

DR. DABNEY AGAIN.

Universal Education as Involving the Idea of the Leveller—All cannot Aspire to the Highest Stations—Manual Labor or Savagery the Destiny of the Major Part—Fancy Philanthropists—The Common School Alumni—Theological Quacks—A Little Learning a Dangerous Thing.

II.

Hampden Sidney, Va., April 22, 1876.

To W. H. Ruffner, Esq., Superintendent of State Schools:

Dear Sir.—In the third place this theory of universal education in letters by the State involves the absurd and impossible idea of the Leveller, as though it were possible for all men to have equal destinies in human society. It is a favorite proposition with the asserters of these so-called American ideas, that "every American boy should improve himself as though he might some day be President of the United States." That is to say, the system supposes and fosters a universal discontent with the allotments of Providence, and the inevitable gradations of rank, possessions and privilege. It is too obvious to need many words, that this temper is anti-Christian; the Bible, in its whole tone, inculcates the opposite spirit of modest contentment with our sphere, and directs the honorable aspiration of the good man to the faithful performance of its duties, rather than to the ambitious purpose to get out of it and above it. It may be asked, does not the Bible recognize that fact, so pleasing to every generous mind, that the lower ranks now and then produce a youth worthy of the highest? Yes, David was taken from the sheep-folds to be Israel's most glorious king. But the Bible-idea is (and David's was a case precisely in point) that the humble boy is to exhibit this fitness for a nobler destiny, not by discontent and greedy cravings, but by his exemplary performances in his lower lot; and that Providence and his fellow-citizens are

to call him to "come up higher." For these instances of native merit, which are usually few, the State has no need to legislate. They will rise of themselves. They cannot be kept down, provided only we do not legislate against them, but leave them the *carriere ouverte aux talents*; or, if they will be the better for any provision, it should be exceptional, as they are exceptional cases.

With this exception, it is utterly false that every American boy may aspire to the higher stations of life. In the lottery of life these prizes must be relatively few—only a few can reach them. Nor is it right or practicable to give to all boys an "even start" in the race for them. The State, of course, should not legislate to the disadvantage of any in this race; but we mean that Providence, social laws, and parental virtues and efforts, do inevitably legislate in favor of some classes of boys in their start in that race, and if the State undertakes to countervail that legislation of nature by levelling action, the attempt is wicked, mischievous, and futile. The larger part of every civilized people is, and ever will be, addicted to regular, manual labor. The idea that the diffusion of intelligence and improvement of the arts are so to lighten the doom of labor, that two or three hours' work daily will provide for the wants of all, and leave the lowest laborer the larger part of his day for intellectual pursuits, is a preposterous dream. Let experience decide. Does the progress of modern civilization tend to exact "shorter hours" of its laborers than the barbarous state? Human desires always outrun human means. If this Utopian era is ever to come, when two or three hours of the artisan's time will be worth a day's work, the artificial wants of him and his family will have outrun him, in demanding the expenditure of five or six days' wages in one. The laborer will still find a motive for working all day as now—unless he turn loafer! And the last words remind us, that the inexorable law of nature we have just pointed out is, on the whole, a beneficent one; for it is necessary to prevent mankind from abusing their leisure. The leisure conferred by wealth is now often abused. So would that secured for the poor, by this fancied wealth of intelligence, be yet more abused; and the six or eight hours redeemed from manual toil would be devoted, not to intellectual pursuits, but to wasteful and degrading vices. And these vices would soon rivet again the yoke of constant labor upon their necks, or the fetters of the jail or

house of correction. We repeat: The destiny of the major part of the human family is the alternative of manual labor or savagery.

Now, no people will ever connect a real pursuit of mental culture with the lot of constant manual labor. The two are incompatible. Neither time, nor taste, nor strength, nor energy of brain will be found for both. Have not all manual-labor schools been failures? The man that works all day (usually) does not study. The nerve-force has been expended in the muscles, and none is left for mental effort. Hence, we care not how universally the State may force the arts of penmanship and reading on the children of laborers, when these become laboring men they will cease to read and write; they will practically disuse the arts as cumbersome and superfluous. This is a fact at which your enthusiast for common schools is very loath to look; *but it is a stubborn one.* The laboring classes in States which profess to give a universal education do not make any more beneficial use of letters, than those elsewhere. Prussia has for more than a generation compelled all her peasantry to go to school; but she is full of middle-aged peasants who have forgotten how to read, and who, in fact, never read. In boasted Massachusetts herself the very superintendents of the free schools lament that the State has more than ever of laboring poor, especially among the agricultural laborers, who neither know nor care anything concerning letters, for themselves or their children. The deniers of these stubborn facts are only the flatterers, not the friends, of the laborers.

Again our fancy-philanthropist will raise his out-cry, that if these views are admitted they condemn more than half of our fellow-creatures to a Boeotian stupidity and mental darkness. We might answer, first, that his expedients are futile to reverse that doom. The only difference between him and us is, that he is too quixotic, or uncandid, or interested, to admit the fact. God has made a social sub-soil to the top-soil, a social foundation in the dust, for the superstructure—the utopian cannot unmake it, least of all by his patchwork. But there is a second answer; he forgets that *the use of letters is not education*, but only one means of education, and not the only means. The laboring classes find their appropriate mental and moral cultivation in their tasks themselves, and in the example and in-

fluence of the superiors for whom they labor. The plough-man or artisan cultivates his mental faculties most appropriately in acquiring skill and resource for his work. He trains the moral virtues by the fidelity and endurance with which he performs that work. He ennobles his taste and sentiments by looking up to the superior who employs him. If to these influences you add the awakening, elevating, expanding force of Christian principles, you have given that laborer a true education—a hundred fold more true, more suitable, more useful, than the communication of certain literary arts, which he will almost necessarily disuse. Let the reader recall that brilliant passage of Macaulay, as just as brilliant, in which he shows, against Dr. Johnson, that the Athenian populace, without books, was a highly-cultivated people. Let him remember how entirely the greatness of the feudal barons in the middle ages, was dissociated from all “clerkly arts;” yet they were warriors, statesmen, poets, and gentlemen. So, our own country presents an humbler instance in the more respectable of the African freedmen. Tens of thousands of these, ignorant of letters, but trained to practical skill, thought, and resource, by intelligent masters, and imitating their superior breeding and sentiments, present, in every aspect, a far “higher style of man” than your Yankee laborer from his common school, with his shallow snattering and purblind conceit, and his wretched newspaper stuffed with moral garbage from the police-courts, and with false and poisonous heresies in politics and religion. Put such a man in the same arena with the Southern slave from a respectable plantation, and in one week’s time the ascendancy of the Negro, in self-respect, courage, breeding, prowess and practical intelligence, will assert itself palpably to the Yankee and to all spectators. The slave was, in fact, the educated man.

Let it be granted, as we have just implied, that there is a certain use which this *alumnus* of the common school may continue to make of his knowledge of letters. This gives us our strongest argument. Then the common schools will have created a numerous “public” of readers one-quarter or one-tenth cultivated; and the sure result will be the production for their use of a false, shallow, sciolist literature, science, and theology, infinitely worse than blank ignorance. “Wheresoever the carcass is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.” This will

be the sure result of the law of supply and demand inspired by a mercenary spirit. Formerly literature was for the educated; it was their occupation, and they formed the constituency for whom the producers of literature labored; consequently the literature of the civilized nations was characterized by all that was most decent in manner, elevated in sentiment, and thorough and just in argument, of which their society could boast. The uneducated or quarter-educated formed no direct constituency for authors and publishers; they did not bid for them, or cater to them. These unlettered classes received their ideas of literary, political, philosophical, and theological subjects (the most ignorant virtually have their politics, philosophy, and theology), from their social superiors, through social channels. And this was a source much safer than the present "literature for the millions," because much higher, purer, and more disinterested. The consequence was, that the unlettered classes reflected the opinions, sentiments, and elevated tone of the uppermost *stratum*; now it is those of a class lower and more sordid than themselves. Thus the Southern overseer, who read little but his Bible, had a judgment infinitely better trained, a moral tone far higher, and a social, political, and religious creed far sounder than the modern *alumnus* of your "common school," with his Leveller's arrogance and envy, and his armful of cheap newspapers. The overseer had the landed gentry who employed him as his instructors and models, and through them drew his speculative opinions from the noblest minds of the South; the Crawfords, Cheves, Madisons, Barbour's, Randolphs, Calhouns. The common-school *alumnus* has the wretched sciolists and theological quacks, who drive their sordid trade in cheap periodical literature. The advocates of the Yankee system boast in it, and revile the old one in that the latter made letters the prerogative of the few; theirs of the many. But letters of what sort? Here we have "given them a Roland for their Oliver."

We appeal to facts. Has not the creation of this large reading (but not truly educated) public occasioned a flood of mischievous, heretical, sciolistic, corrupting literature? The result is that the book and newspaper-making trade has, for sordid purposes, brought down to the lower classes a multitude of speculations on the most dangerous subjects, with which no mind is prepared to deal for itself and independently, until it is

very thoroughly trained and informed. That thorough mental discipline and full learning the common schools can never give to these masses. They may as well promise that every agrarian among them shall be an Astor or a Rothschild in wealth. The state of European and Yankee society under this new impulse illustrates the facts we assert. The smattering which State education has given the masses has but been to them the opening of Pandora's box. It has only launched them in an ocean which they are incompetent to navigate. Every manufactory is converted into a debating club, where the operatives intoxicate their minds with the most licentious vagaries of opinions upon every fundamental subject of politics and religion; and they have only knowledge enough to run into danger, without having a tenth part of the knowledge necessary to teach them their danger and incompetency. It was this system which prepared the way for the "International Society," and the horrors of the Paris *Commune*. So far are these nations from being healthily illuminated, they are an easy prey to the most destructive heresies, social and religious; and their condition is far more unwholesome and volcanic, with a more terrifying prospect of social dissolution, anarchy, and bloodshed, than was ever presented by the ignorance of the "middle ages." So obvious was this tendency to thoughtful minds thirty-five years ago that the great historian Heerea, with his intimate acquaintance with all the defects of mediaeval society, announced the deliberate opinion that the art of printing was destined to be more a curse than a blessing to Europe. It is not necessary for us to espouse that opinion; here is, at least, a fair instance for the application of the maxim of Pope, now so universally and disdainfully ignored:

("A little learning is a dangerous thing,
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
 For shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
 But drinking deeply sobers us again."

The amount of this grave objection is that when the State interferes in the work of common school education, it inevitably does not enough, or too much. To give that large learning and thorough discipline necessary for setting the mind to deal inde-

pendently with the corrupt labyrinth of modern current opinion is beyond the State's power. What she does give usually prepares the victims for the literary seducers.

It is one of the most important and best established maxims of social science that *influence descends*. Hence, if you would permeate the whole popular mass with any wholesale influence, the wisest plan is to place the element of good at the top, that it may percolate downwards. The engineer, when he wishes to supply the humblest, lowliest lane or alley of a city with pure water, establishes his reservoir upon the topmost hill; and thence it descends, without any other force than its own gravity, to every door and every lip. So the most effectual, the most truly philanthropic mode for elevating the lower classes of society is to provide for the rise of the superior class. This is nature's process; she elevates the whole mass by lifting it from above so that all the parts rise together, preserving that relation of places on whose preservation the whole organism depends. The fashionable plan is to place the lever under the bottom stones and prize them to the level of the cap-stones of which the result is that the whole structure tumbles into rubbish. The establishment of the University of Virginia for giving the most thorough training to advanced scholars has been the most truly liberal measure for the cultivation of the masses ever adopted in the State. It teaches only a few hundred of young men, and those only in the highest studies? True, but in giving them a higher standard of acquirement it has elevated as well as multiplied all the teachers of every grade; making the instruction better, down to the primary schools where the children of the poor learn the rudiments of reading. And what is better still, it has made thorough culture respectable, and diffused honest aspirations to the lowest ranks. Your very obedient servant,

R. L. DABNEY.