

ADVICE TO YOUTH.

AN ELOQUENT ADDRESS BY M. RÉNAN ON THE VALUE OF LIFE.

Subjoined are some of the more striking passages from an address made by M. Rénan to the pupils of the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris :

Consider the life before you as a matter serious and full of responsibilities. But is that a reason to regard you as less favored by fate than your predecessors? Quite the contrary, young people! Never say, as did those malcontents of whom the prophet speaks, "Our fathers have eaten sour grapes, and their children's teeth are set on edge." Your lot is fair, and I see a thousand reasons to envy it; not merely because you are young, and because youth is the entry upon an excellent thing, namely, existence, but you will see what we shall never see; you will know what we seek for restlessly; you will possess the solution of many political problems about which we hesitate, because the facts have not yet pronounced themselves with sufficient clearness.

Your years forbid you to be cautious. Nobody is fearful about life when he is beginning it. A kind of blindness, skilfully arranged by Nature, presents existence to you as a tempting booty which you burn to seize upon. Wiser men than you will warn you against the illusion which underlies your youthful ardor. They will tell you of disappointments; they will say that existence does not keep its promises, and that if people only knew what it was they took in hand, they would not have the *naïf emprise* of your age. But I declare to you that is not my sentiment. I have traversed this life, which opens before you like an unknown and limitless land. I expect to encounter nothing much more in it of the novel; its termination, which seems to you indefinitely far off, is very near for me. Well, with my hand on my heart, I say that I have found this life, which it is the fashion to calumniate, good, and well worthy the appetite which youth shows for it. The one real illusion of which you are guilty about it is, to believe it long. No, it is short, very short; but even thus I assure you it is well to have existed, and the first duty of man toward that Infinitude from which he emerges is to be grateful. The generous rashness which makes you enter, without a shadow of *arrière-pensée*, upon a career, at the close of which so many enlightened folks aver they have found nothing save disgust, is really very philosophic after its kind. Forward, therefore, with good hearts! suppress nothing of your ardor; that flame which burns within you is the same spirit which, providentially spread throughout the bosom of humanity, is the principle of its motive force. Forward, forward! say I; lose not your love and passion for living. Speak no evil of the boundless bountifulness from which your being emerges, and in the special order of individual fortunes bless the happy lot which has bestowed on you a generous country, devoted teachers, kind relations, and conditions of development in which you have no longer to strive against the old barbarisms.

That joyous intoxication, then, which springs from the new wine of life, and which renders you deaf to the weak complaints of the feeble-hearted, is legitimate. Do not be ashamed to abandon yourselves to its influences! You will find existence full of sweet savor, if you do not expect from it what it cannot give. When people complain of life, it is almost always because they have asked impossible things from it. Upon this believe wholly the teaching of the wisest,—there is but one foundation for a happy life; the pursuit, namely, of the good and of the true. You will be well pleased with existence if you make fair use of it, and if you abide well pleased with yourselves. A noble sentence is that which says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all the rest shall be added unto you."

On a similar occasion of this of to-day, but forty-three years ago, the illustrious M. Jouffrey addressed the following stern words to the pupils of the Lycée Charlemagne: "Our duty, to whom experience has unveiled the ultimate truths about the things of this world, is to announce it to you. The mountain's top of life hides from you its farthest slope; of its two sides you see but one, that which you are ascending; it is bright, beautiful, fragrant as spring time. You are not able, as we are, to contemplate the other fall, with its melancholy aspect, its pale sunlight, and the icy river flowing at the bottom." Well, my lads, I say no to all that. It is too mournful! The sunlight is never pale, though it is often veiled. Because a man grows old, has he the right to say that flowers have grown less lovely, and the springtide less radiant? Are we, forsooth, to grumble because we cannot live forever on earth? What rubbish is this, just heaven! Amidst all the flowers (and how sweet and fair that flower-world is!) only one seems to me without any charm. It is the sickly, dry, stiff, withered, disagreeably glittering thing which gardeners wrongly call "the immortelle." I do not call it a flower. I prefer the bright and sweet rose, though it has the defect of fading away all too soon.

You will behold the twentieth century, my young scholars. Ah! I confess I envy you that other privilege,—you will see the unforeseen! You will hear what posterity says of us; you will know what there was of solid and what of frail in our dreams. Be kind to us who preceded you. This poor old nineteenth century, which will be so well abused, had good people in it, faithful souls, warm hearts, and heroes of duty. Generations, as they follow each other, are oftentimes unjust to each other. You are the nursery-garden of the talent of the future. I fancy I descry amid you the very critic who, about the year 1910 or 1920 A.D., will sit in judgment on this age. I imagine I read his indictment (permit me to indulge my idea): "What a sign of the times! what a complete reversal of all proper notions of things, to choose in 1883 for our president at the distribution of prizes a man, harmless enough, but the very last who should have been selected, etc. He gave some good advice; but what feebleness, what lack of indignation against his times!" Thus, doubtless, will write the conscientious critic of the twentieth century, and perhaps he will not be far wrong; but do not let him forget to add how glad I was to be amongst you, how your marks of sympathy went to my heart, and how the touch of your youth revived and rejoiced me.

WHAT IS THE MISSION OF THE COMMON SCHOOL?

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The sweep of my argument is, that the State may take a very wide range in the educational field; that much will depend upon circumstances; no metes and bounds can be defined, save as groups of facts. But it is far more important that the State shall provide primary schools and grammar schools than colleges or even high schools. The following statistics are an impressive argument:

In 1881 there were enrolled in the primary and grammar schools of Ohio 714,819 pupils. The same year there were enrolled in high schools 29,939 pupils. The same year there were enrolled in 30 Ohio colleges 3,256 pupils. The same year there were enrolled in 33 preparatory schools and academies 3,814 pupils. The same year there were enrolled in 6 normal schools 2,953 pupils.

Now, it is not necessary for one to believe in mere numbers, or to disparage the higher education, to see that the heart of American education beats below the high-school line. Hence, I do not hesitate to declare that to strengthen and deepen the education of the pupils in the lower grades,—the real common schools,—stands first among the educational needs of the time.