AN

ORATION,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Maine Charitable Mechanic Association,

AT THEIR

TRIENNIAL CELEBRATION, JULY 4, 1829.

BY NEAL DOW,

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ORATION.

THIS DAY, Brethren, commences a new era in the existence of our Association. It introduces the custom you have adopted, of meeting together periodically, to take a retrospect of the past and to place a watchful eye upon the future; to look back upon what you have done, and forward to what remains for you to do,—and it is hoped that the happy effects of this custom will be felt to the latest hour of our Society's existence; for by mutual encouragement and exhortation, you may be induced to think less of the obstacles you have met with, or may hereafter encounter—and more of the success which has hitherto attended, and may yet await your efforts.

In the Address, which will be offered to you at this time, you are to expect nothing new or startling—nothing which does not strictly relate to your duties as members of this Association and of society. The subjects which

present themselves to my mind as proper to be offered for your consideration are numerous, but as time will not permit of an extensive range I shall confine myself to such as I think particularly interesting and useful.

This has been justly called the age of Invention, of Improvement, of Philanthropy—and let me add too, of Patriotism. The human mind is awake and on the stretch to alleviate the sorrows of the afflicted, to multiply the resources and increase the power of nations; and at no period of the world have men ever devoted themselves more heartily to the public good; never have they been louder in their professions of attachment and devotion to their country. But let us not sit down inactive, content with a mere acknowledgment of our love, with an empty profession of our duty; but let these be the constant feelings of our hearts, renewed and animated by the recurrence of the anniversaries of that glorious day which appears to have been hallowed by Him who caused it to be the birth-day of a mighty Nation.

The situation of the human family would be far different, were every member of it to consider himself, as he certainly is, a link in the vast chain of society, upon the strength and soundness of which depends, in a great measure, the strength of the whole; if he would make himself a pattern by which the rising generation might well regulate their conduct; if

he would consider himself accountable, as he undoubtedly is, not only for his own deeds, but for the influence of his example upon others.

Some of the greatest and best men in this country and in Europe, are devoting their whole minds to the melioration and improvement of the condition of mankind. The time has come when men actually begin to feel that they do not live to promote their own selfish interests only, but that they are members of a community, the welfare and happiness of which they are bound to consult. Men, by their individual exertions, by their precepts and example, may do much in promoting the public good; yet numbers associated together, actuated by a common motive and aiming at the same result, will effect much more. Experience has taught us that the human mind, by an interchange and collision of thought, acquires an energy, a strength and firmness, to which it was before a stranger. A knowledge of this fact has occasioned the formation of innumerable societies which, however various the names they have assumed, are all endeavoring with steady and increasing effort to promote the greatest happiness of mankind; and amongst the many societies which the benevolence and patriotism of our citizens have thus formed, Mechanic Associations are far from being the least important and useful.

It cannot be expected that in the time to which this address must be confined, I should give

you a history of the origin of these Institutions, nor of what they have accomplished in the advancement of the arts and sciences, and in the promotion of the prosperity of the countries in which they have been established, however interesting these subjects might be to you; for a mere outline of them would require that time which may be better devoted to subjects of more immediate and individual interest. But I cannot permit this opportunity to pass away without alluding to the importance which is justly attached to the mechanic arts in all civilized countries, and to the degree in which they contribute to the happiness and prosperity of man.

Let us look through the history of the world; let us trace the progress of nations from a state of the rudest barbarism to that high degree of civilization to which many of them have now arrived—let us look at one glance upon their former and their present condition—and what is it that constitutes the difference which strikes us so forcibly? Is it the want of grace in the external deportment of the savage? Is it the want of that degree of wealth which would enable any of them to support themselves without submitting to the ordinary occupations of the rest of their tribe? Is it that they have no privileged classes among them, no masters nor servants, no lords nor vassals? No: it is neither of these. It is that the savage clothes himself

with the skins of the animals which he has slain in the chase, and upon whose bodies he is obliged to subsist; that he sleeps in the wretched cabin that he is able to construct with his own hands; in a word, that his comforts are few, because his knowledge of the mechanic powers and arts is extremely limited. And we find that the advancement of civilization has always been in exact proportion to the advancement in the arts, which even at the present day form the basis of national power. Do we say that any nation, at the period of its discovery, was more or less civilized, we have nothing upon which to found an opinion, but the degree of perfection to which they had brought the mechanic arts. It was said of the subjects of Montezuma, that they were considerably advanced in civilization, because they had houses, instead of skin or bark lodges to protect them from the inclemency of the weather, and because they had brought the manufacture of metals to some degree of perfection. And it is even now, in our own time said of the inhabitants of Timbuctoo, that they are more civilized than any other natives of middle and southern Africa, because they have neat houses of bamboo, and clothe themselves with the productions of the loom, and are not unacquainted with the value of the forge, as contributing to relieve their necessities and promote their comfort.

And England—where could we have found

the story of her power, and of her wealth, were the mechanic arts unknown to her sons; and but for these, where could we have read the names of her *Nelsons* and her *Rodneys*, the thunder of whose artillery was heard wherever could be found an enemy to their country. And our own Washington, whose name is now blazoned upon the highest pinnacle of the Temple of Fame—whose glory is a rich inheritance to every American; where would have been his reputation were it not for the Mechanics, by the products of whose labor and skill, our fathers were wafted to the shores of the western continent. And our beautiful towns and villages, our cultivated vallies, our flocks feeding on a thousand hills, this great and powerful Republic!—where could we have read of them all, were it not for the Mechanics, by whose assistance, the wild dreams and extravagant adventures of Columbus resulted in the discovery of another world. And if such be the importance of the Mechanic Arts, if such be the influence which they possess over the condition of mankind, Societies instituted for the express purpose of extending the knowledge of them and improving the moral condition of their professors, must be highly beneficial to the countries in which they may exist.

Fourteen years has your institution been established; and in looking back through the whole period of its rise and progress, you have

abundant reason for gratulation. Its influence upon the moral and intellectual character of a large and important part of the community may be seen every where around us. You have not, as the name of your society might imply, confined your attention to the distribution of alms merely, to the supplying the physical wants of the needy, but it has been devoted also to nobler, higher objects.

It is true that the sorrows of many a widow have been softened by your sympathy, and their distresses relieved by your bounty; but while you have stretched forth one hand to relieve private afflictions, the other has ever been ready to promote the common weal.

None are more sensible than yourselves, how much the safety and strength of our Republic depend upon the virtue and intelligence of its citizens; and your attention as a society, has been devoted to the promotion of both amongst a class of the rising generation, which ere long will occupy a station in society, important on account of its number and the influence which it will exert; and it was your intention by the establishment of the Apprentices' Library, to diffuse that knowledge and information amongst them, which are the most powful stimulants to virtue, and which will best fit them to be good men, and useful and honorable citizens. When you look at the effect which has been already produced upon their minds, by

the books which you have put into their hands, you will see that your most sanguine hopes, in relation to the operation of the Library, have been realized. Those youths, who, to the period of its establishment, could not obtain access to any extensive collection of books, now discover an avidity in the pursuit of knowledge, which will not only enlarge their minds by useful acquisition, but will be a safeguard against the forming of vicious habits, and the contracting of immoral acquaintances.

The efforts which are now making throughout our country, to cultivate the minds of those youths who are to swell the ranks of the laboring classes of the community, will not only tend to strengthen the hands of our government, but will have the most genial influence upon the tone of society. Disguise it as we may, deny it to ourselves as we sometimes do, still the fact comes home to our hearts that there are impassible barriers existing amongst us; that there are grades of society in our country as well as in every other, and those grades are scarcely less marked here than they are in Europe, though founded on different causes. And such must be, and ever ought to be the case in well regulated communities, where a difference exists in the character of the population.— But with us it is not noble blood, nor is it wealth that marks the lines of distinction between the different classes of society; but the

difference is occasioned, as it should be, by different degrees of intelligence, of integrity and education. That the terms, Liberty and Equality, however grateful to the ear, cannot bear a practical construction, the history of the French Revolution, which for a while, proved fatal to morality, virtue and religion, and in its mad career deluged Europe in blood, furnishes ample testimony. Common sense and experience declare, in language which cannot be misunderstood, that the state of that society cannot be sound and healthy, in which the ignorant, the depraved and vicious associate on equal terms with the intelligent, the virtuous and the learned; and though violent agitation may occasion a temporary mixture, yet the oil will separate from the heavier substance, and remain entirely distinct. Men of similar habits and feelings and pursuits, associate together from a common law of nature; hence it is, the learned, the intelligent and the virtuous do, and ever ought to form a distinct class in society; for although our Constitution and Laws recognise no privileged class, yet the nobility of mind is felt and acknowledged by all.

The hand, hardened by labor—the brow, furrowed by exposure, are not in our country, considered stamps of vulgarity, which will forever exclude a man from the society of the intellectual and the good; and every year we see, that the operation of our Institutions, in scat-

tering knowledge with an unsparing hand amongst all who will receive it, is to extend that circle which has hitherto been so limited, until at last it will embrace the great body of our population; and the efforts which you have made in the cause of Education will have great influence in promoting so desirable an end.

But it is not the small amount of actual knowledge which we may be enabled to give to our apprentices, that will fix the standing they will take in society after they shall arrive at manhood; but this must depend entirely upon the principles of virtue which we may have planted in their hearts, and a taste for reading and a thirst for information, which will induce them to devote that leisure time to books, which too many of them have been accustomed to spend, either in idleness or with vicious companions. The time has now gone by when men believed that an acquaintance with the simple rules of Arithmetic, with reading and writing, was all that was necessary for those who expected to devote their whole lives to business. We now see that this opinion has occasioned much of the vice and misery with which our country is afflicted, and which has arisen almost entirely from the ignorance of a considerable part of our population, and consequently from the manner in which, for relaxation, they spend, or rather misspend those hours which are not devoted to labor. Even if by the indulgence of a taste for reading,

we acquire no useful information, but only amuse ourselves for the moment, still the possession of it would be invaluable to him who earns his bread by the sweat of his brow; for when returned from the field or the workshop, he would have it in his power to amuse his mind while he reposed his limbs. But a studious habit will be productive of far greater good, than that of merely enabling us to while away our leisure hours; for while it steals us from the cares and fatigue of business, it will store our minds with useful knowledge, and enable us to become more useful to ourselves and others; in a word, to be more valuable citizens than we can possibly become without it.

But to Apprentices this taste must be the foundation of character; for though virtue constitutes the only basis on which can be erected all the other qualities of an honorable man, still integrity alone, will not give them that standing in society, which all of us must wish to attain, as enabling us to exert the greatest influence over others, and by which we are bound to promote the good of all.

A taste for reading, then, is the great lever by which the laboring classes of the community, must raise themselves from the situations which many of them have hitherto occupied, into those which they possess native talent enough to fill with honor. But the positive advantages which will certainly result from the cultivation of this

taste in our children and apprentices, are not confined to the high enjoyment which is derived from it, nor to the enlargement of the mind which its indulgence will produce. We all know the nature and the extent of the danger to which the young are exposed in all populous towns, and from which it is extremely difficult to preserve them. We may assure them that the restraint which we impose is for their own good—but still, inclination aided by opportunity, will induce them to a course of conduct, which must end in their disgrace and ruin. Now a taste for reading, implanted in their minds and well directed, is the most powerful assistant, which the parent or the master can call to his aid, to enable him to enforce that discipline, which is absolutely necessary to lead a child in the way in which he should walk.

But I beg your indulgence, while I pursue a little farther a subject which ought to interest us all as patriots and as christians. By yielding a perfect obedience to the laws of our country—by supporting our share of the public burthens without murmuring—we may think that we discharge the duties of good citizens. By kneeling down periodically at the footstool of the Most High—by rendering to every man his due, and by observing the ordinances of religion—it may be thought that our duties as Christians are faithfully fulfilled. But Brethren, there is an awful responsibility

resting upon us, which cannot obtain too much of our consideration; there are other duties which we are called on to perform—to neglect which, may not awaken in our bosoms that remorse, which would be occasioned by an intentional error in our dealings with the world, because we may not have viewed them in a just light—but they are duties, to the faithful discharge of which, we are imperiously called by our obligations to God and to our Country.

You need not to be told how easily the minds of the young are operated upon by the precepts, and above all, by the example of those under whose care they may be placed, and to whom they look up with respect and affection—nor how lasting are the impressions which are made upon them, whether virtuous or evil. Like the mortar, which is tempered by the hands of the builder, the young heart may be moulded, and the form which is given to it will be more and more lasting as time passes away. There is no relation of life to which more care and responsibility are attached, than to that of a parent to the child; and here it is that we can see most clearly the truth of what I have before said—that we are not only accountable for our actions, as they may be positively sinful or the reverse—but are responsible for their influence upon others. The relation of a master to his young servants and apprentices, is little, if at all inferior in importance and responsibility to

that of a parent to his children. Indeed I know not, but the duty which we impose upon ourselves, by entering into such a connexion, may be much more arduous than the other, because we are not assisted in its discharge by that natural affection, which is the most powerful and enduring of which the human heart is susceptible.

After having come to the conclusion in our own minds, that to cultivate the moral and intellectual capacities of our children, is the only way to render them happy—to make them honorable and useful members of society—parental love will urge us to make every exertion to accomplish so desirable an object. But to the discharge of this duty towards our servants and apprentices, we have not this powerful stimulant; and it is principle alone—a deep sense of our obligations in this respect to our God and to our country, that will give us the patience and watchfulness, which are so necessary in cultivating their minds, and in restraining their passions. I have said, that as a society, we have already done much for the enlargement and cultivation of the minds of our apprentices; but it is not as a society, that our influence upon their hearts and moral capacities, can be the most extensive and useful. In our own families, a spirit of piety, and good order, and exact discipline, constantly observed, will have the most powerful effect upon their members—and will certainly procure us the unspeakable

satisfaction of sending forth into the world those youths who have been under our care, properly fitted by education and habit for the discharge of every duty which may devolve upon them.

I know not whether my views of our responsibility in relation to our obligations, and to the discharge of our duties to those under our care are peculiar, or whether they are more serious than those which all of you entertain; but I consider the moral and intellectual capacities of our young servants and apprentices, as a sacred deposit, placed in our hands by God, by their Parents, and by their Country; and for the improvement or the neglect of which we must render an account to all—to the Almighty for the manner in which we have reared their immortal souls—to the parents for the exertions which we have made to render their children an honor to themselves, and a comfort to their old age—and to their country, for our endeavors to render them pillars upon which she can lean in days of trial and danger.

Amongst the most important of the numerous societies, which are in operation in our country at the present time, and in the ranks of which are enrolled the greatest and best men of our age, may be reckoned those which have for their objects, the immediate and future welfare of the American people. Nations as well as individuals, may sink into a state of apathy—may descend by slow and almost impercepti-

ble gradations, to such a degree of moral depravity, that they may fall at last into an obscure and infamous grave. But when, in the progress of descent, the public mind becomes awakened and alarmed at the prospect—when the better part of the community unites as a body to withstand the tide of corruption, great hope may be entertained of a speedy and effectual reform. Such is the prospect of preservation which is opening to this young and prosperous Republic.

There is a deadly disease now preying upon her very heart, which threatens her with a premature decay; but you have seen its effects with sorrow, and have stepped forth to aid in relieving her—and the measures that you have taken to accomplish your purposes, must have a favorable operation.

Intemperance has been the theme of many an eloquent tongue—of many a powerful pen; but the fear of bringing myself into a disadvantageous contrast, shall not deter me from adding, if possible, to what has already been so ably written and said upon a subject, which is so interesting to us all, as citizens and men.

In speaking publicly, of a public vice, it is important, under any circumstances, to beware of giving offence; but while addressing you upon this all-important subject, I am sure that whatever truth I may utter, will strike a chord in every bosom; for as individuals, you have manifested your abhorrence of the vice—and,

as a society, you have put forth your strength to assist in its suppression. Your efforts, Brethren, if continued, must be successful, for you have struck at the very root of the evil. Believing as you have declared that you do, that Ardent Spirit is not a restorer of the strength—is not a relief from fatigue—cannot impart additional power to the system—is not necessary in heat or in cold—you have said that you will not supply it, or cause it to be supplied to any one in your employment.

Persevere, Brethren—in God's name, I conjure you to persevere; your example will be followed by other Associations, your influence will be irresistible, and America will rise from the dust, when she shall cease to mourn the moral death of so many of her sons.

Your opinions, in regard to the uselessness of spirit to the laborer, are fast gaining converts; and the consequence will be, that many a man who now drinks rum in fair weather, because he thinks it has stood his friend in foul weather, will discard it altogether, as a deceitful, a subtle, and a deadly foe.

But reform in this thing, is not the ground that you have taken--for you are convinced by observation, how difficult a thing it is, for a man who has been accustomed to the frequent use of ardent spirits, to avoid the fire which he is conscious is consuming him.

In contending against intemperance, which

is the most prominent blemish in the national character of Americans, you have every reason for encouragement; turn which way you will, you see multitudes arrayed to support you; but though the whole world should oppose you, still your duty to your country alone would urge you on—and I am sure, that when she calls, you cannot turn away.

The influence which Mechanic Associations can exert in the promotion of temperance, is greater than that which any other societies possess; because if we look abroad through our whole country, we shall see, that though this vice has not confined its ruinous effects to any particular body of men, yet our mechanics, our yeomanry, and all the laboring classes of the community, are the principal sufferers.

And that they are so is not strange, when we become acquainted with the custom of taking spirit regularly and frequently, which has universally prevailed among them; and we now look back with astonishment upon the general thoughtlessness, which has pervaded the whole community,* in relation to a custom which is more dangerous and absurb, than any other which does, or ever did exist, in any country, or in any age.

We are struck with horror, when we are told of the contests of the gladiators, to witness which

*The Society of Friends has always "borne testimony against the use of Ardent Spirits, except for medicine;" and they are the only exception to the observation.

was pastime to the Romans; we melt with compassion, when we hear that Hindoo widows offer themselves a sacrifice to the manes of their husbands; and we are roused into action by the tales which we hear from the western isles, of infants, who are sacrificed to the Gods of their fathers. But, Brethren, why does not our blood chill, when we look upon scenes of misery, and suffering, and wretchedness, which exist every where around us, and which intemperate men bring upon themselves; why do we shed no tear when we look upon the desolate situation of the inebriate's wife, who is infinitely more forlorn than if she were a widow—and who looks forward to the end of life with impatience, as the termination of suffering, worse than that of death; why are we not roused into more vigorous and effectual exertion, when we see infants, in our own neighborhoods, perhaps, offered up body and soul to the Demon, worshipped by their parents!

Facts will support us in asserting that the practice of drinking ardent spirits "temperately" results in greater misery and suffering to more individuals than any other custom, which has ever existed—and is pursued by "temperate drinkers" under greater responsibility. The gladiatorial contests, which have procured for the Romans the name of cruel barbarians, were the cause of but little comparative misery, especially as the combatants were generally crim-

inals who had forfeited their lives to the laws of their country—or were prisoners of war whom common usage authorised the captors to put to death. And the other customs to which I have alluded as being the most shocking to christians of the present day, occasion indeed a momentary pang to the victims, and that is all—for the friends through mistaken notions of duty, rejoice that their gods consider them worthy to contribute to their glory—and except on the very pyre, the Hindoo widow herself anticipates with joy the happy meeting with her husband, to which she is hastening. But not so trifling are the consequences of intemperance, which is arrived at only through temperate drinking—for it destroys its unhappy victims as effectually as the flames—and like the gibbet withholds their disgusting carcasses from the grave, to harrow up the feelings of those, who were the friends of the minds which once inhabited them.

To convince any reflecting man of the danger of the custom of temperate drinking, it is only necessary to take him to our workshops and our fields—to point out the youth who yet loathes the potion—him in whom it has now ceased to create disgust—him who has begun to anticipate the appointed hour with pleasure, and to look forward to it with impatience—him who is languid and dull, and whose organs reluctantly perform their offices, until driven on

by the unnatural stimulant, which has expelled their sovereign, nature, and usurped dominion over them—and him who is plunged deep in the gulf, from which his gradually increasing infirmities, his wasting frame, his trembling limbs had warned him to flee. In such a place he might trace the path from its commencement, in which the drunkard has wandered, and into which the first glass has introduced the destined victim. Now why is it, that after looking at the consequences which so frequently, indeed which so generally result from temperate drinking, that so many men are found, who are not only willing to encounter the danger themselves, but by their example to lead others into it also? And why is it that the community are so little alive to their danger, when this serpent is seen to creep over every threshold, and to seduce all who do not avoid its temptations?

The truth is, brethren, we do not yet look upon this vice with those feelings of detestation which it ought to inspire—for alas! the numerous paths which lead to it are strown with flowers—upon which, when we have been allured to enter, we cannot tarry, we cannot turn aside—and how few there are who ever have returned.

But we have other motives to induce us to persevere in the exertions which we are now making for the promotion of temperance, be-

side the love we bear our country—a desire to render that class of our citizens to which we belong, as useful and as respectable as they are capable of becoming.

Is there a feeling in the heart of any sensible man that honest industry is disgraceful? I answer, no!—but is there not an unexpressed feeling existing in the community, that mechanics occupy the second rank in society, instead of the first?—it cannot be denied that there is;—and if they are not so much respected as they might be, it is because they have not endeavored as they should have done, to render themselves respectable.

And what are the great drawbacks upon the respectability of this invaluable class of our citizens—is it that their occupations are less honorable than those of any other class? Surely not. Is it that nature has fixed upon them a stamp of inferiority, which will forever keep them down in the scale of being? I could point you every where to instances which answer emphatically, no! Then why is it that Mechanics are not as a body, second to no other class of our citizens? It is because they have not until recently, estimated in a just light, the incalculable advantages of an extensive education—nor reflected as they should have done, upon the effects, which are invariably produced upon the moral powers, by the frequent and regular, though what is falsely call-

ed the temperate use of ardent spirits—which benumb the faculties, degrade the soul, and finally render men fit companions only for brutes.

Then let the knowledge of these facts, brethren, serve as a beacon and a pole-star to us. Let us avoid the rocks on which so many others have split, and endeavor by properly educating our children and apprentices, to place them in situations more favorable than ours to the developement of all their powers. And by bestowing upon them good educations, you not only render them superior to many temptations to vice—you not only make them more happy, more respectable, more useful, but you add infinitely to the permanency of our free Institutions:—and it may be safely asserted that he who contributes most to the dissemination of knowledge and general information amongst the laboring classes of the community, is the greatest Philanthropist and the greatest Benefactor to his country.