

AN ADDRESS.

ON

SOME GROWING EVILS OF THE DAY,

ESPECIALLY

DEMORALIZING LITERATURE AND ART,

FROM

THE REPRESENTATIVES

OF

THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS,

FOR

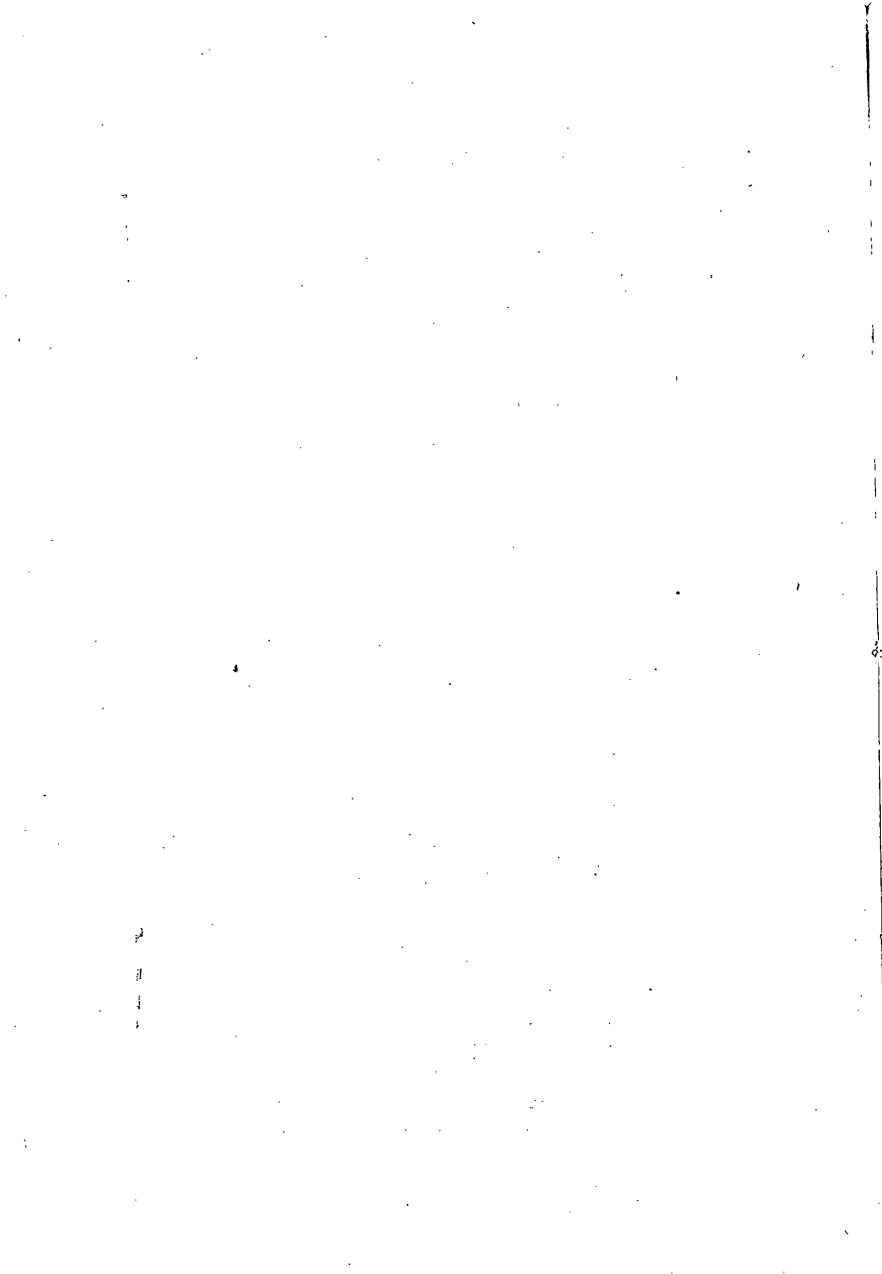
PENNSYLVANIA, NEW JERSEY, AND DELAWARE.

*SECOND MONTH, 10, 1882.*

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## AN ADDRESS.

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THE advance of modern society in general intelligence as well as in the arts and comforts of civilized life has been steady and rapid. The progress of the United States in these directions has been largely owing to the liberal spirit which pervades its institutions, and their wholesome influence, and the possession of almost unlimited natural resources, have combined, under the blessing of the Most High, to give to our beloved country a rapidity of growth in material wealth and general prosperity unexampled in the world's history.

It is, however, always to be borne in mind that those broad views of the founders of our government respecting the equal rights of man, civil and religious liberty, and the just claims of the governed to participate in and control the government under which they live, find their highest sanction in the precepts of the New Testament; and if the prosperity of this great country is to be lasting, we believe there must ever be a direct reference, not only to the development of its resources and the progress of its people in useful arts and knowledge, but to its advancement in Truth and Righteousness. Yet it must be admitted by every careful observer of what is transpiring around us, that notwithstanding the

rapid advances in wealth, general intelligence, and refinement apparent on every side, there are certain sources of weakness and downward tendencies, which are among the direct results of financial prosperity and incidental to a high degree of civilization and culture.

With the general increase in wealth there has been brought within reach of the great bulk of our people, not only the comforts, but many of the luxuries of life; following these there has been an indulgence in tastes often of a character more or less injurious, and a love of display has been developed which leads to extravagance in modes of living. In order to support a style which is beyond their circumstances, men are thus often driven to an unwarrantable extension of their business which results in pecuniary embarrassment, distress to their families, and a loss of moral rectitude.

We cannot but notice a lowering of the standard of business integrity and of moral responsibility for the payment of debts; the increase of unscrupulous speculation and of corrupt combinations to control prices and give fictitious values regardless of the injury done to others; which all greatly oppress the man of tender conscience in his endeavors to make a living. There is a growing disposition to consider all means of accumulating wealth justifiable which the law does not forbid, in forgetfulness of the equitable claim of every one to a fair opportunity of using his talents and industry in acquiring property. Accompanying this and promoted by it, unsound views of the rights of property which are

subversive of social order and security are industriously taught, spreading abroad envy or jealousy of those who have the advantage of wealth; and mistrust exists between classes of society whose common interests, if regulated by Christian consideration, would keep them in contented co-operation. Unfaithfulness in the administration of trusts, which was once comparatively rare, is not unfrequent, and positions of public trust are sought for the opportunity of private gain by means which threaten the stability of the government.

These evils, though the result of combined causes, are in large part traceable to the emulation for the reputation of wealth, and love of the power which wealth gives, which is apt to follow rapid increase of material prosperity where its influences are not moderated by the warning that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

But besides these causes and consequences of demoralization, which all thoughtful men observe and deplore, there are some others which, though hidden in their nature, may well awaken in the true lover of his country deep anxiety lest, if they go unchecked, the result will in the end prove disastrous to its true interests and highest happiness.

With the cultivation of what are known as the "Fine Arts," and through the opportunities which wealth affords, there have been introduced on this side of the Atlantic many works of the acknowledged masters in painting and sculpture, which are commended as models

of art, and have thus been accepted as a standard to be followed. Some of these, which are in keeping with modes of life and a code of morals utterly at variance with the pure teachings of the gospel, are tolerated and admired in cultivated society, forgetting that no cover of artistic excellence or stamp of classical reputation counts for anything in the Divine sight as an excuse for that which prompts unholy thoughts; and that, though "to the pure all things are pure," no one will be justified in "putting an occasion to fall in his brother's way."

The tendency of the present day in this direction is to be seen in the character of many of the paintings and engravings exhibited in art galleries or the windows of print stores; in the pieces of statuary introduced into public grounds, or in the ornamentation of public buildings, wherein undraped figures occupy conspicuous places. Has there not also been a growing relaxation of those rules of propriety which were once sufficient to exclude such representations from private houses; and do we not now find in the homes of the wealthy, and even those of professing Christians, specimens both of painting and sculpture whose tendency cannot be in the direction of a high order of purity or virtue?

Emboldened by this laxity of public sentiment, the theatre, the opera, and the circus, too ready to pander to the lower appetites of the community, have of late thrown off much of the restraint which at one time they assumed, and we now not unfrequently see displayed

on their placards large pictures of their performances that may well shock the finer feelings of those who pass them. It is therefore to be greatly feared that frequent familiarity with productions such as these is unconsciously lowering that high standard of moral purity which it is of the first importance should be maintained in a Christian community.

More hurtful still in its effects than these injurious influences is that of much of the literature which is now being circulated broadcast through the land. Highly wrought tales of adventure, romance, or crime, profusely illustrated, which are demoralizing in their general tone, or cater to the sensual propensities of our nature, are, through the wonderful powers of the printing-press, furnished at prices so low as to bring them within easy reach of young minds. Many of the novels of this day are histories of the indulgence of unholy passions and disregard of the sanctity of marriage, so seductively presented as to make a pure life, crowned with the blessings of the family relation, appear tame and uninteresting. To a population in which few are unable to read, the injurious consequences resulting from impressions thus received can scarcely be estimated. It is not too much to assume that to this source may be largely attributed the rapid spreading of sentiments subversive of gospel truth, sound morals, and right views of civil government, as well as the fearful increase of crime in its varied phases.

At the news-stands, where are displayed this worse

than trashy literature, we may see groups of boys and girls gathered to feast their eyes upon the graphic illustrations of the thrilling story, which a few cents will enable them to buy. Upon the railroad-train how frequent are the calls of the book-vendor in efforts to dispose of his armful of more or less expensive works, while in many cases it needs but a glance to satisfy the traveller that the contents of many of them are such as can only corrupt the heart and fill the mind with pictures which may leave lasting impressions for evil. Where a taste for such reading has been indulged, can we be surprised to learn that the downward progress of very many of the inmates of our jails and reformatories is traced by themselves to the seeds of vice thus early sown?

Rising in the social scale, we find on the counters of most book-stores, and in the book-cases of many professors of religion, the complete works of poets who have, in some of their writings, abandoned their exalted gifts to ministering to the lowest and most excitable passions of our weak human nature, in the most seductive language. The impure thoughts and images infused into the moral being by this unhallowed poetry, like certain poisons taken into the blood, may remain there for life, to be only rendered inert by continual resort to Divine grace. How can any doubt that He who "is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity," will "sweep away as the refuge of lies" the plea of an accepted classical standing as a sanction for immorality; and that He will hold to an awful accountability the possession of exalted powers of mind

and feeling, deliberately employed in estranging from Him those for whom Christ died ; and that He will not hold them clear who further their work by tolerating and excusing it.

A large proportion of the publishing arrangements of this country is employed upon novels, either in books, magazines, or family newspapers ; and there are public libraries, designed for the improvement of the people, whose volumes count by tens of thousands, devoted in large measure to works of fiction, because there is so much more demand for them than for any other kind of reading. Such works, whatever may be their claims to literary merit, often present false views of life, or aims that are far from elevating ; and by stimulating the fancy with dreams which they cannot realize, the young of either sex are frequently led into most unwise courses or improper connections.

Even where the aim of the author is to uphold right views of life and to serve the cause of religion, where the lesson intended to be taught is good and the characters worthy of imitation, human nature puts the teaching aside as imposition when it crosses its own inclinations ; and only gives to the characters described that kind of sentimental admiration which is due to ideals which may be or may not be true. This is far different in its effects upon character from the sincere desire to follow the example of excellence as exhibited in the records of real life, which is strengthened by the assurance of possible attainment.

There is reason to believe that in reading the class of novels which most attract cultivated and refined natures, where the fascination consists in the graphic representation of human nature in its dealings with not unnatural, but unreal circumstances and characters, the finer emotions of our being are often aroused and worthy interests stimulated. But these having no real object to act upon are barren of direct good to others, and in the end often produce sentimentalism or obtuseness of feeling in the reader. The sympathy which can have no outlet either in effort or prayer for the relief of actual suffering or thankfulness for actual happiness, tends to react and become morbid, or may grow to be as fictitious as the imagined occasions which have called it forth. The pleasurable excitement of these emotions satisfies the benevolent impulses for the time, while it indisposes for the exercise of that healthy sympathy with the real life around us, and active participation in its joys and sorrows, which brings its own reward of happiness on earth and the approval of Him who will say, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

By the indulgence of a passive and unregulated imagination requiring no mental effort, the taste for truly profitable books is destroyed, while a dreamy habit of thought is begotten which unfits for grappling bravely with the duties and practical business of life. Those who give themselves up to this desultory occupation of their thoughts are the more ready to satisfy their

desires for mental entertainment with theatrical performances, and thus subject themselves to their corrupting associations. Upon the female mind especially does the habit of novel reading lead to most injurious results, and to this source may be fairly traced a large proportion of the domestic wretchedness which now abounds. It is to the evils growing out of these and kindred abuses of the printing-press that we feel the community needs to be thoroughly aroused, lest the best life and energies of the nation become poisoned at their very source.

We firmly believe that the corrective for this and every other injurious tendency which threatens the highest interests of our beloved country, is to be found in a fuller and more practical acceptance of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. While the Scriptures of the New Testament deal with human nature in all its weakness and deformity, they also set forth the capacities of man for bringing glory to his Maker, both here and hereafter. As his heart is brought into harmony with the Divine will, a large measure of pure and substantial happiness is promised him on this side the grave. They treat of life, however, as it really is, short at best, and most uncertain as to its ending; the inestimable value of time, therefore, and its right employment, are frequent themes of the Saviour and his apostles. By them, also, the realities of death, eternity, and the judgment to come are pressed with the deepest earnestness.

They teach that as men receive Christ and his pre-

cepts into their hearts, their desires, their wills, and the whole bent of their lives will be changed, and through the sanctifying influence of his own Holy Spirit, they do indeed become "new creatures in Christ Jesus." All being thus subordinated to the will of God, they are assured that power from on high will be given over every sinful propensity; and all that is out of harmony with their highest happiness will be made manifest by the light of Christ "which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." The life into which our blessed Redeemer calls his followers is marked by a degree of watchfulness and self-denial, a singleness of purpose, a purity of conduct and even thought, which bespeak the Divine authority of Him who still "teacheth as never man taught." This is the religion which is meant to restore, lift up, and bless our fallen race.

As we seek for the "wisdom which cometh only from above," it will be given us more and more clearly to see what it is that promotes the establishment of Christ's kingdom upon the earth, and what is hindering it—what savors of his own pure spirit and what is not in unison with it; while we shall come to understand the full force of the apostle's declaration that "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." There has ever been an incompatibility between the service of the "two masters," and no man can serve them both. Hence the warnings and exhortations that abound in the writings of the apostles to their fellow-believers to be

“not conformed to this world,” to “keep themselves unspotted from it,” to “love not the world, for if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

We have need of the continual help of the Holy Spirit to see through and over the spirit of the world in its secret workings in ourselves and others—to enable us to rise above the authority of the standards of excellence and refinement which society adopts and changes at will independently of Divine sanction—to discern the tendencies of hurtful customs which are generally approved, and especially, to detect and turn from the insidious influence of things, impure or enervating in their own nature, which gain entrance into the unguarded heart under cover of their association with intellectual enjoyment or the attractions of refined taste. While we feel that the doctrines of our Saviour lay the axe at the root of every evil, yet in our human weakness we are confused by the mingling of good and evil in life, and are unable of ourselves to apply them with assurance to our own condition or that of society.

But our Holy Redeemer, when He returned to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, having left his followers a perfect example of holiness, and precepts to show them how “to walk even as He walked” while with them on earth, did not leave them comfortless, discouraged at their high calling, in doubt how to carry out his pure teachings in their practical application to the circumstances of their daily lives, and in perplexity how to keep themselves pure while

fulfilling their whole duty to their fellow-men. "The Comforter which is the Holy Ghost," the Sent of the Father in the name of the Son, who is given to us, according to the promise of our Saviour, to "teach us all things, and to bring all things to our remembrance whatsoever He has said unto us," will make the humble and watchful spirit quick of understanding to receive and apply his recorded teachings, to know his will when directly revealed, and fulfil his purposes, where our human reason would fail us or lead astray.

They who desire to sit at the Master's feet to listen to the gracious words which still proceed out of his mouth, and to "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth," while they look to Him continually for guidance in all the affairs of life, seek frequent retirement from the world and its confusing voices, to wait in reverent silence upon Him, in submission of their wills, prepossessions, and reasonings. These are brought so near to Him that they come to know of his doctrine, to see his gracious designs for the well-being of society, and conform their own conduct and influence thereto. In humility and faith they allow the convictions sealed upon their spiritual understandings to have precedence of their own reason or the example of other men. They are taught to distrust many of the accepted views of society, and stand as its faithful guardians, as well against the small beginnings of harmful influences as against gross and apparent evil.

These, however differing in gifts and the influence of

religious association and education, however gathered or wherever scattered over the earth, though mostly unknown to one another, yet having daily communion with and following one Lord and Master, are united in the fellowship of those who "walk in the light as God is in the light, and know the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, to cleanse them from all sin." Thus they are made co-workers with Him in harmonious labor for the promotion of the happiness of mankind by those best means which his all-seeing wisdom points out to them day by day. Looking to the same "Holy Leader and Commander to the people," and being each obedient in his own allotted place and calling, according to the ability given them—though they have no organization that can be seen of men, He beholds them keeping their ranks in righteousness, and moving forward in the advancement of his kingdom of "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." These are "lights in the world" and "the salt of the earth;" and as such Christians have a most important service to fulfil. If their own hearts are filled with "the peace of God which passeth all understanding," they can have not only no enmity towards those who are strangers to its blessed influences, but will earnestly long and labor that they too shall be brought into the fold of Christ.

In our intercourse, therefore, with those around us, we need especially to illustrate by our own consistent example the precepts of the gospel, and by the "beauty of holiness" commend the "fulness of its blessings" to

their approval. In our business relations, our modes of living, the choice of our recreations, and even the exercise of our tastes, we shall be made willing to practise that personal restraint and self-sacrifice which should ever mark the disciple of Jesus. While a discipline so wholesome will tend on the one hand to wean us from the spirit and vanities of the world, it will the better fit us for bearing our allotted part in carrying on the great work of the Church. Our Lord prayed for his followers "not that they should be taken out of the world, but that they should be kept from the evil." Had we a more real belief in his promise, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end," and a fuller faith in the keeping power of his grace, we should know our spiritual strength to increase, and should find ourselves the less embarrassed by a weak conformity to the ways of the worldling in many things which now greatly hinder the cause of Christ. As the number of these faithful Christians shall multiply, a fuller and more united testimony, we doubt not, will be borne against evil in every shape. A higher tone will be given to public sentiment; the press, the school, the business community, the civil government, will all receive nobler and higher impulses; and thus shall our favored land be brought rightly to fill that influential position among the nations for which it is so eminently fitted, and for which we may trustfully believe it has been hitherto preserved by an Almighty hand.