

## THE ART OF LIFE,—THE SCHOLAR'S CALLING.

LIFE is an art. When we consider what life may be to all, and what it is to most, we shall see how little this art is yet understood. What life may be to all is shown us in the lives of the honored few, whom we have learned to distinguish from the rest of mankind, and to worship as the heroes and saints of the world. What life is to most is seen wherever we turn our eyes. To all, life may be freedom, progress, success. To most men it is bondage, failure, defeat. Some have declared all life to be a tragedy. The life of most men is rightly so termed. What can be more tragical, than after long years of weary watching and ceaseless toil, in which all the joy and strength of our days have been wasted in pursuit of some distant good, to find, at last, that the good thus sought was a shadow, a sham, that the sum total of our endeavor, with no positive increase has left us *minus* our youth, our faculty, our hope, and that the three score years have been a livelong illusion. This is the great ground-tragedy, in which all other tragedies and sorrows and defeats of man's life are comprised. Such is the actual condition of mankind. Look at our educated men. Of the hundreds, whom every year sends forth to wander in the various paths of active life, how many are there who find or even seek the bread that alone can satisfy the hungering, dreaming heart of man? How many sell their strength and waste their days and "file their minds" for some paltry clerkship or judgeship or

senatorship; or some phantom which they term a competence; or at the best some dream of Fame — “*ingens gloriae cupido quæ etiam sapientibus novissima exiit*” — and find, when the race is done and the heat is won, that they are no nearer than before the true end of their being, and that the great work of life is still to do.

The work of life, so far as the individual is concerned, and that to which the scholar is particularly called, is *self-culture*, — the perfect unfolding of our individual nature. To this end above all others the art, of which I speak, directs our attention and points our endeavor. There is no man, it is presumed, to whom this object is wholly indifferent, — who would not willingly possess this too, along with other prizes, provided the attainment of it were compatible with personal ease and worldly good. But the business of self-culture admits of no compromise. Either it must be made a distinct aim or wholly abandoned.

“I respect the man,” says Goethe, “who knows distinctly what he wishes. The greater part of all the mischief in the world arises from the fact, that men do not sufficiently understand their own aims. They have undertaken to build a tower, and spend no more labor on the foundation than would be necessary to erect a hut.” Is not this an exact description of most men’s strivings? Every man undertakes to build his tower and no one counts the cost. In all things the times are marked by a want of steady aim and patient industry. There is scheming and plotting in abundance, but no considerate, persevering effort. The young man launches into life with no definite course in view. If he goes into trade he has perhaps a general desire to be rich, but he has at the same time an equally strong desire for present gratification and luxurious living. He is unwilling to pay the price of his ambition. He endeavors to secure the present, and lets go the future. He turns seed-time into harvest, eats the corn which he ought to plant. If he goes into professional life, he sets out with a general desire to be eminent, but without considering in what particular he wishes to excel, and what is the price of that excellence. So he divides his time and talents among a great variety of pursuits; endeavoring to be all things, he becomes superficial in proportion as he is universal, and having acquired a brief reputation as worthless as it is short-lived, sinks down into hopeless insignificance.

Everything that man desires may be had for a price. The world is truer to us than we are to ourselves. In the great bargain of life no one is duped but by his own miscalculations, or baffled but by his own unstable will. If any man fail in the thing which he desires, it is because he is not true to himself, he has no sufficient inclination to the object in question. He is unwilling to pay the price which it costs.

Of self-culture, as of all other things worth seeking, the price is a single devotion to that object, — a devotion which shall exclude all aims and ends, that do not directly or indirectly tend to promote it. In this service let no man flatter himself with the hope of light work and ready wages. The work is hard and the wages are slow. Better pay in money or in fame may be found in any other path than in this. The only motive to engage in this work is its own inherent worth, and the sure satisfaction which accompanies the consciousness of progress, in the true direction towards the stature of a perfect man. Let him who would build this tower consider well the cost, whether in energy and endurance he have sufficient to finish it. Much, that he has been accustomed to consider as most desirable, he will have to renounce. Much, that other men esteem as highest and follow after as the grand reality, he will have to forego. No emoluments must seduce him from the rigor of his devotion. No engagements beyond the merest necessities of life must interfere with his pursuit. A meagre economy must be his income. “Spare fast that oft with gods doth diet” must be his fare. The rusty coat must be his badge. Obscurity must be his distinction. He must consent to see younger and smaller men take their places above him in Church and State. He must become a living sacrifice, and dare to lose his life in order that he may find it.

The scholar of these days has no encouragement from without. A cold and timid policy everywhere rebukes his aspirations. Everywhere “advice with scrupulous head” seeks to dehort and deter. Society has no rewards for him. Society rewards none but those who will do its work, which if the scholar undertake, he must straightway neglect his own. The business of society is not the advancement of the mind, but the care of the body. It is not the highest culture, but the greatest comfort. Accordingly, an endless multiplication of physical conveniences — an infinite

economy has become the *cultus*, the worship of the age. Religion itself has been forced to minister in this service. No longer a divine life — an end in itself, it has become a mere instrument and condition of comfortable living, either in this earth or in some transmundane state. A more refined species of sensual enjoyment is the uttermost it holds out.

On all hands man's existence is converted into a preparation for existence. We do not properly live in these days, but, everywhere, with patent inventions and complex arrangements, are getting ready to live; like that King of Epirus, who was all his lifetime preparing to take his ease, but must first conquer the world. The end is lost in the means. Life is smothered in appliances. We cannot get to ourselves, there are so many external comforts to wade through. Consciousness stops half way. Reflection is dissipated in the circumstances of our environment. Goodness is exhausted in aids to goodness, and all the vigor and health of the soul is expended in quack contrivances to build it up. O! for some moral Alaric, one is tempted to exclaim, who should sweep away, with one fell swoop, all that has been in this kind, — all the manuals and false pretensions of modern culture, and place men once more on the eternal basis of original Nature. We are paying dearer than we imagine for our boasted improvements. The highest life, — the highest enjoyment, the point at which, after all our wanderings, we mean to land, is the life of the mind — the enjoyment of thought. Between this life and any point of outward existence, there is never but one step, and that step is an act of the will, which no aids from without can supercede or even facilitate. We travel round and round in a circle of facilities, and come at last to the point from which we set out. The mortal leap remains still to be made.

With these objects and tendencies the business of self-culture has nothing to do. Its objects are immediate and ultimate. Its aim is to live now, to live in the present, to live in the highest. The process here is one with the end. With such opposite views the scholar must expect nothing from Society, but may deem himself happy, if for the day-labor, which necessity imposes, Society will give him his hire, and beyond that leave him free to follow his proper

calling, which he must either pursue with exclusive devotion, or wholly abandon. The more needful is it that he bring to the conflict the Prometheus spirit of endurance, which belongs of old to his work and line.

Besides this voluntary abstinence from temporal advantages and public affairs, the business of self-culture requires a renunciation of present notoriety, and a seclusion more or less rigorous from the public eye. The world is too much with us. We live out of doors. An all-present publicity attends our steps. Our life is in print. At every turn we are gazetted and shown up to ourselves. Society has become a chamber of mirrors, where our slightest movement is brought home to us with thousandfold reflections. The consequence is a morbid consciousness, a habit of living for effect, utterly incompatible with wholesome effort and an earnest mind. No heroic character, no depth of feeling, or clearness of insight can ever come of such a life. All that is best in human attainments springs from retirement. Whoso has conceived within himself any sublime and fruitful thought, or proposed to himself any great work or life, has been guided thereto by solitary musing. In the ruins of the capitol, Gibbon conceived his immortal "Rome." In a cavern on the banks of the Saale, Klopstock meditated his "Messiah." In the privacy of Woolsthorpe, Newton surmised the law which pervades the All. In the solitude of Erfurt, Luther received into his soul the new evangile of faith and freedom.

"And if we would say true  
 Much to the man is due  
 Who from his private gardens, where  
 He lived reserved and austere  
 As if his highest plot  
 To plant the bergamot  
 Could by industrious valor climb  
 To ruin the great work of time  
 And cast the Kingdoms old  
 Into another mould."

In retirement we first become acquainted with ourselves, our means, and ends. There no strange form interposes between us and the truth. No paltry vanity cheats us with false shows and aims. The film drops from our eyes. While we gaze the vision brightens; while we muse the fire burns. Retirement, too, is the parent of freedom. From

living much among men we come to ape their views and faiths, and order our principles, our lives, as we do our coats, by the fashion of the times. Let him who aspires to popular favor and the suffrage of his contemporaries court the public eye. But whoso would perfect himself and bless the world with any great work or example, must hide his young days in "some reclusive and religious life out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries."

Whatever selfishness there may seem to be in such a discipline as this, exists only in appearance. The influence it would have upon Society would, in fact, be hardly less beneficial than its influence on the individual himself. In self-culture lies the ground and condition of all culture. Not those, who seem most earnest in promoting the culture of Society, do most effectually promote it. We have reformers in abundance, but few who, in the end, will be found to have aided essentially the cause of human improvement; either because they have failed to illustrate in themselves the benefits they wished to confer, and the lesson they wished to inculcate, or because there is a tendency in mankind to resist overt efforts to guide and control them. The silent influence of example, where no influence is intended, is the true reformer. The only efficient power, in the moral world, is attraction. Society is more benefitted by one sincere life, by seeing how one man has helped himself, than by all the projects that human policy has devised for their salvation. The Christian church—the mightiest influence the world has known—was the product of a great example.

Every period has its own wants, and different epochs require a different discipline. There are times when mankind is served by conformity; and there are times when a sterner discipline is required to revive the heroic spirit in a puny and servile age. When the Athenian mind, emasculated by the luxury which succeeded the Persian wars, and corrupted by the mischievous doctrines of the Sophists, had lost its fine sense of justice and truth; then arose, with austere front and wholesome defiance, the Cynics and the Stoics, whose fan was in their hands, and whose lives went deeper than Plato's words. That the present is a period when examples like these would not be unprofitable, no one, I think, can doubt, who has considered well its characteris-

tic tendencies and wants—the want of courage, the want of faith, the hollowness of Church and State, the shallowness of teachers,

" Whose lean and flashy songs  
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,"

the hunger of the taught, who "look up and are not fed," and the frequent protest, which he who listens may hear from all the better spirits in the land. The time has come when good words are no longer of any avail. Book-teaching has become effete. No man teaches with authority. All are eager to speak, none are willing to hear. What the age requires is not books, but example, high, heroic example; not words but deeds; not societies but men,—men who shall have their root in themselves, and attract and convert the world by the beauty of their fruits. All truth must be lived before it can be adequately known or taught. Men are anterior to systems. Great doctrines are not the origin but the product, of great lives. The Cynic practice must precede the Stoic philosophy, and out of Diogenes's tub came forth in the end the wisdom of Epictetus, the eloquence of Seneca, and the piety of Antonine.

On this ground I am disposed to rejoice in those radical movements, which are everywhere springing up in the discontented spirits and misguided efforts of modern reform. Perfectionism, Grahamism, Nonresistance, and all the forms of ultraism, blind and headlong as they seem, have yet a meaning which, if it cannot command assent, must at least preclude contempt. They are the gropings of men who have waked too soon, while the rest of mankind are yet wrapt in sleep, and the new day still tarries in the East. The philosopher sees through these efforts, and knows that they are not the light that is to come; but he feels that they are sent to bear witness of the light, and hails them as the welcome tokens of approaching day. However our reason may disallow, however our taste may reject them, the thoughtful mind will perceive there the symptoms of a vitality which appears nowhere else. They are the life, however spasmodic, of this generation. There, or nowhere, beats the heart of the century. Thus the new in Church and State is always preceded by a cynical, radical spirit, which wages war with the old. Every genuine reform has its preacher in the wilder-

ness. First the Cynic John with hair cloth and fasts, then the God-man Jesus with the bread of life.

Meanwhile the scholar has his function, too, in this baptism of repentance. For him, too, the age has its problem and its task. What other reformers are to the moral culture, he must be to the mind of his age. By taste averse, by calling exempt, from the practical movements around him, to him is committed the movement of thought. He must be a radical in speculation, an ascetic in devotion, a Cynic in independence, an anchorite in his habits, a perfectionist in discipline. Secluded from without, and nourished from within, self-sustained and self-sufficing, careless of praise or blame, intent always on the highest, he must rebuke the superficial attainments, the hollow pretensions, the feeble efforts, and trivial productions, of his contemporaries, with the thoroughness of his acquisitions, the reach of his views, the grandeur of his aims, the earnestness of his endeavor.

It is to such efforts and to such men that we must look for the long expected literature of this nation. Hitherto our literature has been but an echo of other voices and climes. Generally, in the history of nations, song has preceded science, and the feeling of a people has been sooner developed than its understanding. With us this order has been reversed. The national understanding is fully ripe, but the feeling, the imagination of the people, has found as yet no adequate expression. We have our men of science, our Franklins, our Bowditches, our Cleavelands; we have our orators, our statesmen; but the American poet, the American thinker is yet to come. A deeper culture must lay the foundation for him, who shall worthily represent the genius and utter the life of this continent. A severer discipline must prepare the way for our Dantes, our Shakspeares, our Miltons. "He who would write an epic," said one of these, "must make his life an epic." This touches our infirmity. We have no practical poets, — no epic lives. Let us but have sincere livers, earnest, whole-hearted, heroic men, and we shall not want for writers and for literary fame. Then shall we see springing up, in every part of these Republics, a literature, such as the ages have not known, — a literature, commensurate with our idea, vast as our destiny and varied as our clime.