

them, advising them how these aims can be best attained, giving direct end and object to what might otherwise easily become waste forces, and sending among them not only oral teachers, but, better still, boxes of excellent books, called, "Free itinerating Libraries."

#### FREE LIBRARIES AND THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE RURAL PARTS OF ENGLAND.

I learn that the books of these free libraries are constantly making the circuit of hundreds upon hundreds of miles, and are constantly being read with inexpressible relish by thousands upon thousands of toiling people, and that they are never damaged or defaced by one rude hand. (Hear, hear.) This and other like facts led me to consider the immense importance of this fact—that no little cluster of working men's cottages can rise in any Lancashire or Cheshire valley, at the foot of any running stream which enterprize hunts out for water power, but has its educational friend and companion ready and willing for it, acquainted with its thoughts and ways, and turns of speech and thought, even before it has come into existence. No central association at a distance could possibly do for those working-men what this association does. No central association at a distance could understand them, could possibly put them in that familiar and easy communication one with another as that a man or boy eager for knowledge, in the valley seven miles off, should know of a man or boy eager for knowledge, in the valley twelve miles off, and should occasionally trudge to meet him, that the one might impart his learning in one branch of acquisition to the other. Yet this is a distinct and most important feature of this society. On the other hand it is not to be supposed that these honest men, however zealous, should as a rule succeed in establishing and maintaining their own institutions of themselves. It is obvious that combination must materially diminish their cost, in itself a vital consideration; and that experience, which is essential to the success of all combination, is especially so when its object is to diffuse the results of experience and of reflection.

#### EXAMINATIONS, PRIZES AND CERTIFICATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION.

But the student of the pleasant and profitable history of this Society does not stop here in his learning. He finds with interest and pleasure that the Parent Society at certain stated periods invites the more eager and enterprising members of the local societies to submit themselves to voluntary examination in various branches of useful knowledge, of which examination it takes the charge and arranges the details, and invites the successful candidates to come to Manchester, to receive the prize and certificates of merit which it impartially awards. The most successful of the competitors in the last of these examinations are now among us; and those little marks of recognition and encouragement, I shall have the pleasure of giving them presently. I have looked over a few examination papers. They comprise history, geography, grammar, arithmetic, book-keeping, decimal coinage, mensuration, mathematics, social economy, the French language—in fact, they comprise all the keys that open all the locks of knowledge. I felt most devoutly grateful as to many of them, that they had not been submitted to me to answer. (Hear, hear, and laughter.) For I am perfectly sure if they had been, I should have had mighty little to bestow upon myself to-night. (Laughter.) And yet it is always to be observed, and seriously remembered, that these examinations are undergone by people whose lives have been passed in a continual fight for bread, and whose whole existence has been a constant wrestle with twin goalers of the daring heart—low birth and iron fortune. (Applause.) I could not but consider with extraordinary admiration that these questions have been replied to, not by men like myself, the business of whose life is with writing and with books, but by men the business of whose life is with tools and with machinery.

#### INTERESTING PERSONAL SKETCHES OF SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES.

Let me name a few of the most interesting cases of prize-holders and certificate gainers who will appear before you. There are the two poor brothers from near Chorley, who work from morning to night in a coalpit, and who, in all weathers, have walked eight miles a night, three nights a week, to attend the classes in which they have gained distinction. (Hear, hear.) There are two other poor boys from Bolton, who began life as piecers at a shilling and eighteen pence a week, and the father of whom was cut to pieces, by the machinery at which he worked, but not before he had himself founded the institution in which this son has since come to be taught. These two poor boys have taken the second class prize in chemists. (Hear, hear.) There is a plasterer from Bury, sixteen years of age, who took a third-class certificate last year, at the hands of Lord Brougham, and who has exerted himself so strenuously since, that he is this year again successful in a competition three times as severe. (Hear, hear.) There is a wagon maker from the same place who knew little or

absolutely nothing until he was a grown man, and who has learned all he knows, which is a great deal, in the local institution. There is a chain maker, in very humble circumstances, and working hard all day, who walked six miles a night, three nights a week, to attend the classes in which he has won a famous place. There is a moulder in an iron foundry, who, while he was working twelve hours a day before the furnace, got up at four o'clock in the morning to learn drawing. (Hear, hear.) "The thought of my lads," he writes in his modest account of his work, "in their peaceful slumbers above me gave me fresh courage; and I used to think that if I should never receive any personal benefit, I might instruct them when they came to be of an age to understand the mighty machines and engines which have made our country, England, pre-eminent in the world's history." (Applause.) There is a piecer at mule frames, who could not read at eighteen, who is now a man of little more than thirty, who is the sole support of an aged mother, who is arithmetical teacher in the institution in which he himself was taught, who reports of himself that he made the resolution never to take up a subject without keeping to it, and who has kept to it with such an astonishing will that he is now well versed in Euclid, and in algebra, and is the best French scholar in Stockport. (Hear, hear.) The drawing classes in that same Stockport are taught by a working blacksmith, and his pupils will receive the highest honors of to-night. (Applause.) To pass from the successful candidates to the delegates from local societies, and to content myself with one instance, there is among their number a most remarkable man, whose history I have read with feelings that I could not adequately express under any circumstances, and least of all when I know he hears me—who worked when he was a mere baby at handloom weaving, until he dropped from fatigue; who began to teach himself as soon as he could earn five shillings a week, who is now a botanist, and acquainted with every production of the Lancashire valleys; who is now a naturalist; who has made and preserved a collection of the eggs of British birds, and stuffed the birds; who is now a conchologist with a very curious and, in some respects, original collection of fresh water shells; who has collected and preserved the mosses of fresh water and of the sea; who is worthy the presidency of his own literary institution, and who was at his work this time last night as foreman in a mill. (Hear, hear, and applause.) So stimulating has been the influence of these bright examples and many more, that I notice among the applications from Blackburn for preliminary test examination papers, one from an applicant who gravely describes himself as ten years of age; and, who with equal gravity, describes his occupation as "nursing a little child." (Hear, hear, and laughter.) Nor are these things confined to the men; the women employed in factories, in millinery and in domestic service, have begun to show, as it is fitting they should, a determination not to be outdone by the men. The women of Preston, in particular, have so honorably distinguished themselves, and show, in their examination papers, such an admirable knowledge of the sense of household management and economy, that if I were a working bachelor of Lancashire or Cheshire, and if I had not cast my eye, or set my heart, on any lass in particular, I should positively get up at four o'clock in the morning, with the determination of the iron-moulder himself, and should go to Preston in search of a wife. ("Hear" and laughter.) These instances, and many more, daily occurring, always accumulating, are surely better testimony to the working of this Association than any number of speakers could possibly present to you. Surely, the presence among us of those indefatigable people is the Association's best and most affecting triumph, in the present and past, and is its noblest stimulus to action in the future. As its temporary mouthpiece, I would beg to say to that portion of the company, who attend to receive the prizes, that the Institution can never hold itself apart from them, can never hold itself above them, that their distinction and success, must be its distinction and success, and there can be but one heart beating between them and it. In particular, I would most especially entreat them to observe that nothing will ever be further from the Association's mind than the impertinence of patronage. (Applause.) The prizes and certificates that it gives are mere admiring assurances of sympathy with so many striving brothers and sisters, and are only valuable for the spirit in which they are given and received. The prizes are of money simply because the Institution does not presume to doubt that people who have so well governed themselves, know well how to make a little money serviceable. (Hear, hear.)

#### SELF-TAUGHT MEN.

Reverting once more to the whole collective audience before me—of the advantages of knowledge, I have said and shall say, nothing. Of the certainty with which the man who grasps it under difficulties, rises in his own respect, and in usefulness to the community, I have said and shall say, nothing. In the city of Manchester, in the county of Lancaster, both so remarkable for self-taught men, that were superfluous indeed. For the same reason I rigidly abstain from