

and at once commended itself to the good sense and generosity of the wealthier classes. Mechanics' Institutes sprung up in every part of the country, and were liberally supported by all ranks: the rich contributed their wealth, and gave their influence and their co-operation to manage the affairs of the Institutes; and the classes for whom they were especially designed did not show themselves ungrateful or unworthy of the interest and the generous efforts made in their behalf. For many years the classes were crowded with faithful and zealous students, and the lecture rooms were the favourite resort of all classes, and formed a bond of social reunion between ranks of society too widely separated by the accidents of fortune and position. If the history of Mechanics' Institutes were written, it would present very satisfactory evidence that the benevolent designs of their founders were most successfully accomplished. In very many instances, and especially in the towns and cities of manufacturing districts, not only were the Institutes flourishing, but the instruction was sound and useful, and the lectures were frequently of a very high character. The ablest literary talent of the country was engaged,* and the subjects were of a thoroughly practical and elevating character. The spasmodic system of single lectures, now so prevalent on this continent, did not then prevail; but courses of six, eight, or twelve lectures were given on a scientific topic, embracing all its leading points, with ample illustrations and apparatus when necessary. These lectures were generally distinguished for their simplicity, fulness and appropriateness, and could not fail to be the means of diffusing a great amount of useful knowledge throughout the country, and amongst all classes of the community, but chiefly that class for whom they were especially intended. But apart from this issue, a still higher result followed in the cultivation of scientific and artistic and literary tastes. No one could listen to the popular analysis of the steam engine by Dr. Lardner; or the delightful discourses of the unfortunate

Haydon on painting, and art, and the Elgin marbles; or the interesting histories of animal nature by Professor Owen; or the fascinating histories of music and the old madrigals, with the charming illustrations of voice and instrument, by Professor Taylor, of Gresham College, and a host of other splendid lectures by equally able lecturers, all open to the members of the Institutes, without being edified, instructed, and refined. These were moral and intellectual advantages associated with this feature of the Mechanics' Institutes of thirty years ago of which we can have but a dim conception now. The enthusiasm with which they were then supported secured for their success the services of the highest cultivated minds in literature, art, and science; and while that order of talent was engaged in the work of popular adult education, the classes and the lecture halls were crowded, and the libraries were filled with books in harmony with the pursuits and the tastes stimulated and sustained by the lectures.

A great change has marked the history of Mechanics' Institutes during the last twenty years. The lecture platform has ceased to be occupied by the best literary and scientific talent of the countries in which these Institutes exist, and in too many instances the lectures have been made to pander to low tastes and emotions, with no reference to the elevation of the masses or the instruction of the members. It has been asserted that the working-men found the subjects too dry, and deserted the lecture hall because they had no desire for scientific or literary culture of a solid and high character; and it has been said that the conviction is gaining ground that adult education is a hopeless task. With reference to the failure of the popular lectures, it is quite possible that the indifference lay as much on the side of the lecturers and the wealthier classes whose munificence, while it lasted, kept the Institutes in successful action. Many of the lecturers gave their services gratuitously, while the enthusiasm associated with a new and popular movement prevailed; and under the pressure of that enthusiasm gave their best efforts to make the lectures interesting, clear, and instructive; and when the lecturers were paid for their services, the temporary liberality of the wealthy patrons of the Institutes removed all financial difficulties. Even at the present day,

* The writer has had the privilege, as a member of the Liverpool Mechanics' Institute, of hearing courses of lectures by Dr. Lardner, Professor Owen, Haydon the painter, George Thompson, Sheridan Knowles, Dr. Epps, Professor Wallis, Hemming, John Wilson the Scotch vocalist, and many others of equal eminence.