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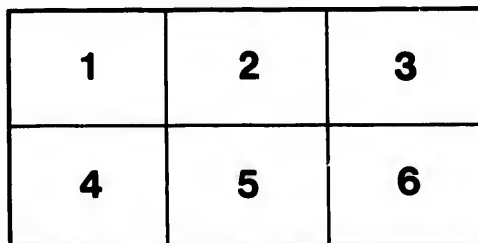
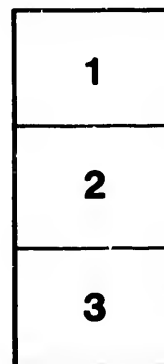
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J. D. EDGAR, ESQ.,

PRESIDENT

OF THE

“Ontario Literary Society.”

FEBRUARY 5TH, 1863.

THE HON. P. M. VANKOUGHNET,
Chancellor of Upper Canada,
IN THE CHAIR.

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :—

My first duty on this occasion is to address myself to the Members of the ONTARIO LITERARY SOCIETY, and to acknowledge the high honor they have conferred upon me, in having unanimously chosen me for their President.

To be the presiding officer in a Society, so large and so influential as yours, is a distinction which any one might highly prize ; but I feel that the names of several gentlemen who have preceded me in this office, lend additional distinction to your chair. I only hope that I shall prove myself in some degree worthy of your choice. But this much I can assure you, that if my *ability* is all equal to my *desire* to serve you, your confidence has not been misplaced.

This Society is now in the seventh year of its existence. During that period it has risen from very small beginnings to a position that may fairly entitle it to be called one of *our Institutions*. It is not Toronto alone that has a claim to this institution, for there is not a city

or town, in Upper Canada, where we do not find men engaged in the different professions, who owe much to the hours they have spent in this intellectual gymnasium. The names of some who are already acquiring distinction in the liberal professions are to be found among our lists of debaters in former days ; and they *never* forget to acknowledge their deep obligations to this Society.

The short limits within which I must confine my remarks, are not enough to allow of my making any very extensive comment upon the reasons why such Institutions as this should commend themselves to all young men. Yet I think that a few minutes could not be more profitably spent than in a quiet talk over some of the advantages of these secondary aids to education.

Let us first endeavor to ascertain what benefit and pleasure the individual members may expect to derive from them. We will find in these pleasures nothing coarse, or degrading, nothing that fills one with satiety from too frequent indulgence, or with after regrets for time misspent. In the discussion of questions of historical, political, or philosophic interest, the mind is toned to a healthy, manly, vigor of thought, and the perceptions are sharpened, by the necessity for ready reply. To have a thorough knowledge of any one of the questions that are continually brought up for discussion, and to have a clear, decided opinion on the matter, founded on this knowledge, is invaluable : and this can be obtained in no better way than by investigating the subject preparatory to discussing it, and by acquiring the ideas of other speakers upon it. The attrition of minds that must take place in a good debate is one of those advan-

tages, which a man can otherwise seldom expect, without the dear-bought experience of real life.

Some may object that it is a crude sort of knowledge that is picked up in this way ; and I do not, for a moment, contend that it should take the place of the severe mental discipline of school or college ; but, when the young man escapes from the charge of his tutors, and fairly commences the business of life, is it not highly creditable that he should find time from the hours of daily business, or nightly dissipation, to turn to the pure delights of Literature, which do not tend to diminish his capacity for the desk, or the counting-house, but do much to render him more fit for all the duties of life ?

To any one, whose aim is to acquire a mastery over his mother tongue, either with the mere desire of having a weapon of such consummate power at his command, or requiring it as the means of earning his daily bread, or, perhaps, influenced by the nobler wish—to convey lessons of heavenly wisdom, and eternal truth to his fellow men—to such an one, the incessant practice, and constant training of a Debating Club, are of an inestimable value. In this mimic Parliament the faculties are quickened, ideas flow, and the tongue wags easily. Here that noblest instrument—the sweet human voice—is attuned to its most perfect harmony, and taught to captivate the ear by its most potent spells. Here, too, the young man, who has an over-estimate of his own powers, is soon made to find his level ; while the modest and diffident, are not long in losing their timidity, and gaining self-reliance. What is more exciting than to share in the throbbings of a young Debater, who, as he

nervously begins, feels ready to sink under a sense of his own incapacity, but, as he gradually warms to his subject forgets all this, and those ideas that seemed obscure and doubtful, while they lurked in the recesses of his own mind, are, by the genial inspiration of the hour, quickened into life, and moulded into form.

One great aim of our Society is to allure our members on to a taste for Reading and Literature. To find arguments and authorities, they must search through many volumes of the best authors; and each one is thus, almost in spite of himself, brought into contact with the best society in every period of history—with the wisest, the wittiest—with the tenderest, the bravest, and the purest characters that have adorned humanity. He becomes a denizen of all nations—a cotemporary of all ages. The world has been created for him; and it is hardly possible but that the character should take a wiser and a better tone, from the constant habit of associating, in thought, with a class of thinkers so far above the average of humanity.

There is a class of young men to whom I have always believed our Society to be particularly useful, in more ways than one. When a student of any of the liberal professions comes to this Provincial Metropolis to seek fame and fortune, or, with less ambition, to extend the range of his studies, he finds within the walls of our meeting-room, a number of young men—strangers, perhaps, at first,—whose literary tastes and habits, soon open up the way to, at least, an acquaintance with congenial minds. He finds that those young men apply to a stranger a severe, but fair test. They do not appoint

a Committee to enquire into the cut of the coat upon his back, the quarterings upon his coat of arms, or the social position of his grandfather ; but they *do* require of him some fair degree of intelligence, an anxiety to employ the powers which God has given him, and the intrinsic stamp and qualities of a gentleman, before they admit him to their confidence, at first, and friendship afterwards. Such is their test, because they believe that a man may be gentlemanly, without being foppish, and capable of thoroughly understanding the proprieties of good society, without being profoundly ignorant of the requisites of Murray's Grammar !

The existence of Societies such as ours, has a great influence in extending throughout the whole community a taste for Literature ; and, surely, no aim can be more noble, none more worthy of success, than this attempt at diffusing among the many so elevating and ameliorating a tendency ! Imbue a man with this taste, throw all the means of gratifying it in his way, and you can hardly fail to make a happy man of him. You expand the range of his mental vision ; you change him from the ignorant creature of hope and fear, to the thoughtful being "with large discourse looking before and after," to find examples in the past, and to fill the future with high and noble aims. You give him means of enjoyment that are universal. And this enjoyment helps him along the path of daily life ; it sheds a light upon that path, which enables him to discern and avoid the shoals and breakers upon which so much human happiness is wrecked. From the influences of all that is affecting in history, exquisite in art, suggestive in

eloquence, profound in science, and divine in poetry, the mind is toned to a true feeling of contentment. It is not too easily carried away with joy, or too deeply stricken by sorrow; but acquires a fixed belief in the working of that overruling power in nature, which equalizes the extremes of happiness by the lessons of adversity, and sweetens the bitter cup of sorrow by pleasing alternations of joy. By these influences a man becomes schooled to the philosophy of life that has been nowhere more simply, or more beautifully said, or sung, than in the words of America's sweetest bard:—

" Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end and way ;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us further than to-day."

It has not only been the aim of this Society *indirectly* to infuse a literary taste throughout the community, by the ordinary accomplishments of its primary objects; but it has stepped aside from its regular path and original design to bring *directly* to bear upon the whole of our citizens the advantages of a Lecture System. It has placed upon a Toronto platform men who have distinguished themselves in literature, in politics, in the pulpit, or at the bar—men whose fame had gone before them, and was great enough to warrant us in the belief, that we were affording a treat to the public, that would prove a source of instruction, while it gratified a laudable curiosity. Men of distinction, and women of distinction, poets and philosophers, statesmen and orators, have, from year to year, spoken words of power and of

wisdom in our halls ; and if the time has come when these halls shall no more echo with their tones of eloquence, or be enlivened by their happy turns of thought, the blame rests, not with the Ontario Literary Society, but, with the Public of Toronto. When we first made the attempt, while there was novelty in the thing, we had no reason to complain of the support received ; but, when the charm of novelty had worn off, and the people became accustomed to hear that talented strangers were amongst them, they often left us to bear the mortification of introducing these men to a miserable house, and the heavy pecuniary loss of bringing them so far. We feel, however, that we have done our duty towards our fellow-citizens—done far more for them than prudence, or our own interest would suggest ; and if they are to have any more opportunities of listening to those distinguished men, it must be under happier auspices than ours. Still, perhaps, we ought to feel that *any* appreciation of our efforts should afford encouragement to all who are hoping for an increase of literary tastes in this young country—so young, perhaps, and so busy, that we should be very well satisfied with *any* evidences of such tastes, and make large allowances for the shortcomings of a people, whose whole history, it has been said, may be told in the biography of that venerable and distinguished Judge, who has but now closed a career of such varied, untiring, and honorable usefulness ; whose talents have shone so conspicuously throughout the whole of our Colonial existence, and have, for the third of a century, adorned the highest position a colonist can aspire to.

While alluding to any effort that we may have made to forward a popular and literary object, I cannot refrain from paying an affectionate and grateful tribute to the memory of another, who ever used his more exalted position to further the cause of social progress, and the public good. One whose illustrious example will ever be a beacon light to guide such feeble efforts as ours, to inspire and to encourage them. He has now passed from the scene of his labors of love, and left England mourning, and England's Queen a widow. It was the one aim of his life to increase among his people culture and refinement, as well as material prosperity. And he found no more admirable instruments to accomplish his noble purposes, than those we employ in our more humble way. There is scarcely a Library in Great Britain that has not been enriched by his munificence. He encouraged by his presence, assistance, or counsel, every literary and scientific association in the Kingdom. And such societies as ours, since they are the greatest sufferers from the loss of that universal benefactor, and noble man, should be the first to join in the feelings of gratitude, that enshrine in the heart of every man and every woman in the British Empire, the sacred memory of Albert the Good.

It may be asked whether our Society, or any of its members, look forward to more lasting results for their efforts than some ephemeral effect upon their fellow-citizens? Whether our objects are purely of a selfish nature, and tending towards individual improvement alone? And it may be answered—that while each member hopes to derive undoubted profit and pleasure,

from participating in our exercises, he has the higher aim in view of doing his small share towards fostering those precious seeds of Literature, that may, ere long, take root in our congenial soil, and, shooting out in all their luxuriant beauty, may one day bear their sweet blossoms of poesy and erudition, of history and philosophy, under a Canadian sun. And there is no wish more patriotic, no aspiration more noble, than that Canada may soon have a Literature of her own. And what reason have we to despair of this? Among three millions of intelligent and enterprising people, have we not brains and imagination enough? With a population as large as that of Scotland, with educational institutions that would be a credit to any country in the world, and with the readiest access to all the Literature of the English language, why should we not have one of our own? If anything is necessary in the face of nature to inspire the Canadian poet can we not point to our majestic Niagara, our wild, wonderful Saguenay, and our fairy Thousand Isles? And although objects of historic interest are for the most part wanting in this Canada of ours, although we have no feudal fortress, no cloistered abbey, or mouldering castle, there is hardly any combination of wood and water, plain and mountain, shady dell and rocky height, clothed, perhaps, with the traditions of the red man, that may not be found in this favored land, affording ample food for the poet's or the romancer's dream.

We are fortunate, however, in having amongst us many whose pens are as ready to round a period of pure and elegant English, as their tongues are to utter one;

but we require something higher than this ; we require the talent and erudition that are solely occupied in the practical affairs of daily life, to be devoted, in part, towards laying a ground-work for a Canadian Literature. In our eagerness for material prosperity, and desire to spread the blessings of civilization over those regions that we are still reclaiming from the wilderness, we are apt to forget how powerful an instrument of civilization we are thus neglecting nearer home. In Canada we have much need of everything that has a tendency to create literary tastes. Ours is a young and busy country, where much of our time is given up—necessarily given up—to the advancement of material prosperity, and where, for the present, at least, Literature, and the elegant Arts, must grow up side by side with the coarse plants of daily necessity, and must depend for their culture, not on the exclusive devotion of time or wealth, but on hours and seasons snatched from the pursuit of worldly interests by intelligent and public-spirited individuals. If we Canadians cannot point proudly back to the traditional patriotism of ages, if we have been too recently transplanted from other soils, to allow our roots to strike deeply into the soil of Canada, and if we cannot glory in her *past*, we may still indulge in as proud hopes for her *future*, and cherish as ardent an ambition for her prosperity, as if we had a history—old as the eternal hills. No doubt it is right and patriotic to direct our ambition towards attaining material greatness, and a place among the nations, from our wealth, or commercial, or political importance—but we must not forget that there is a nobler element in national greatness than any of these. There

is that which a nation leaves as a heritage to future generations, when she is swept away by the hand of time, and dies like one of us. Where are the material glories—the wealth, the arms, the power—of the great nations of antiquity? are they not swallowed up in the past, without bequeathing any substantial legacy to the present or to future ages? While the noble thoughts, and wise words, of their master minds, live and speak for all time. Let us look at the page of history for examples; and for one that will strike us all, we

“ Turn ever to the land
Where on the Egean shore a city stands
Built nobly—pure the air and light the soil;
Athens! the eye of Greece, mother of arts
And eloquence—”

While the wild and warlike nations that in all parts of the East were cotemporaries of Athens, have left no trace of their existence, save the record of some bloody fight, she still guides the deepest thinkers, instructs the greatest orators, and inspires the imaginations of the noblest poets of the nineteenth century. And if Canada can never aspire to a destiny like this, she may still set such examples before her, and may well hope, at some distant day, to take a high position as a literary nation, at least, in the New World. And it is to the men of our own day that the glorious privilege belongs of raising Canada in the eyes of the world, from a rude, half civilized Colony, to a respected, literary nation. The stout arms of our forefathers have cleared away the trees of the forest, and have given us a fair land, full of plenty and prosperity,

and it remains for us of this generation, to raise the intellectual standard of the people, to aid in the diffusion of knowledge, and to encourage, foster, and cultivate, tastes for Art and Literature.

And is there not much to give encouragement to the hope that this is being fast accomplished, when we see that our public men are recognizing the advantages of all the educational and literary movements of the day? Is it not also a fact of some significance that we have found men of high social position, and large influence, laying aside their graver duties to grace the chair at the public meetings of a society of literary pretensions like ours? And it is a proof that even our small efforts are not unnoticed, but are marked as stepping stones to a great result, when the chair is filled to-night by one, who has long had a voice in the councils of the nation, and who is ready to come down from the high judicial position to which his talents have raised him, in order to encourage us, by his presence, in the prosecution of our work.

And let us hope that that work may go bravely on; and that when ages shall have rolled over this continent, and some future Hallam shall be born to chronicle the Literature of Canada, he may hand down to posterity the names of some, who began their career in the Ontario Literary Society.

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