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Dr. Farr's Commemoration address

WHAT are we to do with our young lawyers, doctors, and other professional men? Dr. Farr in his recent address at the University commemoration pointed out that the schools of law, medicine, and music have the largest number of students, and the reason he assigned is the fact that these subjects have the greatest direct bearing on the students' future lives. In the majority of cases no doubt a liberal education is being secured as the means of obtaining a livelihood. The number of youths whose studies are directly influenced by this consideration grows rapidly. The Vice-Chancellor gave a few statistics showing that whereas in 1874 there were only 6 undergraduates, and seven years afterwards only 15, at the end of another four years the number had sprung to 95, and last year it was 115. The fees meanwhile had leaped up from £6 15s. to over £3,300. While it is thus evident that the advantages afforded by the University are being extensively utilised, it is also clearly apparent that there is a marked advance in the number of persons who seek to enter a professional life. The same fact may be gathered from the annual reports of the colleges and other establishments where a superior education is given. There is ardent emulation among tutors, a willingness on the part of parents to invest money in developing the talents of promising children, and among the young people all the stimulus that keen competition can supply. Success in lower grades will naturally prompt to entrance on those that are above, and there is thus every prospect of the University classes being still more largely reinforced. The important questions relate to what will follow. When the educational course is completed so far as circumstances will permit what shall we do with all these professional men, or rather, what will they do for themselves? Can we find suitable work and adequate remuneration for them, or will their ranks be so overcrowded as to make their lives a struggle and to substitute for a brilliant career vexation and disappointment?

In a recent article in the *London Spectator* the outlook of professional life is discussed in a very gloomy fashion. The writer, quoting from a German statist, alleges that in Germany there is not professional work enough for one-third of the young men who are wanting to engage in it, and as a consequence either the whole must suffer most seriously from its subdivision or a majority must go without food. It is added that both Germany and America are overrun with half-starved professional men, and the fear is expressed that before long the position will be the same in the United Kingdom. If the results predicted are not greatly exaggerated we are certain to feel the effects of the altered conditions. In the older countries one of the stock remedies for a plethora in any department of industry is emigration, and hence there is for Australia the cheerless prospect of others than artisans having to complain that they are ruined by cheap labor from foreign countries. One reason assigned for the position of professional men is that the increase of remunerative work to be done by educated people bears no proportion to the increase of those who contend for it. In some directions there is no great expansion of the work. In law for instance the modern tendency is to simplify what is intricate, and such matters as the transfer of land have undergone considerable changes. On the other hand the rush for employment increases, and is probably only now

In the preliminary stage. It is said to be a natural consequence of the improved systems of primary education that a larger number of applicants for the higher branches are coming forward. The development of ability to engage in professional pursuits has continued to increase, and therewith a desire to make the most of it. The *Spectator* observes a growing distaste not only for mere manual labor, but for shop life, and for what is regarded as monotonous generally. The greater accumulation and diffusion of wealth bring a number of young men into the field who have small fixed incomes, and who, regarding their individual gains as supplementary, are likely to force prices down. It is also argued that owing to the financial changes in the productiveness of invested capital professional men find themselves obliged to stay longer in harness than formerly. It requires a much larger fortune to yield a fixed and certain return of say £500 per annum than was the case twenty-five years ago. Hence, while the crowd pushing into the field is larger, the way is not cleared for it. To all this must be added the centralising effect of modern industry and railway communication. Doctors, lawyers, and others in large towns absorb more and more the lion's share, and the rural practitioner finds himself left in the lurch. It is so easy to run up to town in these days, and there is such a convergence of talent there that the client or patient sees that it is more to his interest to visit than to be visited in case of need. Thus it is concluded that the outlook of professional life is extremely discouraging, for while the work is being divided among a greater number of persons there is on the whole less to be done, and accordingly the prizes offered are both fewer and less valuable.

To the general community this view of the case may not be altogether displeasing. Democracy hates large incomes, and cannot see why toll of brains should be paid for so much more highly than toll of hands. Many people will frankly admit that we can get on quite well enough even if we have to do with fewer lawyers and doctors, and so may regard their difficulties with tolerable equanimity. Then there is another side to the question. The diminished value of brain work is distinct evidence that the capacity for it is becoming more abundant, and therein is cause for general congratulation. The larger the average of well informed, able, and clever people the better, even if they are not all able to earn a thousand a year. One fact, however, ought not to be lost sight of. The openings for the exercise of ability are certainly increasing in some departments; and though no statistics are possible, it is not unlikely that on the whole they are keeping pace with the supply. If law and medicine are choked, the progress of inventions, the development of sanitary science, the expansion of great engineering undertakings, and the improvement in education itself, all present opportunities which have multiplied enormously, demanding the employment of highly-trained faculties. It would be much to be regretted if social conditions should so alter as to discourage higher education. The professional classes contribute immensely to intellectual improvement. They constantly aid in promoting culture and refinement, and serve the best interests of the community in that way. Their position in the social scale is commonly regarded as superior; but it is due in almost every instance to their own diligence, and has been won by sheer hard work. It is difficult to suggest an adequate remedy for the danger of over-production that threatens, but at least there should be careful consideration of the prospect before the choice of a profession is made. If that were always done there would be fewer failures, and a greater degree of correspondence between supply and demand.