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A RETROSPECT¹

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It is the custom of our association that the annual presidential address should be delivered, not by the actual president, who assumed the responsibilities and honors of his office at the close of the last meeting a year ago, but by his predecessor, who by courtesy is termed the "retiring president" although as a matter of fact he is not "retiring" but "retired." He has to the best of his ability sustained the responsibilities of the presidency and has been relieved of them, he has enjoyed the honor of the position and has retired beyond the range of the spot-light only to be dragged into it once more with even greater responsibilities than before. Professor Dana in his presidential address of nearly seventy years ago describes this situation more eloquently than I can. "In most offices," he said, "the duties terminate with the office, and the thing of the past, the ex-officer, is to the present an unknown quantity. But it is not so with your president. Science . . . sternly drags forward its reluctant presidents to their hardest trial when they have ceased to be, to a judgment after death severer than that of Rhadamanthus." And Professor Asa Gray nearly twenty years later naturally and happily employing a botanical metaphor, compared the president to a biennial plant: "He flourishes for the year in which he comes into existence and performs his appropriate functions as a presiding officer. When the second year comes round, he is expected to blossom out in an address and disappear."

This arrangement has its advantages in that it affords what should be ample time for the preparation of such an address as the occasion and the position demands; for a speaker from this rostrum is confronted with the responsibility of speaking as one having authority, as a representative of science and while he may not have the ability to duly mix "reason with pleasure and wisdom with wit," he may be expected to set forth with surety and clarity the faith that is in him as to the achievements and progress of science, or at least of that department of science which he cultivates. Few can see this responsibility approach with cool, calm composure and assurance and alas! the very fact that one has apparently ample time for the preparation of one's pronouncements

¹ Address of the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Seventy-fifth Annual Meeting, Cincinnati, 1923.

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