

ALUMNI ESSAY

Read by Jos. E. Campbell at the Commencement Exercises of St. Dunstan's University, May 30, 1923.

THE ADVANTAGES TO BE GAINED FROM THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

It was a warm day in the latter half of May; everything seemed to be under the influence of the drowsiness that accompanies spring. The students in the classroom leaned wearily over their desks, and tried vainly to suppress the yawns that would come.

The professor, who was delivering a lecture on Shakespeare, was endeavoring to make it interesting enough to dispel the general inertia. Nature, however, was working her will with the students; the professor could not awaken any response to his own enthusiasm. Picking out the student, whom he thought nearest to sleep, he snapped.

"Colier, why can't you pay attention? are you determined to remain in ignorance all your life? You'll never amount to anything if you refuse to study literature."

"What advantages do we gain from the study of literature anyway?" Collier replied. "It seems to me like a lot of work for nothing."

The professor saw his opening. He wanted his students to improve and become interested in literature; he saw a good chance to show them how the study of literature would benefit them. Putting his back to the black-board and plunging his hands into his pockets, he began:

Literature, figuratively speaking, broadens a man; it makes him less provincial, for through literature he becomes acquainted with every part of the world and with all peoples; he loses to a great extent the prejudices that he has for his own nationality and he sees the good qualities possessed by people of other nations. It does not, however, make him less patriotic; his patriotism assumes a newer and greater form, for he strives to uphold and to upbuild his country, not because it is his country, but because he sees that it is a unit of that great organization, called the world. His own nationality may still appear to him as the best, but he knows that each people has done something for the betterment of the human race, and he despises none.

The study of literature helps a man also to overcome

his own selfishness, and to work for a nobler end than self. The student sees how even the greatest men lived only a few years; many of them accomplished wonderful things, yet all were as powerless against death as the weakest of mortals. He reads, too, of men who had just mounted to the top rung of the ladder of success, and who were snatched from the world before they could enjoy their glory. No matter what a man has acquired, be it money, power, or wealth, it is all left behind when he crosses the shadowy gulf of death; all that he takes with him is the love or hate that he has towards God and his fellow men, and according to these and the works of these he will be judged. The student of literature has learned from the Bible, which besides being the word of God to man, is the greatest book of literature that the world possesses, that love brings a soul into eternal bliss, and that hate destroys the soul, and brings it to eternal ruin. It is not what man has done for himself that has power in eternity; it is what he has done for God and his fellow men; to no one does this appear more vividly than to the student of literature.

The student of literature never feels inferior to those about whom he reads, for the great men of the ages are no better than he; for he can think what they thought, and feel what they felt; he sees that they had their greatness and meanness, their passions and their caprices; some good quality in them raised them above their contemporaries, some weakness caused their failures. They struggled with the world and with themselves, at times they were victorious, at times they were defeated. It was a continuous fight, and victory came only to him that persevered to the end. The student realizes that these qualities that were in other men are in him; he has the same temptations to fight, the same trials to endure, but he has also the advantage of having the experiences of these former men to guide him. He sees that a certain course of life brought former men to destruction, and he avoids that course; he sees that they overcame adversity, and he makes use of their weapons.

Through literature, the past is continually helping the present. Literature is to us, on the voyage through life, what the chart is to the mariner on the sea, for both show the true course, and, if followed, will lead to the harbor desired.

There are no two individuals in the world alike. They may have the same appearance outwardly yet be as differ-

ent inwardly as darkness from light, for each will have his peculiar likes and dislikes, his strong qualities and his weaknesses. All these individuals, however, must live together, and, if they wish to enjoy life they must live peacefully, granting and receiving good will one to another.

Laws were made to prevent a person from committing any injury against his fellow men, but laws concern only great infringements of individual rights. There are numberless ways by which one person may cause inconvenience and trouble to others that the law does not take into account. The student of literature becomes acquainted with a vast number of characters, some of whom have lived upon the earth; more are the product of some writer's imagination, but whoever they may be, the student can identify a characteristic in some living person that he finds in these; he perceives the temptations and difficulties that these people had, the efforts they put forth to become better, and the fight they waged against their fallen nature; he realizes that few, indeed, do wrong from deliberate intention, and he feels sympathy towards mankind. He does not let his sympathy remain a generality; he applies it to individual cases, and strives to act justly towards those whom chance places in his path, and forgives injuries committed against him. By the knowledge gained from literature, man is helped in the performance of God's command: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Literature places before us examples of men who lived nobly and unselfishly, men who forgetting themselves toiled for the betterment of humanity and the glory of God. It shows us men who faced all evils, even death itself, rather than be false to their faith and ideals. They looked upon the soul as nobler than the body, and put forth every effort to keep it pure and undefiled; casting aside all earthly attachments, they strove for a nobler end than earth could give. We are thrilled by the accounts of them; the things of earth are placed before us in their true proportion. We see what is worth working for, and we are inspired by the examples that literature sets before us of becoming nobler and of accomplishing some great work, not for the applause of the world, not for the advancement of self, but for the glory of our Creator.

We realize from the study of literature that there are great qualities in man such as truth, wisdom, and nobility. We know that man does not produce these himself, al-

though he may by diligence increase them; it does not seem right to us that they should perish after the short span of man's life. We wonder where they come from, and what can be their end; the answer can be obtained from literature: God is the infinite fount of the great qualities of man, and to God they must all return. We long for the source of all these delights of which literature has given us the shadow; nothing appears of worth to us that does not lead to that great source. The desire for the beauties of the mind, which literature gives us, urges us to toil for that end that alone can satisfy our cravings.

The more man studies literature and the more he learns the greater is his realization that he knows little, indeed, of all the wonders that surround him; that he is as ignorant of the universal truth as the worm that crawls along the ground is ignorant of the earth. And realizing all this, as his knowledge advances his pride recedes, and he humbly submits himself to revelation, and his faith becomes strong.

A student of literature can truly be called a citizen of the world, for as he reads literature, he becomes in turn a Greek, a Roman, or an Englishman; he knows all peoples, for nothing portrays a people so well as their literature. He becomes acquainted with the greatest minds that the world has known. He walks through the streets of Athens with Diogenes and listens to his cynical discourses on men and their vanities; he sits in the Roman Chamber and is carried away by an oration delivered by Cicero; or, with a few friends gathered from the talented ones of Greece, he sits and listens to the simple and exquisite conversation of Plato. He does not feel inferior to any of them; he understands their thoughts and weighs their reasoning in his own mind, and he knows what fruit their teaching has borne.

It has been said that no one thinks a new thought. This comes home forcibly to a student of literature, for he sees in the writings of the Greeks and Hebrews the same thoughts as are expressed by men of his own day. There may be a slightly different coloring to the two, but, fundamentally, they are the same. The mind of man is universal and for all ages. In the mind of the first man was contained all that would be in the minds of men for all ages, and each one of us can realize, can feel, and can think, all that ever was and all that ever will be in the minds of men. We pick up Homer, and find an emotion expressed by him that we ourselves have felt. We may have been pondering

over some difficulty; and St. Thomas makes it clear for us. Our minds are linked to those of the past, and we can be benefited in our problems by turning to the pages of literature. I tell you that, if we would only search it out, the cure for every evil, the plain proof of every problem, the solution of every difficulty, is to be found in the pages of literature.

If we have a noble thought we should not keep it to ourselves, for that would be selfishness; we should send it forth so that other men may gain benefit from it, and enjoy it also. Many great thoughts have been spoiled in the transmission from one mind to another. The two means we have for giving out our thoughts are by speaking and by writing. When we talk, we can make ourselves clear by elaborate explanation and repetition; but when we write we can not do this, for if we use a great deal of explanation and repeat too often, we grow tiresome, and the thought that we wished to express loses all its force. To know, therefore, how to express ourselves by writing is of prime importance. From literature we obtain rules for writing, and we note, whilst reading the great authors, how they expressed themselves, and in what way they made themselves clear. We take these rules and the numerous examples given for each, and we assimilate them; and we learn then how to express ourselves so as to have the greatest clearness and force. Moreover from extensive reading of literature we acquire an individual beauty of expression that no rules can form in us. When we have acquired this happy mode of expression, we can put forth to good advantage, not only our noble thoughts, but we may even express ordinary thoughts so that they become delightful and beneficial to others.

If a person depends upon his own mind to furnish him with material to write, he will soon find that he is repeating himself again and again. Man's mind is not rich a productive soil; it is a waste that must be cultivated and fertilized before it will produce anything worth while. We study literature both ancient and modern and our minds become stored with their treasures; they become fruitful in resources according to the number of ideas that have been collected and thoroughly digested. Literature provided material for the memory and the imagination; the memory is stored with facts and ideas; the imagination is given shadows which it presently forms into concrete

things; and both the memory and the imagination working together and stimulated by the study of literature produce new ideas.

It is true that men are not born with better moral and spiritual faculties as the ages pass; the advancement along these lines that the parents have attained is not transmitted to any great extent to their children; these may be certain tendencies passed down, but there is no active principle. Each man must advance along these lines by his own exertions; he must make use of the graces that are given to him by God. But, nevertheless, the past ages help us to live, morally and spiritually. The experiences of some good and holy men are written, and they are passed down to us; we read and study these writings, and we learn how to avoid the evils that ruin men's souls or if we cannot avoid them, we learn how to fight against them, and how to overcome them. Preachers acquire a great deal of knowledge from books; they have not had all the experiences of which they preach. They have acquired their knowledge to a great extent from literature; they preach to multitudes instructing them how to live rightly and how to attain God's kingdom. In this way literature helps many who never think that they owe anything to it. Literature has saved many a man from sin, and it has raised others from the path that leads to eternal ruin by the encouragement and assurance of God's mercy that it contains.

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