

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen

OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,

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BY THOMAS EARLE,

PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.

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ADDRESS.

WITH your permission I will now call your attention to the present state of our Association, and also take the liberty of offering a few suggestions, which, if adopted, will, in my opinion, be beneficial to our interests and enable us to enlarge our sphere of usefulness.

From the annual reports of our Committees we cannot but congratulate ourselves that our Society, in a financial point of view, is all that any of us could have hoped for. Our property has enhanced in value until we find ourselves in the possession of a capital of at least \$250,000—a large sum—the income from which, if properly managed, may be productive of much good.

And while the amount of our capital has increased, the number of inhabitants of the City has also largely increased; so that to-day we are situated in the midst of a community of nearly three-quarters of a million of people, of which the working classes form a large majority.

It is true that the number of our members has not increased in proportion to the increase of the number of mechanics around us, and certainly not to the extent that we had reason to expect, in view of the benefits to be derived from membership with us. This subject I hope will receive your attention, and such consideration as you may think its importance demands. Allow me also to state, that although our increase has been small, yet we register a long list of names, good men in the community, whose reputation for ability and energy is such as, if called into action, would enable this Society to take a

high stand, and extend its usefulness to a degree more commensurate with its means and the wants of the mechanic interests.

Some of our brothers have, indeed, bestowed much time and labor, and shown much interest and ability in furthering the objects of our Society, and they deserve our thanks as well as the thanks of the community ; it would be well if the same spirit that actuates them could be generally diffused among us.

The Society, through the COMMITTEE ON PENSIONS, continue in their good work ; the calls made by the unfortunate, in their affliction, are never made in vain, and the Committee stand ready to hear and respond, knowing that the Society have the ability and the will fully to carry out, in a liberal spirit, this important feature of our Association.

From the report of our SCHOOL COMMITTEE it will be seen that from combined causes the number of pupils in our School, and of course the amount of receipts for tuition, has considerably diminished ; and the Committee lay this important matter before the Society for its serious consideration. For many years we have pointed to this School with peculiar satisfaction, as one of the means by which we have done good. There the children of the rich and the poor meet together and upon equal terms—the child of the poor or deceased brother takes his place in the same class, with the same privileges, and contends for the same premiums as the child of the most favored among us ; *not as a charity scholar*, but with uplifted head, in the enjoyment of his rights, as the child of a brother in the Mechanics' Society—a beautiful feature in the management of our School, admired by all. Many a one has there received an excellent education, which is now carrying him with honor and profit through the world.

I would also advert to the fact that a large number of members of the Society, myself among the number, have been enabled to educate our children in this School on very favorable terms. An excellent education is there secured

for them ; with the comfortable reflection to us, that although reverses may overtake us, yet the School is still there and our children can enjoy all its benefits. I know that you will give this subject your careful attention, and cannot but hope that you will be able to adopt such measures as will place the School in a satisfactory position.

It is certainly very desirable that the School should pay its way—by this, I mean that its receipts for tuition should pay all its expenditures. If it does this it is of great benefit to us—it educates our children, helps us to carry out the objects of our association, and gives us a position in the community that we could not have without it. If it does cost us something, that is, if the receipts do not equal the expenditures, it is only in the same position as the other departments of our Society. All will be right if we can only realize that we are fulfilling our mission. Let us endeavor to make it emphatically a School for the children of Mechanics, and of so high an order that it will commend itself to the whole community.

It has been said, that since the Free Academy has been in operation, it has had an effect unfavorable to our School. It is required of those asking admission to that institution, that they should have been pupils in a Ward School for at least one year previous to making that application. Now, it seems to me that that part of the law should apply to our School, so far as our gratuitous scholars are concerned. And if it does not already, that an application to the Legislature, would, without doubt, procure such an enactment as would place those scholars upon an equal footing with those taught in the Ward Schools. Besides, the Society has two scholarships in Columbia College, and four in the New-York University ; and I have no doubt that we can procure scholarships enough in those two institutions to enable us to hold out as great inducements to our boys as the Ward Schools possibly can to theirs. Let it be known that a boy in our School, by good conduct and application to his studies, can insure himself an education in Columbia College or the New-York University, and it will be seen that the Mechanics' Society's School in

that respect will stand in a better position than even the Ward Schools.

But you must let it be known far and wide. Every body knows the relation of the Ward Schools to the Free Academy; let every body know all the advantages to be derived from a connection with our School. A second rate School will not sustain itself. If our School is not of the very highest order, let us make it so. Let us have the very best teachers that the country affords—we will be compelled to pay the price—but it seems to me that we can safely do so, if we can obtain those whose character and reputation will guarantee success.

The APPRENTICES' LIBRARY, with its Reading Rooms, is in good order and successful operation; it is very desirable, however, that the number of its readers should be increased, for we all know that its benefits are participated in by a very small proportion of those for whom it was intended. The influence of that Library should be felt in every workshop in this city. And here allow me to call your attention to a class of operatives for whom no provision, of this kind, has ever been made—I allude to the large number of females engaged in the various employments connected with the mechanic and manufacturing interests of our city. We can, at very little expense, provide the means of intellectual improvement to them, and it is very desirable that we should do so. I am satisfied that it is clearly within the legitimate objects of our Association, and do not hesitate to recommend that our Library be at once thrown open to *female operatives*, upon the same conditions as it now is to apprentices. I hold in my hand the Report of the Apprentices' Library Company of Philadelphia, for the year ending March 13th, 1855. I suppose that there was one published since, but I have not seen it. Both boys and girls have access to that Library, and the report states, that the number of volumes is about 15,700.

Of books loaned during the year, to 1,750 boys, . . . 21,942

Do. do. do. 1,791 girls, . . . 24,163

Total, 46,105 volumes to 3,541 readers.

The report also says: "Especially is it gratifying to us to inform the Company, and the friends of the Library everywhere, that the girls' department continues fully to realize the most sanguine anticipations of its founders; the number of this interesting class of our readers continues to increase, while their department gives unmistakable evidence of the value they place upon their privileges." It appears to me that any argument that can be advanced in favor of providing the means of intellectual improvement to boys, applies with equal force in favor of the same provision for girls. I ask you to refer this matter to the appropriate Committee.

The DEMILT LIBRARY, bequeathed to us by Brother Demilt, and enlarged and improved by the bequests of his two sisters, has not yet been as productive as the benevolent donors anticipated. Knowing the liberality of our deceased brother, we hazard nothing in saying that if he had known the effect of the proviso, "that it should for ever be a pay Library," that clause would never have been inserted in his will. The Society, through the LIBRARY COMMITTEE has used its endeavors to make this Library available, but those endeavors have thus far proved unsuccessful. The catalogue of books, which it now presents, is a very valuable one. It is true that there is very little of light literature on its shelves, and therefore might not be very attractive to many readers, but to the mechanic, to the student, to the searcher after knowledge, it can not but be highly prized. This department of our Library should be better known, and I am satisfied that there are numbers in our City who would hail with joy the information that such a Library exists, and that they can have access to it.

Our LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE continues to furnish the annual course of popular lectures; and, so far as I have been able to ascertain, they have proved instructing and entertaining to those who have been able to listen to them. I would, however, ask whether an improvement would not result from opening a correspondence much earlier in the

year than has been customary, say as early as the month of April, with men of talent, in order that lectures may be procured upon such subjects as the Committee might deem most profitable to us, and most in accordance with the objects of our Institution. A course of lectures in each year, on subjects connected with science and the mechanic arts, for the benefit of the readers of the Library and the larger scholars of the School, would certainly prove beneficial.

Some of the members of the Society have suggested the propriety of our establishing classes for the instruction of apprentices, journeymen and others, in those branches of science best adapted to enable them to rise in the several occupations towards which they have chosen to direct their energies and attention. I fully concur with those brothers that this is a subject well worthy the attention of the Society. It is within our appropriate sphere, and its object is to instruct the mind, and elevate the character of the working man. We might have classes in Natural Philosophy, Mathematics, Drawing, (particularly Architectural and Mechanical Drawing,) Chemistry, Surveying, the first principles of Book-keeping, and perhaps some others. I am satisfied that if this subject is taken hold of with energy, we will be fully repaid for all the time, labor and money it will cost, in the benefits that will be enjoyed by those who participate; and that it will prove a source of great satisfaction to the whole Society, and of advantage to the community.

In connection with these classes, the Demilt Library may be brought into requisition. Many of the books already there would be very valuable to the members of those classes, and render them much assistance in the prosecution of their studies; and such other works can, from time to time, be added as would be desirable for those classes. And in this way that Library would be made a valuable auxiliary to the Society's operations.

We should use means to make our Institution better known. It is almost lost and forgotten in this great city. We should publish ourselves more; let every mechanic's shop, every

manufactory and every warehouse, through the medium of circulars, &c., know that there is a Society, with its School, its Library and its Lectures, accessible to almost every one; that its objects are to inform the mind, and elevate the characters of the working classes, and that it has the ability to carry out its objects. I would make this Society the grand rallying point for the workers of the community. I would have every working man feel that he has an interest here; and, in order to carry out this idea, I would suggest that a Committee be appointed to prepare and publish a pamphlet, setting forth our position, our objects, and the advantages to be derived from membership with us.

A Committee have now in charge the selection of a new location for a hall. They have presented several lots to the Society for its consideration; and at the last meeting the Society requested the Committee to ascertain whether the lot on Broadway, adjoining this property, can be obtained, and if so, at what price. I suppose we will all agree, that this Society should build a hall, such as the mechanics of the City can point to with pleasure. A substantial building, correct in its architectural proportions, well suited to the uses to which it is dedicated, and worthy of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New-York. But where shall it be located? That is a question which, it appears to me, will require all the wisdom we possess to answer satisfactorily. Where is the best spot for us to locate, in order to carry out the objects of the Association? The most central, the most accessible and the most convenient for those for whom it is designed. We should also have an eye to a profitable investment, if we purchase lots; but that should be only a secondary consideration. Our first and highest aim should be to benefit our Society now—the working classes now. Some of our brothers think we should go to the upper part of the City, so fast being built up for residences, that it will soon be, and in fact already is, difficult to obtain six or eight lots together in any desirable location, and that the rise in the value of property will certainly make it a profitable in-

vestment. Others think that, for the present, Fourteenth-street is the utmost limit we should think of; while others again are of the opinion that the very heart of the city, as well as the very centre of workshops, manufactories and the residences of mechanics, is in Broadway, between Canal and Bleecker streets; in other words, that our present location is the very best we can have. They think that no other can unite all the advantages of this, especially when we take into consideration the various departments of our Society. Now, in view of these differences of opinion, it appears to me that we should decide first of all for what purposes we want a building; what accommodations does the School Committee require; the Library Committee; the Literary and Scientific Committee, and what other rooms are needed; and then procure plans to enable us to ascertain whether such a building can be erected here; and if it is thought desirable to remove from here, what should be the shape and size of such a lot as we require; something also should be inquired about the cost of such building in this and other locations; whether it is desirable to purchase a corner lot, at the larger price, and also how much more it would cost to erect a building on a corner than in the block; and also any other information that may be necessary for us, in order that we may act judiciously in the matter. If you think well of this suggestion I trust that you will refer it to the Committee already appointed, or to some other, in order that we may have all the light possible before we take any action upon the subject.

There is an error into which we, as a Society, are very likely to fall. It arises from the circumstances in which we have all been placed—an old habit that fits us very closely—we have been compelled to put it on and wear it all our business lives. I allude to that ever-recurring question, will our outlays bring a good return in interest?—will they bring a profitable return in dollars and cents? In business we work for an object—it is to maintain ourselves and make money. In our Society we also have an object in view, which is to do good, and for that we work. Our motto must not be, “Our con-

stant care is to increase our store." I grant it, that in making an investment we should be careful that our capital is not diminished, and that we should have an eye to the investment being a profitable one. All our outlays should be judicious, and made with the utmost care that the property intrusted to us is strictly guarded from waste, and that it is made to yield as much as possible ; but I do not think it well that this Society should add any of its income to its capital. No, I would be careful to keep the capital safe and entire, but would, with all care, prudence and good management, spend the income, every dollar of it, for the benefit of our Society and the advancement of its legitimate objects. And looking at the amount of our capital, at the ability and energy our members possess, at the wants of the community all around us—yes, looking from every point of view at the position in which Providence has placed us—I feel warranted in saying, and am sure that you will agree with me, when I do say, the mission of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen is to all the working classes ; and that it is our duty and our privilege, if we will only embrace it, to extend the means to benefit and bless every individual of the industrial, working portion of the community around us.

