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EDUCATION OF IDIOTS

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EDUCATION OF IDIOTS.

AN APPEAL

TO

THE CITIZENS OF PHILADELPHIA.

We plead for those who cannot plead for themselves.

PHILADELPHIA :

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A P P E A L.

By the last Census, it is ascertained, that in the State of Pennsylvania, there are not less than fourteen hundred and forty-eight Idiotic persons, of whom, thirteen hundred and eighty-six are white, and sixty-two colored. Other inquiries have been instituted, which prove, that the actual number far exceeds that indicated by official returns, and that, at this moment, the number in Pennsylvania, cannot be much less than three thousand. Of these, more than one-third are under twenty years of age, and if it be possible, by any species of training and cultivation, to raise them out of their deplorable and apparently helpless state, the duty, is one which should no longer be neglected. It is a duty to which we are urged by every consideration of sympathy and Christian humanity—for no form of misery is so revolting, no victims of hereditary disease, or parental unfaithfulness, are so little cared for. Into every family, with which they are connected, they carry abiding sorrow and humiliation, and yet in few such families, is there any judicious and well-directed effort for their improvement. Their support forms a serious burden on the resources of society, and yet society often turns them over to almshouses, where they are confirmed in their helplessness, and left to grovel in the most abject filth and debasement. The blind, the dumb, the insane, have long since enlisted our sympathies. We ask now, for a hearing in behalf of Idiots.

The charity which hopeth all things, and believeth all things, has yet dreamed of no nobler achievement than the redemption of this most hapless class. The conception belongs to our own age; and to this age it has been given to witness the realization. It was perseveringly attempted at Paris, so long ago as eighteen hundred, by Itard. But the attempt was limited to a single subject, and was made under the guidance of a philosophy essentially false.* It was revived under the auspices of a higher faith, and a

* That of Condillac.

wiser philosophy, in the same city, about twenty-five years since. Thanks to the skill and untiring patience of Voisin, Séguin, and Vallé, in France; of Guggenbühl, in Switzerland; of Sægert, in Prussia; of Drs. Howe and Wilbur, and Mr. J. B. Richards in our own country; the enterprise is now crowned with success. Even Idiots can be raised, from a condition lower than that of brutes, to the likeness of men. Their malady, which it was thought "hopeless to combat," and which earned for them extensively, the title of "human brutes," has yielded to the hand of all-powerful skillful love; and they have been brought to self-consciousness, invested with more or less of self-control, and animated with sentiments of duty and affection. Whoever reads the reports which have issued from Massachusetts on this subject, or visits the school of Mr. J. B. Richards, in School House Lane, near Germantown, will find himself convinced, that even out of Idiots, we can rear up self-respecting, self-supporting, God-fearing men and women.

To effect this marvellous result, however, it is necessary that they should enjoy regular and proper training at an early age. If neglected, feeble-minded children deteriorate with fearful rapidity. At ten years they often exhibit less capacity than at five, and by the time they reach twenty, sink into all but hopeless imbecility. On the other hand, were all such children subjected to patient and well-directed nurture through their earlier years, a large proportion of them would doubtless be saved from the abject and disgusting condition, in which they are usually found. Such nurture, however, is not to be expected, even in the families of the wealthy. Rarely, now, have their inmates the skill, the leisure, the patience, or the enlightened, unfailing love, which the work demands. In the homes of the poor, and of those in limited circumstances, private training and instruction are at present hardly possible. Only the coarsest animal wants are supplied. Every other office of a parent is regarded as irrelevant and useless, and too often, these wretched creatures are sent to an almshouse, to be fed and housed, like cattle, and sometimes to

be cruelly abused. Out of twenty-eight idiotic pupils received in the Experimental School, established near Boston, in the State of Massachusetts, twenty-one could not feed themselves, twenty-two could not dress themselves, several could not walk, and but one could use language well; seventeen of them are described by Dr. Howe, as dumb, either absolutely, or in effect. To such beings, if they are left to themselves, increasing years can bring only increasing alienation from all the rights, enjoyments, and duties that pertain to our nature.

Hence the necessity of *special* schools, where the training required by their peculiar and forlorn condition, can be applied, regularly and systematically. The benefit of these schools will not accrue to their own inmates alone. The attention which they will be sure to command, the impression which will be made, when they restore to the world—as decent and respectable persons—pupils, whom they received, as moping, muttering, grovelling idiots; the inquiries which will be instituted, respecting the causes of Idiocy, its extent and proper treatment, all these will be incidents to a well conducted school, and will be full fraught with blessing, to multitudes who can never directly share in its instructions and discipline. Two facts especially, will gain general publicity, and they are facts which once known and universally respected, would terminate much the largest part of the evils that flow from this source. The *first* of these facts, already well-established, but destined to receive new illustration from every effort which is made in this behalf, is, that Idiocy is not an arbitrary visitation of Providence, but one of the ways in which a righteous Law-giver avenges transgression. In too many cases, it is a legacy bequeathed by ancestors to their descendants, and can be traced directly back to their vices or their recklessness. It thus charges every parent with new responsibility, and indicates how fearful must be their guilt, who can deliberately inflict on their innocent posterity, so sore an evil.

A *second* fact which is destined to become more and more

widely known as schools for Idiots multiply, is—that they are proper subjects for Education. Instead of being abandoned as hopeless, these schools will be an abiding and impressive proof that these children will repay, and should therefore receive peculiar attention. It is the torpor of their mental powers that we have to contend with, not absolute incapacity. In every community, youth may be found who were idiotic at birth, but who under proper care and training have become cleanly in person, quiet in deportment, industrious in habits, and who would almost pass in society as persons of common intelligence; whereas, others with equal natural capacity, because of the ignorance and neglect of their parents have become filthy, gluttonous, lazy, vicious, depraved, and are rapidly sinking into drivelling Idiocy.* That Institution will be an immense benefactor to our people, which shall demonstrate that the imbecile are proper subjects for training and instruction, and at the same time indicate what is the proper course of training to be pursued. We may then hope that much of this work of mercy will be carried on in private families.

Philadelphia, aided by the munificence of the State, has erected noble monuments of her interest in the blind, the dumb and the insane. But for a class still larger and more deeply afflicted, she has as yet done nothing. Schools for Idiots and those of feeble minds, have risen within a few years on the Continent of Europe, in England and in the States of Massachusetts and New York. In Pennsylvania, nothing has as yet been done, except by the unaided exertions of a single individual. Mr. J. B. Richards, to whom allusion has been made already, was placed in charge of the first Class† of Idiots ever formed for training in this country.

After visiting Europe to learn the best methods which had then been devised, he devoted himself to the work with singular zeal and success. At the close of three years, spent in the experimental school established under the auspices of the Legislature of Massachusetts, he removed

* Dr. S. G. Howe.

† Dr. Wilbur, then of Massachusetts, now of New York, formed a private class about the same time.

to this city, and here he has been in charge of a private school for the past twelve months. Thus far he has received no aid. In order to meet the expenses of his school and family, he has been compelled to decline all except pay pupils. Thus, they who most need his care, are precluded from it, and his generous desire to devote himself to the service of the indigent has spent itself in fruitless aspirations.

We trust that a brighter day is at hand, and in this hope we appeal to the enlightened and philanthropic citizens of Philadelphia. It is proposed to establish an Institution, which shall be open to all classes, but in which special and liberal provision shall be made for the children of the poor. After enlisting the charities of Philadelphians, it is also proposed to invoke those of the State, that by the combined munificence of the Commonwealth and of individuals, a beginning may be made, which shall be worthy of the object and of those who sustain it.

We conclude, in the language (slightly altered) of an intelligent American,* who sometime since devoted much of his attention to the education of Idiots, as conducted in Paris. He thus states the result of his inquiries and observation. "Fortunately for the poor Idiots, the error of those who denied them all intelligence, and who pronounced them incurable has been proved, the interdict against them revoked, and the fact triumphantly established, that however degraded their condition, however devoid of all human faculties they may seem to be, they carry within them the holy spark which intelligent sympathy may inflame. During the past six months I have watched with eager interest the progress which many young Idiots have made in Paris under the direction of Mr. Séguin, and at Bicêtre under that of Messrs. Voisin and Vallé, and have seen, with no less gratification than astonishment, nearly one hundred fellow beings who but a short time since were shut out from all communion with mankind—who were objects of loathing and disgust, many of whom rejected

* Mr. George Sumner.

every article of clothing, others of whom unable to stand erect, crouched themselves in corners, and gave signs of life only by piteous howls, others in whom the faculty of speech had never been developed, and many whose voracious and indiscriminate gluttony satisfied itself with whatever they could lay hands upon—with the garbage thrown to swine or with their own excrements; these unfortunate beings, the rejected of humanity, I have seen properly clad, standing erect, walking, speaking, eating in an orderly manner at a common table, working quietly as carpenters and farmers, gaining by their own labor the means of existence, storing their awakened intelligence by reading one to another, exercising towards their teachers and among themselves the generous feelings of man's nature, and singing in unison songs of thanksgiving.

“It is a miracle, you will exclaim, and so indeed it is,—a miracle of intelligence, of patience and of love. When I expressed to the teacher of the school at Bicêtre, M. Vallé, my gratitude and my surprise at the result of his efforts, his reply was as profound as it was beautiful and modest, *Il ne faut, Monsieur, que la patience et le desir de bien faire.* ‘Patience and the desire to do good are all that is necessary.’ More than this is necessary, and I felt bound to complete his sentence by adding to it the noble motto which Don Henry of Portugal engraved on his shield, and by his conduct justified so well, *Le talent de bien faire.* Patience and the talent, as well as the desire to do good, are all required, but these can all be found in the community where Laura Bridgman has been taught, and the possibility of success now fully established, it would be an insult to [Pennsylvania] to suppose that she will not be among the first to make those efforts for her Idiot population which many European states are already commencing.”

ALONZO POTTER,
JOHN K. KANE,
JAMES MARTIN,
GEO. B. WOOD,
CHARLES D. CLEVELAND.

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