EDWARD LIVINGSTON YOUMANS: THE MAN AND HIS WORK, PP. 365-390

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EDWARD LIVINGSTON YOUMANS

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

BY

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THE MAN AND HIS WORK.

In one of the most beautiful of all the shining pages of his "History of the Spanish Conquest in America," Sir Arthur Helps describes the way in which, through "some fitness of the season, whether in great scientific discoveries or in the breaking into light of some great moral cause, the same processes are going on in many minds, and it seems as if they communicated with each other invisibly. We may imagine that all good powers aid the 'new light,' and brave and wise thoughts about it float aloft in the atmosphere of thought as downy seeds are borne over the fruitful face of the earth" (vol. iii., page 113). The thinker who elaborates a new system of philosophy deeper and more comprehensive than any yet known to mankind, though he may work in solitude, nevertheless does not work alone. The very fact which makes his great scheme of thought a success and not a failure is the fact that it puts into definite and coherent shape the ideas which many people are more or less vaguely and loosely entertaining, and that it carries to a grand and triumphant conclusion processes of reasoning in which many persons have already begun taking the earlier steps. This community in mental trend between the immortal discoverer and many of the brightest contemporary minds, far from diminishing the originality of his work, constitutes the feature of it which makes it a permanent acquisition for mankind, and distinguishes it from the eccentric philosophies which now and then come up to startle the world for a while, and are presently discarded and forgotten. The history of modern physics—as in the case of the correlation of forces and the undulatory theory of light—furnishes us with many instances of wise thoughts floating like downy seeds in the atmosphere until the moment has come for them to take root. And so it has

* An Address before the Brooklyn Ethical Association, March 23, 1890. Reprinted from *The Popular Science Monthly*, May, 1890, by permission of Messrs. D. Appleton and Company.

been with the greatest achievement of modern thinking—the doctrine of Evolution. Students and investigators in all departments, alike in the physical and in the historical sciences, were fairly driven by the nature of the phenomena before them into some hypothesis, more or less vague, of gradual and orderly change or development. The world was ready and waiting for Herbert Spencer's mighty work when it came, and it was for that reason that it was so quickly triumphant over the old order of thought. The victory has been so thorough, swift, and decisive that it will take another generation to narrate the story of it so as to do it full justice. Meanwhile, people's minds are apt to be somewhat dazed with the rapidity and wholesale character of the change; and nothing is more common than to see them adopting Mr. Spencer's ideas without recognizing them as his or knowing whence they got them. As fast as Mr. Spencer could set forth his generalizations they were taken hold of here and there by special workers, each in his own department, and utilized therein. His general system was at once seized, assimilated, and set forth with new illustrations by serious thinkers who were already groping in the regions of abstruse thought which the master's vision pierced so clearly. And thus the doctrine of Evolution has come to be inseparably interfused with the whole mass of thinking in our day and generation. I do not mean to imply that people commonly entertain very clear ideas about it, for clear ideas are not altogether common. I suspect that a good many people would hesitate if asked to state exactly what Newton's law of gravitation is.

Among the men in America whose minds, between thirty and forty years ago, were feeling their way toward some such unified conception of nature as Mr. Spencer was about to set forth in all its dazzling glory—among the men who were thus prepared to grasp the doctrine of Evolution at once and expound it with fresh illustrations—the first in the field was the man to whose memory we have met here this evening to pay a brief word of tribute. It is but a little while since that noble face was here with us and the tones of that kindly voice were fraught with good cheer for us. To most of you, I presume, the man Edward Livingston Youmans is still a familiar presence. There must be many here this evening who listened to the tidings of his death two years ago with a sense of personal bereavement. No one who knew him is likely ever to forget him. But for those who remember distinctly the man it may not be

superfluous to recount the principal incidents of his life and work. It is desirable that the story should be set forth concisely, so as to be remembered; for the work was like the man, unselfish and unobtrusive, and in the hurry and complication of modern life such work is liable to be lost from sight, so that people profit by it without knowing that such work was ever done. So genuinely modest, so utterly destitute of self-regarding impulses was our friend, that I believe it would be quite like him to chide us for thus drawing public attention to him, as he would think, with too much emphasis. But such mild reproof it is right that we should disregard; for the memory of a life so beautiful and useful is a precious possession of which mankind ought not to be deprived.

Edward Livingston Youmans was born in the town of Coeymans, Albany County, N. Y., on the 3d of June, 1821. From his father and mother, both of whom survived him, he inherited strong traits of character as well as an immense fund of vital energy, such that the failure of health a few years ago seemed (to me, at least) surprising. His father, Vincent Youmans, was a man of independent character, strong convictions, and perfect moral courage, with a quick and ready tongue, in the use of which earnestness and frankness perhaps sometimes prevailed over prudence. The mother, Catherine Scofield, was notable for balance of judgment, prudence, and tact. The mother's grandfather was Irish; and, while I very much doubt the soundness of the generalizations we are so prone to make about race characteristics, I cannot but feel that for the impulsive—one had almost said explosive—warmth of sympathy, the enchanting grace and vivacity of manner, in Edward Youmans, this strain of Irish blood may have been to some extent accountable. Both father and mother belonged to the old Puritan stock of New England, and the father's ancestry was doubtless purely English. Nothing could be more honorably or characteristically English than the name. In the old feudal society the *yeoman*, like the *franklin*, was the small freeholder, owning a modest estate yet holding it by no servile tenure, a man of the common people yet no churl, a member of the state who "knew his rights and knowing dared maintain." Few indeed were the nooks and corners outside of merry England where such men flourished as the yeomen and franklins who founded democratic New England. It has often been remarked how the most illustrious of Franklins exemplified the typical

virtues of his class. There was much that was similar in the temperament and disposition of Edward Youmans—the sagacity and penetration, the broad common sense, the earnest purpose veiled but not hidden by the blithe humor, the devotion to ends of wide practical value, the habit of making in the best sense the most out of life.

When Edward was but six months old, his parents moved to Greenfield, near Saratoga Springs. With a comfortable house and three acres of land, his father kept a wagon-shop and smithy. In those days, while it was hard work to wring a subsistence out of the soil or to prosper upon any of the vocations which rural life permitted, there was doubtless more independence of character and real thriftiness than in our time, when cities and tariffs have so sapped the strength of the farming country. In the family of Vincent Youmans, though rigid economy was practised, books were reckoned to a certain extent among the necessaries of life, and the house was one in which neighbors were fond of gathering to discuss questions of politics or theology, social reform or improvements in agriculture. On all such questions Vincent Youmans was apt to have ideas of his own; he talked with enthusiasm, and was also ready to listen; and he evidently supplied an intellectual stimulus to the whole community. For a boy of bright and inquisitive mind, listening to such talk is no mean source of education. It often goes much further than the reading of books. From an early age Edward Youmans seems to have appropriated all such means of instruction. He had that insatiable thirst for knowledge which is one of God's best gifts to man; for he who is born with this appetite must needs be grievously ill-made in other respects if it does not constrain him to lead a happy and useful life.

After ten years at Greenfield the family moved to a farm at Milton, some two miles distant. Until his sixteenth year Edward helped his father at farm-work in the Summer and attended the district school in Winter. It was his good fortune for some time to fall into the hands of a teacher who had a genius for teaching—a man who in those days of rote-learning did not care to have things learned by heart, but sought to stimulate the thinking powers of his pupils, and who in that age of canes and ferules never found it necessary to use such means of discipline, because the fear of displeasing him was of itself all-sufficient. Experience of the methods of such a man was enough to sharpen one's disgust for the excessive mechanism, the

rigid and stupid manner of teaching, which characterize the ordinary school. In after years Youmans used to say that "Uncle Good"—as this admirable pedagogue was called—first taught him what his mind was for. Through intercourse and training of this sort he learned to doubt, to test the soundness of opinions, to make original inquiries, and to find and follow clews.

But even the best of teachers can effect but little unless he finds a mind ready of itself to take the initiative. It is doubtful if men of eminent ability are ever made so by schooling. The school offers opportunities, but in such men the tendency to the initiative is so strong that if opportunities are not offered they will somehow contrive to create them. When Edward Youmans was about thirteen years old he persuaded his father to buy him a copy of Comstock's Natural Philosophy. This book he studied at home by himself, and repeated many of the experiments with apparatus of his own contriving. When he made a centrifugal water-wheel, and explained to the men and boys of the neighborhood the principle of its revolution in a direction opposite to that of the stream which moved it, we may regard it as his earliest attempt at giving scientific lectures. It was natural that one who had become interested in physics should wish to study chemistry. The teacher (who was not "Uncle Good") had never so much as laid eyes on a text-book of chemistry; but Edward was not to be daunted by such trifles. A copy of Comstock's manual was procured, another pupil was found willing to join in the study, and this class of two proceeded to learn what they could from reading the book, while the teacher asked them the printed questions—those questions the mere existence of which in text-books is apt to show what a low view publishers take of the average intelligence of teachers! It was not a very hopeful way of studying such a subject as chemistry; but doubtless the time was not wasted, and the foundations for a future knowledge of chemistry were laid. The experience of farm-work which accompanied these studies explains the interest which in later years Mr. Youmans felt in agricultural chemistry. He came to realize how crude and primitive are our methods of making the earth yield its produce, and it was his opinion that, when men have once learned how to conduct agriculture upon sound scientific principles, farming will become at once the most wholesome and the most attractive form of human industry.