will be, to use the words of Tertullian, candidates for eternity—a title infinitely more glorious and sublime than what has been this day conferred upon you. And that great and last day, which is so much dreaded by the slaves of this present world, will be the most happy and auspicious to you; as it will deliver you from a dark,

dismal prison, and place you in the regions of the most full and marvelous light.

Let us pray

MOST exalted God, who hast alone created, and dost govern this whole frame, and all the inhabitants thereof, visible and invisible, whose name is alone Wonderful, and to be celebrated with the highest praise, as it is indeed above all praise and admiration! Let the heavens, the earth, and all the elements, praise thee; let darkness, light, and all the returns of days and years, and all the varieties and vicissitudes of things, praise thee; let the angels praise thee, the archangels and all the blessed court of heaven, whose very happiness it is, that they are constantly employed in celebrating thy praises We confess, O Lord, that we are of all creatures the most unworthy to praise thee; yet, of all others, we are under the greatest obligations to do it; nay, the more unworthy we are, our obligation is so much the greater. From this duty, however unqualified we may be, we can by no means abstain, nor indeed ought we. Let our souls bless thee, and all that is within us praise thy holy name, who forgivest all our sins, and healest all our diseases, who deliverest our souls from destruction, and crownest them with bounty and tender mercies. Thou searchest the heart, O Lord, and perfectly knowest the most intimate recesses of it: reject not those prayers which thou perceivest to be the voice and the wishes of the heart. Now it is the great request of our hearts, unless they always deceive us, that they may be weaned from all earthly and perishing enjoyments; and if there is anything to which they cleave with more than ordinary force, may they be pulled away from it by thy Almighty hand, they may be joined to thee for ever in an inseparable marriage covenant; and, in our behalf, we have nothing more to ask. We only add, in behalf of thy church, that it may be protected under the shadow of thy wings, and everywhere, throughout the world, be watered by thy heavenly dew, that the spirit and heat of worldly hatred against it may be cooled, and its intestine divisions, whereby it is much more grievously scorched, extinguished. Bless this nation, this city, and this university, in which we beg thou wouldst be pleased to reside, as in a garden dedicated to thy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. A-Men.

--Robert Leighton