

**THE DANGERS OF THE SCHOLAR:
AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE
THE GAMMA SIGMA SOCIETY OF
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, JULY
24, 1844**

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The Dangers of the Scholar: An Address Delivered Before the Gamma Sigma Society of
Dartmouth college, July 24, 1844 by John K. Lord

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THE DANGERS OF THE SCHOLAR.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

GAMMA SIGMA SOCIETY

OF

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE,

July 25, 1844.

BY THE REV. JOHN K. LORD,
OF HARTFORD, VT.

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1844.

A D D R E S S .

He who seeks knowledge, for its own sake, is a Scholar. In favorable circumstances, and in process of time, he will become a learned man; but he is a scholar always,— in the district school, or the professional seminary; in the workshop, or on the farm. The simple desire for knowledge distinguishes him from all of equal or greater attainments, who have made them under the influence of other motives. We recognize this distinction by our involuntary, conscientious reverence for simplicity of intention. We are constrained to admire a mind which craves to know what may be known from pure love of truth, and not because knowledge is power, because it gives authority, or commands respect, or wins any tribute of fictitious or real worth. If such a mind rarely meets sympathy in its struggles, which may be severe, it compels homage in its success, which is certain. Its aspirations are free, and constant, and dignified; for the objects before it are not such as, upon being secured, leave no further incentive to exertion, but such as do themselves become more powerful stimulants to activity. They are not limits, but gradations. They are not a bar to progress, but stepping-stones in the way. The old proverb is true: The more one knows, the more he wants to know.

We have often heard of the duties of the scholar. How he comes to us as the apostle of all past time, sent to

publish to the world the wisdom and experience of ages; how he must speak breathing thoughts in burning words, must utter oracles pregnant with celestial meaning, destined to be remembered and studied, to mould the character and direct the energies of nations, long after the tongue of the priest is mute, and the sacred fire gone out.

We have often heard of the difficulties which await the scholar. How his lot is a stern one; how he must contend with the necessities which nature imposes upon him, and which other men patiently overcome, while his own susceptible and eager spirit chafes at the restraint; how prejudice, and bigotry, and thoughtlessness, and stupidity obstruct his path; how envy and detraction pursue him as he rises, if he rise at all; how, more frequently, he lives unappreciated, and dies just as the world begins to feel that the soul it has suffered to languish, or striven to crush, was, in very deed, not of the earth, earthy.

We have heard of the scholar's triumph. Sometimes it has been fashionable to drag genius from its obscurity, and unthinking men and women have clapped their hands at its bright coruscations; but this was no triumph. And sometimes a sensuous utilitarianism has bribed it with empty honors, to do mighty works, and given it a place and a pension therefor; but this was no triumph. The triumph of the scholar has been in that *monumentum aere perennius*, the sentence of posterity — he conquered not the world, but himself; he benefited not himself, but the world.

Will you allow me, gentlemen, to address you, on this anniversary, upon a theme related to those which I have mentioned; and yet essentially distinct from them — The Dangers of the Scholar. It is not unfrequently the case, that, while we learn to contemn difficulties we forget dangers. It is not well to do so; for, though to think lightly of a difficulty may help us to overcome it, to disregard a danger does but enhance it.

One danger of the scholar is, that he will lose his independence. A free spirit is free as long as it stoops to no inferior ends. While true to itself, no power can subjugate it; for it is its own master. It will laugh at penal edicts, and stone walls. It cannot be exiled, for the world is its country; and wherever it finds subjects of thought, there it is at home. The elastic and expansive nature which it possesses is proof against all forms of spiritual despotism, and must have, will have, "ample room and verge enough." But, like the electric fluid as it cleaves the air, such a spirit may be turned aside by reason of the very impetuosity with which it presses through opposition. It has been said of some minds, that their strength lies in their weakness. They are never molested because they never resist. They may believe what they please, because they do not assume to make their opinions the law of the land. But the weakness of a mind which acknowledges no subjection save to its own impulses, is in its strength; or rather in that desire to use strength which is apt to attend the consciousness of having it. This desire once gratified constantly increases, and, instead of being satiated, grows by what it feeds on. Let a man taste the sweetness of power, and he thirsts for it; a fire is in his bones, and it will not be put out. He has been subdued by himself; and no bondage is so hard for the sufferer, and excites so little pity from the beholder, as that of the slave to his own lust. He may be a giant in intellect and acquisition; and, occasionally, some flashes of the buried fire may break out; and he may arise, and shake himself, and do as he did aforetime; but the cords which bound him, though strained, were not broken; and soon they contract, and he bows to the earth again, and the knave and the sycophant put a hook in his nose, and do with him what they list. It was the end that he pursued, and not the capacity or vigor with which he pursued it, that ennobled him, and made him worthy to be called a scholar. He deserved honor because

he aimed high, and not because his bow was made of steel, and his arrow feathered with the plumage of the eagle. It was this loftiness of purpose that separated him from other men, and made him an independent man, and fitted him, though he was a king's subject in things temporal, to be a teacher of princes in things spiritual. But when he suffered himself to be moved upon by inferior considerations, when "formative motions" of evil were discovered palpitating beneath the breast that hitherto had responded to zealous and worthy purposes, and to the yearnings of the imprisoned soul after that light, with glimpses of which, as of the dawn, God refreshes the humble and inquiring mind, then did the sensuous but keen-sighted crowd, whose silence had as yet been constrained by their awe, exclaim, How is the mighty fallen; he is become like unto one of us!

It was not the sympathy which the mighty man felt for others, as they toiled and struggled for what seemed good in their eyes; it was not the interest with which he contemplated the workings of human nature in the individual or the mass — first, the conception of a possible achievement, lighting up the eye and tightening the muscles; then, the sharp, protracted, embittered contest; and then, the exultation, the shouts of victory, mingled with the murmurs of defeat and hoarse threats of revenge; it was not that his benevolence led him to act a part which his wisdom and strength rendered effective, so that he became a

"Hero in the strife,"

and his name was repeated by every tongue and written on every heart; all this did not degrade him. His proper study was man; and it would have been the worst selfishness, to have sat, like a cynic, upon his high watchtower, unmoved by the scenes of real life that were shifting before him. But he fell, when his sympathy for his toiling, struggling brothers degenerated into the same lust that consumed them; when

the clangor of the battle-field, the noise of the captains and the shouting, woke up his slumbering passions, and he, too, fought for glory. He fell, when his faith failed him, and sense got the mastery; when he ceased to look within the phenomena of history and of actual life, for their hidden meaning, even those principles of Divine providence and government, to discover and accord with which constitutes the dignity of a rational and immortal being. He fell, when he became content to be like other men, and conformed his ideas of greatness to theirs; when he was dazzled by the glitter of worldly applause, or felt his courage shrink at the prospect of reproach, and dared no longer to stand up for the right, let what would come, and trusted no longer that God would stand by him, and, if he died, would raise up another to fill his place, and, at last, would ride forth in his own chariot, conquering and to conquer. Indeed, so strong is our natural tendency to seek as an ultimate end, that which should be regarded only as a contingent result, and so many of the wise and great of the earth have yielded to this tendency, that it seems hardly possible for any one who is conscious of possessing extraordinary abilities, to attain and preserve a true independence. And on this account we are sometimes called upon to excuse what are termed, by euphemism, THE FAILINGS OF GENIUS. It is implied, it is almost asserted, that it is unjust to discriminate between the defects and excellences of a character, and to stamp its faults with deserved reproach, when they are associated with profound sensibilities and remarkable intellectual powers. Nay, we are gravely told, that the spots we had seen on these suns, were no spots at all, that the blur was in our own eyes, a species of *gutta serena*. Or, if the blemish is real, and cannot be hidden, then we are exhorted to remember that it is the birthright of genius to transcend law, and that men of uncommon talents are not to be blamed for doing what is forbidden to the ignoble vulgar. A biogra-

pher of the bold, able, ambitious, and unprincipled minister of Henry the Eighth, declares, that he is disposed to dwell upon Wolsey's powers as a mitigation of his faults; as if the consecrated priest, who served his king before his God, and himself before his king, was not a traitor alike to his God, his king, and himself. Montagu will have it, that Lord Bacon was no mean man; as if the courtier, who sacrificed his best friend to gain royal favor; for whom, as the reviewer of Montagu says, "Wealth, precedence, titles, patronage, the mace, the seals, the coronet, large houses, fair gardens, rich manors, massy services of plate, gay hangings, curious cabinets, had as great attractions as for any of the courtiers who dropped on their knees in the dirt, when Elizabeth passed by;" he, who took bribes to pervert justice, when High Chancellor of England, and who displayed, when convicted of the crime, a babyish pusillanimity instead of a penitent magnanimity; as if such a man merited not the oft-quoted satire of Pope; a satire only the more stinging because it does not withhold the meed of praise. We blush for mankind, we tremble for the scholar, when we read of instances like these; more especially, since they are by no means infrequent, nor confined to generations that have gone by. Were there no instances of greatness unalloyed, we might almost wish, for the credit of our race, that not an individual should be gifted with a desire to know and a capacity to learn; certainly, that not one should ever rise above a barren mediocrity.

But we are not left wholly without encouragement. There are some undefiled names on the page of history. When we are disgusted with Erasmus, we console ourselves with Luther. When we mourn over Cranmer's weakness, we rejoice over the blunt, straight-forward, fearless, and truly reverend Father in God, Hugh Latimer, whose title to a martyr's crown was far better established than that of his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury. When we