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The World's Fair.

Clarence Balentine.

'93

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Fate is about ready to seal the fourth century of our history, and the country is preparing for a careful review of the honorable record. In Chicago, this year, the World's Fair, by bringing to the notice of men the wonderful achievements of this century, will carry the universal mind back to times that gave little promise of our present proud position. The present and the past will unite in a vast effort to impress on the public mind their one great lesson of progress, and will bring men to a realization of the fact that "they live in a new and wonderful age; that America is only another name for opportunity; that the whole history of this country seems like a last attempt of Providence in behalf of the human race." While those fellows who are continually howling about the perils of our country, may take in this year, a delicious and delightful rest.

What a grand advertisement it will be! Progress in

every department of ~~life~~ human industry. Progress in science, in letters, and in art. Progress in morals, in politics, and in religion. Progress in everything that brings honor to a nation, or that gives dignity to a history.

Nor will the display make any false impression of the true condition of affairs here in America. Some men's show-windows are the largest part of their stores. Their advertisements, fine fables of fiction. But the Columbian Exposition, stripped of the ornamentation supplied by foreign nations, will be a substantial indication of the progress which the Anglo-American race has made on the Western Continent in 400 years.

But material prosperity is no sure sign of a nation's strength. Rome was never so strong as when her dictators came from the plough-share.

Never so weak as when, in her colossal wealth, she had scarcely a freeman left. Spain was just beginning to dissolve under the melancholy influence of her own vices, when the gold of the Western world was flowing, like the tide of the broad Atlantic, into her national treasury.

A country's wealth is a country's weak. And that does not consist in gold, but rather, as Canon Farar has said, "in the charity, the justice, the temperance - in the strong - pure hearts of her sons and daughters." Without these, wealth becomes the sign of an inward weakness, just as the most luxuriant vegetation is the certain sign of the completest decay.

It is true we have three million square miles of territory, 26000 miles of river way, 12000 miles of indented sea-coast. Our commerce has

spread to every land and to every sea. We have land enough to provide homes for humanity, soil rich enough to feed the world, resources enough to run the machinery of earth. We have railroads enough to bring the whole Chinese Empire on an excursion to Niagara Falls, but alas! we have not enough ships to take them back again. From the labors and sufferings of the past we have learned lessons of energy and industry, while our native genius has taught us wisely to apply them.

But all this pompous detail of material progress triumph is worse than idle unless the nation becomes and remains greater than the mere things it produces, and unless it shall learn how to regard them "as tools with which to work out the higher purposes of its existence."

Have the four centuries taught us this?
Have we learnt charity? Let us see.

It has been said that the relations between rich and poor are more strained than today than ever before. That the present condition of things is forcing a wedge between the two classes which makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. This is not true. The wedge is being driven underneath society, and we are all going up together. The feeling that the whole human race constitutes a universal brotherhood is finding, among Americans today, the most tangible expression. This tendency of the times is very well illustrated by an incident that occurred in Boston a few years ago.

There was sitting, one September afternoon, on the broad marble steps of the New England conservatory of music, a little crippled girl. So

familiar had grown the poor little twisted form and the patient child face above it, that her presence occasioned no surprise among the gay students as they passed. The expression of her face when she heard the tones of a violin sounding from the nearest window ~~saw~~ revealed the object of her visit. As the noise outside grew less, the music became proportionally louder, and each note seemed to touch a sympathetic chord in the little cripple's nature, for pleasure and peace were written on every smile and spoken by every dimple.

Presently the music ceased. The window went down with a bang. Out of the room from which had come the music, rushed a handsome young lady whose appearance indicated that she belonged to the wealthiest class of people,

but whose manner showed very plainly that she was provoked about something. And so she had been. Her violin lesson had not gone well, & the professor had criticised her more severely than she considered necessary. So on down the steps she angrily hurried, and the crutch of the little cripple, which happened to be in the way, she sent spinning into the middle of the street. Then she went to recover it, and restored it to the startled owner. It was but the work of a moment, but in that moment her anger had taken flight. An apology was offered, and in the conversation that followed, the rich young lady discovered that the little cripple had been in the habit of coming to listen daily as she played her lesson on the violin. A corner was thereafter provided for

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Her bright hours were those in which the young lady, now her friend, perched on the bedside, played softly the music that she loved so well.

Winter came and passed. Spring followed. Easter morning dawned as bright as even an

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The sunlight fell upon the pale, little face, the shining hair, the closed eyes. The little cripple had gone to the Father, taking with her that noble young lady's Easter offering.

Nor is this exercise of charity so rare and exceptional as some would have us believe. The multiplied forms of human benefaction which we meet on every hand are but the expression of a desire to live in the bond of a universal brotherhood. The hospitals, the asylums, the homes, the reformatories do not show that there is something wrong; that poverty is a crime for which the state is

responsible; but they do show that there is something eminently right, while they prove the existence and growth of that virtue that suffereth long and is kind.

Indeed, charity has become a national virtue. The law of love, as a rule of human action, was stretched at Appomattox till it cracked, but the sentiment of humanity then awakened has been the ruling motive of the nation ever since. "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from a hundred battle fields have, thank God, been touched by the better angels of our nature", and tomorrow as we assemble to commemorate the deeds of the nations honored dead, the benediction of heaven will be invoked alike on the confederate and on the union soldiers as they rest beneath the palmetto and the pine in their windowless palaces of peace.

No country has a right to advertise progress if the intelligence of its citizens is not steadily promoted. How is it in this respect with us?

Popular intelligence is reckoned here as an element of national power and national wealth. "The stability of the government is recognized as resting" one has said, "on the knowledge and virtue of the people."

Our numerous public libraries with their excellent catalogues, their liberal facilities, their ample endowments, are making a nation of investigators. Our system of education is the freest and most ungrudging in the world. The worth of woman is recognized as never before. No longer excluded from the advantages of a liberal education, the best opportunity is afforded her for the widest culture, and with cultivated mind she takes her place by the side of man as his friend, his counsellor, and his equal.

A fine and original American literature is being slowly developed, and we are pardonably proud of it. Proud of Bryant "who entered the heart through the gate Beautiful"; Proud of Longfellow, whose lust in Westminster Abbey is the delight of two nations. Proud of the wide culture of Lowell, of the sunny geniality of Holmes. Among the novelists we have Fenimore Cooper, whose books were the delight of boyhood's days, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose works are immortal. We have the humor of Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Bill Nye.

What shall we say of the orators of this country? Of Webster, of Beecher, and of Blaine?

Surely we may advertise progress along the lines of education and culture.

In regard to the great moral questions of the day are we making progress?

A gloomily disposed young man in ad-

dressing the U. S. Society last winter said that certain national evils are affecting the body politic as cancer and dyspepsia affect men. Now, a man with cancer is in a pretty bad way. No life insurance company will have anything to do with him. But when a man afflicted with cancer is attacked by the dyspepsia, he becomes an object with which the devil himself would have nothing to do.

I cannot believe we are so far gone as that yet.

Probably the most important moral question of the day is the temperance question. How are we on that?

Every great issue passes in its development through four stages. The first stage is the period when it remains unnoticed by everybody. The most difficult task sometimes is to lift it from this into the second stage, in which it is ridiculed by its

opponents. The third is the period when it excites violent and determined opposition. In the fourth, its benefits become apparent and it is firmly established in the hearts & laws of a people.

Prohibition, in America, is just passing from the third into the fourth stage, and the dawn of the 20th century will reveal the giant Antitemperance in the throes of a painful and certain death.

Are our politics pure?

A great many people find much to deplore in the condition of our polities. Vice and corruption are said to hold such a prominent place in our political system as to render honest elections almost impossible. Our eminent leaders are called dishonest demagogues, our governmental officers denounced as selfish gougers. Of course this wailing comes, in a great part, from the

large army of disappointed office seekers. The truth is that there are more honest politicians in the country today than there ever was before.

It is no small honor to the country that she has succeeded in preserving unscathed, through all the multiplied exigencies of national existence, the purity of her political system. The fabric of government, stained though it be in blood, contains every thread which gave it strength or which added to its beauty.

It is true there are many dishonest politicians. But you have heard it said that a ship is not considered safe when the rats have left it. So, you may rest assured, that the ship of state is entirely seaworthy so long as she carries in her hold such a numerous species of fine, big, black rats.

Nor has the eager spirit of American inquiry allowed religious doctrine to go unexamined. The light of investigation has been turned on the creeds. Calvinism is being superseded by Arminianism. The stern bigotry and the denominational exclusiveness of other years are giving way before a universal desire to spread the truth. The Bible is becoming the handbook of the worthy citizen. From it we are learning lessons of love and humanity; learning that every man - from the highest to the humblest - is equal before the law. - Equal before the stroke of her sword, equal in the shadow of her shield.

I will not describe the majestic triumphs of science in this country. I will not refer to the trophies of industry suggested by such names

as Astor, Peabody, and Johns Hopkins. They will all have their place in the grand exhibition in Chicago. They will help to spell out the honest progress of which the Columbian Exposition will be only the indication. For deep down in the hearts of the people exists a condition which makes progress the only word proper to be written over the portals of this Republic.

And sad were the condition of affairs which would tell any other story. Our heritage was large, and it behooved us to make good use of it. And unless the Anglo-American race is to be the prodigal child of the ages, unless we forget our traditions, we may achieve still greater triumphs. Mindful ever of the limitless value of the jewels which have been confided to our keeping, may we transmit unimpaired

to posterity the Christian religion and civil liberty. For so long as the race continues to honor the trust of its Creator, so long shall it not be said "that the ocean was dug for America's grave, that the winds were woven for her winding-sheet, that the mountains were reared for her tombstone." But rather, as Bishop Newman has said, "she shall live on; and gifted with immortal youth, America shall ascend the mountain-tops of the on-coming centuries with the old flag in her hand, symbol of universal liberty, the light of whose stars shall blend their radiance with the dawn of the millennium".

Commencement Oration of Clarence Balentine, Class of 1893
Transcribed by Christine Rosenberry, May 2002
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

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