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GENERAL KNOWLEDGE.

A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE HALIFAX MECHANICS' INSTITUTE, DURING LAST SESSION.

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The truth and propriety of Bacon's axiom: Knowledge is Power, the experience of every day witnesseth. And the reason is, that our knowledge is made up entirely of our conceptions of the various powers which originate phenomena in the world, amid which we are placed as observers.

We are not indeed able to add a single new power or fact to those which nature in all her generalizations embodies, nor to originate a single new vice or virtue in all the spheres of her operation: But we may observe, we may register, we may employ, and we may expound those powers, vices and virtues, which do exist, and this kind of activity constitutes what I intend by the phrase, General Knowledge.

Our knowledge must be both general and particular. Every man is supposed to have a profession, and the knowledge which appertains to his profession, whatever it may be, he should be intimately versed in; there can be no plea for ignorance in this department, for the public have a right to expect every practitioner to be acquainted with his proper business, not only up to the period when the course of his education in it expired, and he is said, in a given phrase, to have finished his studies;—but up to the present, so as to include all necessary stores of knowledge which his profession at large may have embodied, since he started on his career of fame: always remembering, that increased knowledge is increased power,—that his studies can never be finished, till further improvement is rendered impossible,—and that when a man ceases to study to advance his profession, he ceases to be worthy of it.

However these remarks might be received outside these walls, I flatter myself that they will not be considered as too dogmatical within them, for the existence of this Institute is a pledge of the wish for advancement to which I have referred, but not of this only, it indicates and promotes a wish for a sphere of knowledge beyond the bounds of a mere profession, for that which I said must exist, under the name of general knowledge, or collateral knowledge, as arising out of a variety of objects extraneous to a person's professional course.

If this kind of knowledge were unnecessary, such an institution could not be needed, for its object is not to teach trades, to train mechanics, or to give professional courses of instruction; but to collect and exhibit those lights which the collateral sciences and arts furnish, so as to originate a thirst, if not a critical taste, for knowledge of every kind.

A fear may, perhaps, be entertained, that thus the attention will be too much divided, so as to create a distracting influence, injurious to a man's profession, and professional interests: and in some instances this fear may be warranted by the discovery that certain persons are so easily led away by new pursuits, and are so prone to enthusiasm, as to constitute every novelty into a passion, to which all else must do homage.

Yet, even this kind of constitution, characterised by a deficiency of judgment, and an undue warmth of emotion, is best corrected by a wider pursuit of knowledge; for either an enlarged acquaintance with the elements and pleasures of science, will sober the predominant emotion of originating new ones, or the emotion itself, indicating a genius for its favourite pursuit, will demand and obtain the general homage, and thus point out through life a professional path.

Should a man's passion for a secondary department of knowledge be less immoderate, it might still not be without danger, as trenching too much upon the time and means, of right belonging to his profession. In this case, prudence should be exercised, and her dictates cannot, perhaps, be better answered to, than by a determination to abstain for a time from the study which has become a pernicious foible; not, however, to spend the time unimproved, but in other pursuits which, though less relished, will be more wholesome.

It is a proof of nature's generosity, that every study is liable to become such a passion as I have alluded to, for it does but evidence the pleasure attending every study. The pursuit in art or science, which governs the whole mind of one individual, may, it is true, have no apparent charms for another; but this is in appearance only, for let the reluctant individual get acquainted, though ever so little, with that to which he is now so indifferent, and he will perceive, in some degree, an attraction which perhaps is destined ere long to bind and detain him in the strongest chains.

Now, the chains which I speak of are but the pleasures of science, and which, from the time when the infant is captivated with de-

light, arising from the thought that he has mastered the alpha and omega of all knowledge, in having learned the alphabet, to that when the same child, now a Leibnitz, a Newton, or a Davy, has constrained reluctant nature to unbosom her profoundest secrets to her ardent admirer, a pleasure has been felt and improved, which is one of the most refined of which our nature is capable, a pleasure which, though justly ranked among the purest, is not only capable of supporting the mind in the onward course of discovery, but of fascinating and absorbing the whole mind, in some instances, in the manner before adverted to.

Great pleasure attends even the anticipation and hope of knowledge. A desire for knowledge exists in every human breast, and what is desired, is always contemplated as desirable. Accordingly knowledge is contemplated as desirable by the child from his earliest years, not indeed knowledge of every kind, but invariably of some kind. And through all the ripening stages of youthful existence, and through the most mature periods of our sublimity progress, we alike partake of curiosity, which is, but the desire to know; and is constantly like hope, associated with agreeable sensations.

It matters not how little or how much we know, this desire and expectation, which is but another expression of attention, is sure to be felt, and the feeling is sure to be agreeable. We may indeed have to complain for ourselves or others, of the harshness of tutors, of the obscurity of language, or of other impediments in the path of knowledge; but all this does but evidence a wish to know, and the absence of that pleasure which belongs to the anticipation of acquirement.

In prosecuting knowledge in all the wide field of observation and experiment, and in the use of these several means of knowledge placed within our reach, how varied and luxurious a pleasure is realized! Passing from experiment to experiment we are pleased by our discoveries, suggestion follows suggestion, and even our failures are attended with a success which is valuable, inasmuch as from them we can learn the nature of our materials, and the defects of our apparatus, and processes, may more in seeking for one thing we often find another, accordingly, some of the most valued results of science have been rather discoveries than inventions, many times arising out of the disappointed intentions of the votary of science.

Every means of knowledge is then a means of delight. Think of the pleasures of school days—what young ambition, what alacrity, what competition enlivened our hearts, as our young feet attempted the Olympian mount; what ever new delight thrilled through our natures, when our tutors, our friends, and, above all, our own consciousness, informed us that we were making progress. And then the thought that we should once be men, men of reputation, useful men, men such as we had delighted to read of; perhaps great men, ornaments of our country; how would it occasion the young heart to palpitate afresh with desire, and expectation, and zeal, in the path of knowledge.

From the schools we descend into the arena of the world, where, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, we are expected to act our part, and to act it well. Here if our studies in one kind are at an end, in another they are but commenced. Man and nature must be studied, as well as books; and books themselves are adapted to every gradation of age and attainment.

We should often reflect, when we take a book in hand, with emotions of veneration and gratitude to the master minds that have laboured in this department, on the toils and privations they have undergone, and the small rewards they have realized. Think what should we be without them; think how little we appear when compared with them, and think again how shall we emulate and copy them.

There is a pleasure which all may feel, though few describe, in the use of books. Here we can all be great, in keeping company with the greatest, and if we value the book we naturally transfer our esteem to the author; and if we have learned to esteem the author, we cannot but listen with attention to his advice. We can by this means converse with the ancients, from Moses down to Milton; we gain venerable and ennobling sentiments; and by a wonderful process of intuition make those sentiments our own.

I call this process wonderful; for it is known only in its effects. We take up an author on trial, we read, but with no great relish, still, having read so far, we determine to read on; our attention becomes fixed; we gain delight; we reproach ourselves for past negligence, and feel half inclined to go over our task again; we feel increasing delight, and at last close the book with a mixture of reverence and admiration. We may be said to have increased both our love of learning, and our learning itself, in this perusal; yet we do not remember a single proposition that the book contains.

What, then, we may inquire, has transpired? What change has taken place? And, by what process can we have undergone improvement? I can only illustrate the process by analogy. Mind may be said to act upon mind, or its productions, as saline substances upon each other. Let, then, two persons select a group of different salts and dissolve them, then let one of the two add his group to the other, a total decomposition and recombination may be thus effected, and a variety of new salts be the result. Propositions of knowledge may be supposed, in connection with consciousness, to act and re-act in a similar manner. Consciousness is to these what water is to saline substances: without it they are inactive.

Therefore we are warranted in inferring that reading what we may, it will affect our knowledge no farther than consciousness or attention is in exercise. That the mind is improved by the rejection as well as by the acquirement of certain notions. And that these acquired notions are not the integral notions or propositions of the author, whom we consult; but the results of an intellectual decomposition and recombination of the elements of his knowledge.

To this, as before said, our consciousness affords the medium; but books cannot act thus on each other, because they are unconscious. Consciousness is a property of mind, and therefore persons endowed with mind, and engaged in conversation, exhibit in the greatest perfection all the consciousness, and with it the analysis and synthesis which I have spoken of. From conversation or dialogue, then, we frequently find the mind more invigorated and advanced than from reading; and the proceeds of our studies much improved on, by the powers of discourse.

Some very grave remarks are sometimes offered in favour of a very few books, and I would advise the same, provided you cannot get many. But certainly the advice cannot be deemed favourable to acquirement, as distinguished from a liberal access to authors in any or every department. Truly a good student may, with but few books, and those of the best authority, make greater progress than a dull one, with a good library; yet it must be acknowledged the labours under a great disability. It might, as well be recommended to a traveller to visit only a few countries, in order to make a good chorographer, instead of the many, which would make him a much better, if not a perfect one.

Still we must never confound the possession of books with the possession of learning, which I fear is done by many. Perhaps no book should be added to our library until we have read it through; certainly none that we do not intend to read through, and as a general rule, it is advisable to read a work thoroughly without selection. Selection will naturally be of the parts deemed interesting; which are usually those least needed in regard to instruction, as being the best understood already. By taking each part as it comes to hand, you have or acquire an interest, and thus give rise to established knowledge or new accessions of knowledge. The contrary habit of taking up and laying down a book at pleasure, without any consecutive or thorough knowledge, originates a fastidious and dissatisfied taste, having a tendency to destroy the appetite for reading and learning, which should by every means be encouraged and improved.

Although it may be granted that many books besides those of Holy Writ, are worthy of a repeated perusal; yet, all things considered, more interest and profit may be produced by a perusal of new and various works even on the same subject, where the charms of novelty, as respects authorship, and the variations of style and method, will contribute to impress the inquisitive mind more powerfully than the best with which we are familiar. It presents also an additional motive to reading with a critical attention, ripens our judgment or criticism of authors, and their works, and supercedes that unfair partiality, which would encourage a meanness of choice and conception.

It may be considered improvident, and counter to sound discretion, to procure books faster than we can read them, or beyond what we care to read. "Better in the sight of the eyes, than the wandering of the desire." Besides, there are several subsidiary advantages to be derived from the contrary practice: As, 1st. It puts us in the way of the latest and best editions; 2nd. It provides that all we read be new, and therefore interesting; 3rd. It prevents a distracting variety; 4th. It is a zest, and incitement to our diligence in the practice of reading; always stimulating us by the proffer of another new book; 5th. It is inducement to expend our money well, by purchasing only such books as are deserving of our labour, and the true value of which we shall thus realize, by being prompted to make ourselves early and well acquainted with their contents.

I would now take the liberty to say a word or two with reference to Public Libraries, such as the Mechanics and Barratt's.