

He brings forward the heavy metal of his learning and the light artillery of his wit to the defence of the position that the shallowness of one age is the profundity of another. It is impossible not to sympathise with the generous indignation which he manifests against the bigotry of those who would repel a busy and thirsty multitude from the fountain of knowledge on the pretence that the privilege of imbibing a hasty draught might be abused by them to their own prejudice. But, on the other hand, most of us must, I think, instinctively feel that there lurks somewhere or other a fallacy in the argument which seems to make their comparative acquaintance with the facts of geography, as ascertained by modern discovery, a measure of the relative profundity of Strabo and the young lady from the boarding school. A younger statesman, from whom his country expects much, in an admirable speech delivered by him a short time ago, takes a view of the position and prospects of the unlearned which is hardly less cheering. Addressing a body of operatives, he informs them that their opportunities for acquiring what Mr. Macaulay denominates profundity are scarcely inferior to those enjoyed by men of leisure. There is much in this view that is pleasant and plausible, and also perhaps something that is sound. It is certain that persons who have all their time at their own command do not occupy anything like the whole, or even the greater part of it, in study.

LITERARY MEN,—WITHOUT AN OBJECT IN VIEW.

It has been stated, I think, on high authority, that no existence is more miserable than that of the literary man who, having means and leisure in abundance, has no object to work for, and no motive to stimulate him to exertion. There is much, undoubtedly, that is purely mechanical in many of the occupations of our labourers and artisans—much time, during the long hours of toil, for reflection and thought; and most of us, if we have mingled extensively with those classes, must have had occasionally the good fortune to meet individuals among them who, combining great powers of abstraction with retentive memories and creative imaginations, have been able, by turning those seasons of solitary meditation to account, to rise to speculative heights, and to dive to depths of science which it has almost appalled us to contemplate. But such instances are surely rare, and they are rather the exception which proves the rule that it is the tendency of hard labour, whether of body or mind, to beget a desire for relaxation and repose, and, where it displays itself in a taste for reading, a preference for such literature as does not subject the intellect to a painful strain. It would not indeed, I apprehend, be difficult to cull from the writings of authors of acknowledged reputation passages which suggest a doubt as to whether, on this particular question, the eminent personages whose opinions I have quoted rise quite to the level of orthodoxy.

COLERIDGE: DISTINCTION BETWEEN EDUCATED AND UNEDUCATED MEN.

If I recollect rightly, Coleridge, in the preface to his *Lay Sermon*, maintains that a knowledge of first principles and general laws, as distinct from a mere acquaintance with results and practical conclusions, is what should distinguish the educated from the uneducated man—a maxim which, although it may not contradict the letter, harmonises indifferently with the spirit of the doctrine recently propounded at Oldham, that “it is not necessary to be an astronomer, a chemist, or a physiologist in order to learn what have been the principal results of human thought in these departments.”

SIR JAMES STEPHEN'S CONTRAST.

I read not long ago an able paper, attributed, I think, to the pen of a gentleman distinguished alike in official life and historical literature, wherein the writer, contrasting British shallowness with continental profundity, complains that an Englishman of the present day is expected to possess a competent knowledge of so many subjects that it is hardly possible that he should ever get to the bottom of any. “*Magna*,” exclaims the learned author in accents of despair, “*immo maxima pars sapientiæ est quædam æquo animo nescire velle*.” And he might have added, as applicable to our time, what an eloquent writer says of another age and another state of society—“*Les salons se vantaient d'avoir perdu leur ancienne frivolité, ils n'avaient fait que la porter dans des questions plus graves*.” Monsieur Bunsen, in his recent work, makes our case in this respect even more desperate, for, referring to that very department in literature in which Sir J. Stephen has rendered such universal services, he contends that even the Germans themselves have hitherto failed to apprehend properly the philosophy of history in its highest form. “The problem,” says he, “of such a philosophy would be the reconstruction of the idea by the evolution of the elements, and the explanation of that evolution by the idea”—a definition which, if it be admitted, would, I fear, consign to the category of smatterers some who have heretofore thought themselves worthy of a better place. But, lest the learned author should be supposed in this sentence to be employing words rather as a diplomatist than as a teacher, I shall with your permission follow him while he develops his noble thought in language worthy of the theme. —“There is no finite life except unto death—no death except unto

higher life. Tribes and nations disappear after having prepared the way for others which are to solve a new and higher problem. In the interval there may be much destruction, and confusion; rude ages may intervene between the old and new light; but the idea of humanity always finds its representative at last. A new tribe appears on the stage, takes up and carries on the torch of divine light, which, in the noble race towards the great goal, had dropped from the tribe that held it before.” [Cheers.]

LORD ELGIN'S CONCLUSIONS ON THE SUBJECT.

On the whole, I think we may fairly assume that the balance of authority is in favour of the opinion that such a thing as smattering of knowledge does exist, and, moreover, that it is an acquisition which many of us are not at all unlikely to make in the course of our pilgrimage through time.

SUPERFICIAL KNOWLEDGE DANGEROUS WHEN MADE THE GROUND OF ACTION.

But if so, it becomes important to us that the second question which I have raised should receive an answer, and that we should definitely ascertain whether this said smattering be indeed as great an evil as in some quarters it is represented to be. Now, on this head, I would beg leave to remark at the outset, that a smattering of knowledge becomes dangerous only when it is made the ground of action; so long as it remains in the speculative or sublimated condition it is altogether innocuous. There can be no reason whatsoever, for instance, for withholding from the English gentleman who finds that he cannot pass muster in society unless he be supposed to possess a competent knowledge of everything, that modicum of science which he can collect from reviews or lectures and coin into small talk. Still less should we desire to place any obstacle in the way of those, whether they be men of labour, of business, or of leisure, who, in the pursuit of relaxation or amusement, pass an idle hour from time to time in sauntering along the royal road to learning. It is only when smatterers, relying on their own infallibility, or on the gullibility of others, proceed to turn their presumed knowledge to account in practice, that it becomes necessary that we should put ourselves on our guard against them. [Cheers.]

SINGLE ILLUSTRATIONS.

How often, for example, has it happened to myself in my younger days to receive from aged and anxious friends of the gentler sex affectionate warnings couched in language such as this—“Remember the fate of Mr. A.; a most valuable succession fell to him—a banker's account overflowing—an estate replete with treasure above and below ground. But—infortunated man! by way of bettering his fortunes, he betook himself to geology—and from that evil hour he has gone on from one folly to another till you behold him what he is—a beggar!”—or “Only think what a millionaire Mr. B would have been if he had never heard that detestable word mechanics”—or, again, “Observe Mr. C.'s emaciated form—he inherited from his parents, on both sides of the house, an iron frame and a vigorous constitution, and see what physiology has brought him to!” And my kind friends concluded by saying, “If you have an attachment for science which you cannot restrain, stick to astronomy, for the stars will at any rate take care of themselves, and they will neither hurt you nor allow themselves to be injured by you.” [Laughter.] I remember meeting, some years ago, in a life of Watt which I was then reading, with a statement to the effect that, on looking over specifications for patents which had turned out to be failures, entailing on the projectors heartbreaking and ruin, that great man found many which were the embodiment of ideas that had suggested themselves to his own mind, and which, after exposing them to the test of severe examination and analysis to which he subjected the offspring of his brain, he had rejected. Does not this incident illustrate in a very striking manner the respective fate of the profound man and the smatterer when they are brought together to wrestle on the field of action? [Applause.]

GREAT EVIL TO SOCIETY PRODUCED BY SMATTERERS.

We are not, however, I fear, at liberty to assume, although the cases I have mentioned might seem to favour this opinion, that in all cases of smattering the smatterers themselves are alone victims of their own delusions, and that the only havoc which they make is that of their own fortunes. It is but too certain that there are classes of smatterers which spread around them a ruin much more extensive and appalling. There are smatterers, for example, in theology, who rush in where angels fear to tread, and lure to their destruction those who are rash enough to follow them. There are smatterers in what has been recently christened Sociology, who induce men to abandon the pursuit of real happiness in order to chase after phantoms. There are smatterers in economic science, who think that abundance is to be secured by limiting production and restricting exchanges. There are smatterers in the science of politics who ignore the true purposes of civil society, and tell men to look to Government for benefits which they can attain only by working them out for themselves. [Cheers.] Now it is obvious that to the success of these impostors, or smatterers, call