

**GREAT MEN: BEING THE  
SUBSTANCE OF A LECTURE  
DELIVERED EX-TEMPORE AT THE  
TOWN HALL, ON THE 28TH  
SEPTEMBER, 1866**

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**VARIOUS**

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## GREAT MEN.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

THE age in which we live has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. In these days of civilization and enlightenment, of industry and enterprise, of trade and manufacture, of steam and electricity, of scientific discoveries and inventions, there are on all sides cheering indications of material improvement and prosperity. But the age does not seem to be very favorable to the spiritual interests of man. In the midst of all this pomp and splendour of material prosperity, ill fares the spirit. While the senses enjoy an endless variety of physical comforts, the soul droops and pines in an uncongenial atmosphere. Modern civilization is eminently and essentially materialistic. All departments of thought and speculation are more or less of this character. The politics of the age is Benthamism, its ethics Utilitarianism, its religion Rationalism, its philosophy Positivism. All seems dull, mechanical, unspiritual, and lifeless. In the discharge of moral and religious duties especially, and in all concerns affecting the interests of the soul, men follow not the high and immutable principles of conscience, but the low and convenient standard of conventionalism. All the nobler instincts and aspirations are smothered by the ignoble worship of custom and tradition. The orthodox fondly look through the vista of by-gone ages to a romantic past, peopled with saints and prophets and angels of God, adorned with all that is fairest and goodliest and holiest, and illumined by God's direct revelations; and they fancy that by believing in that they will be saved. Those, on the other hand, who are beyond the pale of orthodoxy are giving themselves up to the wild vagaries of

free-thinking and scepticism, though outwardly, for politic reasons, they conform as strictly to forms and symbols as the orthodox. Thus, as regards both those who are within and those who are outside the orthodox church, there is underneath apparent conformity a striking absence of spiritual faith—that faith which is “the evidence of things not seen, the substance of things hoped for.” From the bigotry and dogmatism of traditional creeds to the cold abstraction of rationalism, the entire religious life of the nineteenth century betrays a lamentable want of spiritual insight, and of that direct inspiration which alone can give us light unto salvation. From such tendencies, which characterize the civilization of the present age, India is not altogether free. Decrepit with age as she is in relation to her ancient greatness, and quite in her infancy in relation to modern civilization, she has with peculiar readiness caught this wide-spread contagion. Politically and intellectually, England is our master. We have been brought up in the school of English thought, and have been inoculated with Western ideas and sentiments. Hence is it that we see in India a dim reflection of all that is going on at present in civilized Europe. The physical resources of the country are undergoing wonderful expansion and development, and everywhere we behold daily multiplying signs of material prosperity. The intellectual gloom which for centuries covered its face is being dispelled by the rays of liberal education, and the mists of idolatry and superstition are fast disappearing. But alas! what have we instead of these? The materialism of modern civilization. Utilitarian views have already spread far and wide among the educated classes, and Positivism counts its followers by hundreds. Few care about the sacred interests of the soul; and those who do, rest satisfied with a few vague rationalistic dogmas. It is certainly the duty of all who are interested in the welfare of India, to endeavour to check, in due season, these sceptical tendencies of the age, and to infix in the minds of the rising generation such positive ideas of the higher truths of religion as may enable them to attain the blessings of salvation. To put forth my humble efforts in this direction, so far as my limited capacities will allow, is the main object I have in view in appearing before you this evening. The people of India must be roused from their lethargy and apathy, and saved from the dangers of smooth but treacherous materialism. This life of

spiritual stagnation that we see around us is woful; this spreading infection of sceptical fancies is appalling. The enslaved spirit of the nation must rise and bestir itself freely to the holy activities of the higher life. That question is or should be as solemn and pressing with us in India now as it ever was elsewhere.—“What shall I do to be saved?” And for a proper and practical solution of this question, we must, with sincere and humble hearts, rely on God, and pray without ceasing that He may reveal Himself to us, and purify and regenerate us by the direct action of His holy spirit. For, in order that we may be sanctified and saved, we must hold direct and personal communion with God, each for himself, and so feel and establish our relations with Him, that our hearts may be for ever open to His living and holy inspiration. And as God communicates His spirit to us in certain mysterious ways, a proper comprehension of the secret of such communication is obviously of great importance to our salvation. Thousands, we know, have, in all ages, searched for truth and God in the dry wells of ancient traditions and outward symbols, to satisfy their spiritual thirst; but it was not till they discovered and drank of the deep fountain of divine revelation, that they felt truly blessed with the pure water of saving truth. It is therefore necessary to inquire how God reveals Himself to man.

The first manifestation of God is in nature, and it is from this that the earliest religious impressions of men and nations have been derived. This is the primary and ordinary revelation of God, and one which is accessible and intelligible to all alike. Man, in the simplicity of his uneducated mind, and without the aid of logic or philosophy, “traces nature up to nature’s God.” He cannot but do so. The universe exhibits on all sides innumerable marks of design and beauty, of adaptation and method, which he cannot explain except by referring them to an Intelligent First Cause, the Creator of this vast universe. Each object in nature reminds us of its Maker, and draws the heart in spontaneous reverence to His infinite majesty. The stupendous Himalayas, the vast deep Atlantic, the flowing rivulet, the fragrant and beautiful rose, the warbling bird, and all that is grand and beautiful in the world below, and the heavens above, “declare the glory of God, and shew His handiwork,” and inspire devotional feelings in the soul towards Him who made them. Verily, there are “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in

stones, and good in every thing." But is God manifest in the universe simply as its Maker—who created it, but has no connection whatever with it at present? Does the universe bear the same relation to God as the watch does to the watch-maker? Certainly not. The world cannot exist for one moment without God. He is its life and power. He is the power of all secondary powers, the true life of all living beings. He is the immanent power of the world; its in-dwelling life. The same power that created men and things supports them. They can have no independent power or existence apart from their Maker. In Him we "live and move and have our being." It is not true as some would have it, that God created the world, invested each object and being with certain powers, and left them to work independently, according to certain fixed laws. Law simply denotes mode of action, and can have no agency; while the secondary powers inherent in objects, which indeed act and produce all the striking effects and phenomena we behold in nature, are dependent upon the primary power of the Almighty. God the Creator should not be conceived apart from God the Preserver. If the world is real, it is real because of the divine power which animates it, and constitutes its immanent vitality. But is it merely the intelligence and power of God that we see in nature? We perceive His goodness in the countless and varied bounties which He showers on us, and which make us gratefully bow to Him as our Merciful Father, who not only makes us live but renders life agreeable. It is He who supplies our daily wants; and even before we came into the world He made ample provisions necessary for our sustenance and well-being. He taketh care of each one of us, and is the giver of every good that we enjoy. This is a great fact and cannot be ignored—God's providence. There are some, however, who affect to dispose of it as a general providence, the effect of God's general administration of the world on each individual life, and therefore not a matter for special thanksgiving. The imposing plausibility of such an argument cannot pervert the unsophisticated simplicity of human nature, or restrain its spontaneous and generous impulses. Let these men argue that, as God does not directly give into their hands their daily bread, He can have no special claim on their gratitude, for He shows no special goodness to them. Men with simple and natural hearts will, however, believe that the food they



eat and the pleasures they enjoy are all the gifts of Providence;—the necessary effects of a general economy, it is true, but not less the generous gifts of special kindness to each individual recipient of the same. Between general and special providence there is no difference in fact. It is God's goodness viewed from different stand-points that makes the distinction. The Creator of the universe is the Father of each individual man. All His dispensations are general as regards the world at large, but they are special so far as they fall within the bounds of our individual life, and are respectively partaken by us. The same sun that gives light and heat to millions of men, may be viewed either as a part of the general economy of the world, conducive to general prosperity, or it may be gratefully looked upon by each individual man as manifesting God's mercy towards him. Hence to each of us God stands in the relation of Father for the manifold blessings He daily confers on us. And thus, while we worship God as the Creator and upholder of this vast and magnificent universe as a totality, we offer Him the grateful homage of our hearts as our Merciful Father for the particular benefits we derive from His works. Behold the Supreme Creator and Ruler of the universe—infinite in wisdom, power, and goodness—immanent in matter, upholding it, and quickening all its movements, and mercifully dispensing joy and blessings to all His children. Such is the revelation of nature.

But is God manifest only in matter? Is the volume of nature His only revelation to man—the only source from which we are to derive our knowledge of His nature and attributes, and our relations and obligations to Him? Does He call forth our homage and gratitude simply by His wonderful manifestations in the world of matter, and His merciful dispensation of physical comforts? No. There is another revelation; there is *God in History*. He who created and upholds this vast universe, also governs the destinies and affairs of nations. The same hand which we trace in the lily and the rose, in rivers and mountains, in the movements of the planets and the surges of the sea, regulates the economy of human society, and works unseen amid its mighty revolutions, its striking vicissitudes, and its progressive movements. History is not what superficial readers take it to be, a barren record of meaningless facts,—a dry chronicle of past events whose evanescent interest vanished with the age when they

occurred. It is a most sublime revelation of God, and is full of religious significance. It is a vast sermon on God's providence with copious and varied illustrations. Grecian mythology represents Zeus, the supreme ruler of the universe, as the father, and Memory as the mother of Clio, the muse of history, thereby shewing that the nature of history is partly divine and partly human. In fact, history is not altogether secular; it is sacred. If instead of merely looking on the surface of facts and events, where only human agency is visible, we dive beneath and trace them to the great principles which underlie them, and the energies which brought them about, we shall find that the source of all the wisdom and power they display is God. Like nature, history reveals the marvellous workings of Providence. But in what manner does God manifest himself in history? Through Great Men. For what is history but the record of the achievements of those extraordinary personages who appear from time to time and lead mankind; and what is it that we read therein but the biography of such men. The history of the world, says Carlyle, is the biography of great men. The interest of nations and epochs centres in them: eliminate them, and you destroy all history. It is with the masses of mankind as with armies: they act by their leaders, themselves unknown and unnoticed. In reading of battles, we invariably miss the names of the thousands of common soldiers who fight on either side, and meet the names only of their captains and leaders; so in the vast history of the world we miss the names of ordinary men, whom Victor Cousin justly calls "the anonymous beings of the human species;" only the names of great men strike the eye, and rivet our interest and sympathy. Such men take the lead in all the great movements of the world, the multitude always follow. They prominently stand forth in the van of society, and can hardly be confounded with ordinary men. A great man is a giant amongst a race of pigmies: he towers above the level of ordinary humanity. His greatness is unmistakable. It is through these great men, these leaders of mankind, that God reveals Himself to us in history: in short they constitute what we mean by 'God in history.'

Great Men have also been called Representative Men, Geniuses, Heroes, Prophets, Reformers, and Redeemers, according to their various functions and characteristics. Let us now

proceed to inquire what it is that constitutes great men : what are the distinctive features in their character which give them pre-eminence, and distinguish them from ordinary humanity.

But who are they, some may ask on the very threshold of the inquiry, that we should be so anxious about them? The student of history may study their career with a view to satisfy his literary curiosity, and add to his stock of historical knowledge, and may feel astonished as he reads their wonderful exploits; but beyond this what are they to him? They lived and died like other men, performing their respective parts in the amphitheatre of history: probably they did great good to their country, and evinced extraordinary ability and wisdom, and for all this posterity will readily give them credit. But what moral interest can we feel in them? Whatever importance they may possess as leading historic characters, are they of any religious importance to us? Yes, they are of the deepest interest and importance to our souls. They are destined to subserve the most momentous purposes in the moral economy of all men, of whatever race, or country, or age. With what is purely personal, local, and contingent in them we have certainly nothing to do; but that which is divine and universal in them, that which makes them great men, deeply concerns us all, for it is God's gift to us. Nations rise and fall, revolutions and wars make a wreck of society, but true greatness always lives—a standing miracle and an abiding revelation—to speak unto endless generations and unto all the nations of the earth of the inscrutable riches of God's wisdom, power, and goodness. This is the sublime purpose of the lives of great men: this makes every one of us feel a deep moral interest in them, and leads us to place ourselves in an attitude of reverent loyalty towards them, that we may receive from them the precious boon which they were designed and destined by God to confer on us. We cannot dishonor or trifle with them; we cannot dispose of them as mere great historic characters with empty praise and admiration; we must regard them as God's manifestations to each one of us, and so open the whole heart to them, that it may be filled with all that is great, noble and divine in them. We should so love and revere them, that under their influence, and with their aid, we may find Him whom they reveal.

Great men are sent by God into the world to benefit mankind. They are His apostles and missionaries, who bring