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The Elevation of the Masses

June 7th 60.

A. Henderson.

The rights of man, have become the theme of general and earnest discussion. That all men are created equal is a truth, though the present outlook seems to imply a contradiction.

That with the giant strides of physical improvement, - human progress has but slowly kept pace, is a fact, an alarming fact, that forces itself persistently before our univodling vision. In this age, the palace and the hovel stand out in bold contrast.

"In the face of our wondrous labor saving inventions, and the immensely increased productiveness of human toil, we find, a large proportion even of the industrious and frugal still living from necessity in narrow hovels, still pinched with hunger and want, in spite of the most incessant drudgery and parsimony. When we become conscious of this, how can we resist the conviction, that the goods of this life are unfairly distributed, that the social and political institutions which compel millions to delve in penury, that thousands may rot in luxurious idleness, are not radically defective, and require thorough renovation." When will capitalists be courageous enough, or rather when will they be compelled to dispel the pleasing illusions, which

science to govern their purses, and give to labor its true reward. — Human Industry! how statesman, orators, poets vie with each other in delineating the happiness of the man of honest labor, — but seldom does the careworn toiler, "court the muse" and break forth in praises of his condition, indeed as an illustrious reformer remarked, "an unsophisticated listener might well imbibed the notions, that all these honored eulogists, earth's great and glorious, had been thrust by some harsh decree of inexorable fate from the plowfield and the workbench, sent sorrowing exiles into forums and senates, and there, compelled to witness afar off the felicities, they too might have enjoyed had they been born under kinder stars."

Let these deluded eulogists, with draw their eyes from the hazy distance, for "distance lends enchantment to the view", and with the searching eye of truth, glance not hastily over the beautiful fields of nature, but stop, and mark the course of the toiler, and they may look down upon, "the dumb agony of millions of American craftsmen, whose sweat and blood, we are coining into gold, after they have built our mansions, and supplied our feasts."

Now since the evil is seen, we may

properly ask for the cause and remedy. —

Mark the general tendencies under the present régime of society, note the suffering, not the enjoyment, "Amid the general advancement of society, we find that one fact remains permanent, — the poverty and suffering of the masses", and this is due, not from any want of industry or wealth, but because the present form of society renders the bounties of heaven, the advantages of life unavailingly to the masses of humanity.

Then as the evil manifestly lies in the present form of society based upon the craftiness of its caste and distinctions, how can that organization be redeemed to its true and normal condition?

In reply we advance the theory of the education of the masses, by universal education.

Aha! the present calls for social reorganization on the principles of a higher life — a unity of purpose and a community of interests. — We would not limit education to any question of dollars and cents, but only by the satisfying of the cravings and longings of the immortal spirit. — We would place within the reach of the humblest citizen, the highest honors of the state and nation, we would open the doors of the best society to the refined of every class and condition in life. — Room, room for all, — not in the false spirit of the associations of socialists, not in the assumed wealth of agrarians, not in the affinities of communists, — but;

in that higher type of development, which is the out-growth of a universal education, in the light of a common brotherhood.

Man is a being of activity, he is so constituted, that let the powerful forces of his nature remain inactive, and the "chain of life" part, eaten by the rust of indolence, and yet why is labor repulsive? It is not labor in itself, labor is a law of heaven, but it is the circumstances under which we work that constitutes its hardships.

Man is a social being, his nature requires sympathy, variety and enthusiasm, but under the present system of labor the man of toil is stunted, companionless and selfish, - his highest motive, - his daily aim a dollar, "Lift him up," lift him up to the full station of his being, and in his manhood, "the working man will feel that he is but one of many, engaged in the grand & mighty solution of man's destiny on earth, - a coequal among brothers, a servant of humanity, a steward of heaven, in the distribution of its richest bounties." Let the vast body of reformers unite, & with their breast-plates emblazoned with the motto, Elevation of the masses, attractive industry let them cast themselves before the mighty billow of progress, & upon the barge of universal justice, which upholds them, let there, be gathered the toiling millions, and thus freighted, guided by superior and educated minds, humanely united, will pass down the current of time, and at last, glide safely into the haven of the

eternal sea, in the full conviction that
merit makes the man,

Finis.

Commencement Oration of John Webster Henderson, Class of 1876
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

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Finis