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THOUGHTS ON SUNDAY SCHOOLS,
AND SUNDAY SCHOOL BOOKS.

I go for Sunday schools. Apart from religious edification, they have at least three distinct recommendations, even to the mere worldling, who looks to nothing beyond the temporal good of man. 1. Their lessons are learnt peculiarly well, and act with peculiar force upon the mind and character, from their coming but once a week. So long a space between the stated mental repasts, causes them to be thoroughly digested; and creates for them an appetite ravenous, yet most healthful. Accordingly, the most rapid advancement in knowledge that I have ever known (considering the quantity of instruction given), has been made by children whose only teaching was at Sunday schools. 2. They afford opportunities for thousands, who (to the shame of Virginia be it spoken) have no other means of knowledge, to acquire much that may be useful. Some of these thousands cannot be spared from home on work-days: some, whose parents cannot afford to pay for their schooling, are not sent to the poor-schools, because pride will not let them consent to be singled out as objects of charity. Sunday schools avoid both these difficulties. The children of the rich and poor meet together there, without distinction—just as they would in those COMMON-SCHOOLS, the want of which has been so long and so justly a reproach to us. 3. Children who go to the Sunday school are kept out of mischief; saved from habits of vice and idleness. I have no morbid horror at the ‘*desecration of the Sabbath*’; but I do believe, that a child, who spends all of it that is not devoted to needful bodily exercise, in improving his mind, stands a far better chance to be useful, respectable, and happy, than if he had given the same hours to idleness or sport. Compare any number of regular Sunday scholars, with as many children of like condition, who have idled away their Sundays: and see which will furnish the larger number of good-for-nothing, or profligate people; if not criminals.

Thus, whether we look to the well-doing of individuals, or to the good of society, Sunday schools, if not greatly perverted, must receive signal praise.

But, some of them at least, have been greatly perverted: so greatly, as to make them agents of less than half the good, which they might otherwise have wrought.

To pass over their omission to teach writing, geography, or arithmetic—though these might to some extent be easily and most usefully taught—the greatest perversion consists in the sort of books, used. Instead of Sandford and Merton, Evenings at Home, Edgeworth’s Early Lessons, or the stories contained in them and in her Parents’ Assistant and Popular Tales; instead of Peter Parley’s shrewd, instructive stories, or the not less instructive Conversations of Uncle Philip; and Popular Lessons, Sergeant’s Temperance Tales, or even that excellent series, the New York Spelling Book and Readers;—a tribe of books has been introduced, many of which no one can with a safe conscience employ as vehicles of knowledge, unless he is of the sect to whom that particular Sunday school belongs. Not content with the New Testament—though, (beautiful as it often is in style, and perfect in morals) *that is*

a very unsuitable school-book for young children—the caterers for such a seminary provide works not only staggering to faith, but puzzling to intellects ripe in years and long exercised in study. An innocent of eight years old is made to get and say by rote, mysterious doctrines that Athanasius and Arius in the fourth century, a thousand Fathers in the Middle Ages, the Council of Nice, and the Synod of Dort, battled it over in vain; when, like the fallen Angels in Pandemonium, they

‘reason’d high
Of Providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,
Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute;
And found no end, in wand’ring mazes lost.’

Locke on the Human Understanding, is not commonly deemed a very simple book: few persons would think of putting it into the hands of small school-children. But it is easily intelligible, compared with some of the catechisms for Sunday schools. A very sensible member of a leading denomination of Christians lately told me, that one day, after instructing his own class of Sunday scholars in a plain, common-sense way, he perchance listened awhile to the lesson of a neighboring class; and was astonished to hear the little creatures utter mysteries unintelligible to him, and, he could not but suppose, unprofitable to them. The lighter-reading furnished by way of accompaniment to those profound catechisms, is not much better. It consists of Essays, Biographies, and Tales (pious novels), tending mainly to exemplify and illustrate the mystic doctrines aforementioned; with but an incidental bearing upon common life. Even Miss Hannah More’s ‘Two Wealthy Farmers,’ Miss Jane Taylor’s ‘Display,’ and her still more excellent ‘Contributions of Q. Q.’ so full of genuine piety, are scarcely evangelical enough for our Sunday schools.

For my part, this cause has long shut me out from a regular share in those schools. I grew up to manhood, and began to grow gray, teaching in them through six or eight summers: but sectarian books were introduced, which I could not explain and enforce (as books always sought to be, to pupils) without a seeming hypocrisy. Occasional help has since been all that was in my power.

In this thing, sects might profit by a sort of apologue in ‘Evenings at Home.’ A gentleman and his son were walking in a village one Sunday, as the church bells were ringing. The various societies of worshippers were going to their respective houses of worship. ‘Father,’ said the little boy, ‘why do not these people all agree to worship God in the same manner?’ ‘And why should they agree? They were not made to agree in this, I suppose,’ said his father. Just then, a poor man fell down in the street, in a fit. Numbers instantly hastened to aid him. A Presbyterian sat down and made his lap a pillow for the sick man’s head; a Baptist chafed his temples; a Roman Catholic lady held her smelling bottle to his nose; a Unitarian untied his neck-cloth, and unbuttoned his collar, to let him breathe more freely; a Methodist ran for a doctor; an Episcopalian soothed the poor man’s crying children; and a Quaker held his wide umbrella over him, to keep off the burning sun.—‘Arthur,’ said the gentleman, pointing to the scene,—‘this is what men were made to agree in.’

Now the early instruction of youth, like the offices of humanity, surely is what men ought to agree in; so far, at least, as to forbear inculcating doctrines which, if intelligible to the pupil, are useful only to prime him for bitter controversy, and cruel intolerance. In the immense fields of confessedly valuable knowledge, there is common ground enough to employ all childhood in traversing, without straying into the by-ways of sectarian mysticism. To explore the several kingdoms of visible Nature, even superficially; to learn somewhat of Man’s constitution and history; to master that sum of all moral duty, comprised in the injunction, ‘Do justice—love mercy—and walk humbly before Heaven;’ are studies to fill many years; studies which no rational being can postpone to such questions as ‘how many persons are in the Godhead?’—and, ‘is sprinkling or immersion the right mode of baptism?’ Those studies are the common ground of humanity; on which all sects should meet, and to them confine early education.

Cannot the wise and good of every Christian denomination (including Unitarians and Catholics) determine, with some exactness, the great principles of religious truth in which they all agree; and then expel from Sunday schools, all books that teach any other religious tenets? The principles thus adopted, with moral duties, and the knowledge of Nature,—* would present a range wide enough for the most active mind, during the longest life. Hundreds and thousands of volumes might be filled, within that range; schools might go on for hundreds of centuries, to teach what it contains; and leave it, after all, far from exhausted.—Why—why will not those wise and good come to that agreement? Why cannot they make that sacrifice of the spirit of proselytism, upon the altar of their country, and of humanity?

In whatever school that generous sacrifice may be made,—or in whatever one a rational influence may prevail,—Sandford and Merton, with the other books first mentioned, ought to be among the first adopted.

Added to them, should be a recent one of Miss Sedgwick’s; ‘A LOVE-TOKEN FOR CHILDREN.’†

The eight stories which compose this little book, are suited to the capacities and tastes of children; for whom they were written. They show that knowledge of common life and of the young heart, for which the author is remarkable; and they possess that quality, the unerring test of a truthful and wholesome book—the quality of making the reader feel, that good principles within him have been fortified, and generous impulses aroused, by the perusal. But the highest praise is yet to be uttered. Although these stories bear the manifest impress of decided christian piety, they contain not the slightest indication of the author’s particular creed. The truly virtuous of every sect must acknowledge and admire her, as a co-worker for the great end of Religion—human happiness: yet not one of them could claim her exclusively, as a sister, in subordinate points of faith. This is well nigh the beau ideal of a book for Sunday schools; indeed, I cannot help saying, of a

* By the phrase ‘knowledge of Nature,’ I mean all kinds of moral and physical science, and all sorts of history.

† ‘A Love Token for Children. Designed for Sunday School Libraries. By the Author of “The Linwoods,” “Live and let Live,” “Poor Rich Man,” &c. &c. New York: Harper & Brothers.—pp. 142. 12mo.

book for any school. It should exhibit not the belief of Calvin, or Socinus, or Fenelon; but the maxims of common sense, and the principles of Christianity: just as the speech of a real statesman breathes not the spirit of party, but the holy dictates of Patriotism and Justice. Such a book ranges within that *common-ground*, upon which all sects ought to meet. Like the spectacle of distress in the apologue, it calls them away from points wherein they differ, to things wherein, if true to their common Master, they *must* agree—to succor the afflicted, to comfort the wounded in spirit, to diffuse all around them the kindly charities of life. Such a book is *this* one.

The best stories in it are 'The Widow Ellis and her son Willie,' 'Our Robins,' and 'Mill-Hill:' and again of these three, 'Mill-Hill' is at once the longest and best. If the Editor of the Messenger can spare room, he will find it well filled by copying one of these stories—'Our Robins'—as a touching and instructive lesson to his young readers.*

They are all New England Stories. *Emma Maxwell*, the heroine of 'Mill-Hill,' is a being of that captivating, yet unexaggerated loveliness, which the author so well knows how to portray. I subjoin an account of her; given, just after a description of the village burying ground.

'Ask any one at Mill-Hill whose thought it was thus to beautify their burial-place, and you will be answered, "Emma Maxwell's. Emma is so thoughtful about the children, and she thinks, if there are flowers about the graves, it will take off their gloomy feelings, and they won't be so shy about going there. She says it's a teaching-place, for there is always a still small voice comes up from the grave; and besides, since we have tried it, the neighbors all say it's a comfort to do it." Should you proceed in your inquiries, and ask "who planted the trumpet-creeper that winds round and round that old dead tree by the schoolhouse, and who trained the sweetbriars round the windows," you will be answered, "the children did it, but Emma has seen to it." "And who cut out the earth like stairs to 'Prospect Rock' at the top of the hill?" "The boys, but Emma Maxwell put it into their heads." "And who keeps the Sunday school for those little Irish children from the shanties on the railroad?" "Emma Maxwell; who but she would take the trouble, when their folks did not care one straw whether they were taught or not?"

And so you might go on for an hour, and find that Emma Maxwell did good deeds that others, for want of thought (and perhaps faith) rather than time or heart, do not do.

There are persons in this world who would almost seem to be deprived of the natural relations of parents, brothers and sisters, husband and children, that they may do the little odd jobs for the human family left undone by the regular laborers. Emma Maxwell was one of these, God's missionaries to his children. Emma was an orphan. She lived at her uncle's, where, though she paid her board, she rendered many services that lightened the burden of life to every member of the family. Perhaps some of my young readers would like to know how Miss Emma Maxwell looked. She was tall, and not very slender, for she took good care of her health, and had the reward of her care in strength and cheerfulness, and the sign of it in the bright bloom of her cheek. She had a soft blue eye, and one of the sweetest mouths I ever saw. How could it be otherwise? for never any but kind words and soft tones came from it. And she had—do not be shocked, my gentle readers—red hair. Depend upon it, all young ladies, be they good and lovely, and even pretty (and pretty Emma undeniably was), do not have—except in books—"auburn hair," or "flaxen," or even "rich brown." Emma's hair was so plainly and neatly arranged, that no one noticed it except to say that "somehow red hair did not look badly on Emma Maxwell." The light that comes from within can make

everything without look agreeable in our eyes. Many wondered why Emma Maxwell, who, at the date of our story, was full *four-and-twenty*, was not married, and she "so attractive and so excellent." The mothers said, knowingly, "the right one" had not asked her; and the young girls, with all their horrors of an *old maid*, almost hoped that "the right one" never would ask her away from Mill-hill.

Emma had escaped that worst evil, sometimes the consequence of the early loss of friends, a diminution of her affections. Hers were "set on things above." Her heart went out to meet every human being gently and silently, like the falling of the dews of Heaven. There was no bustle, no talk. By her fruit she was known. She often resembled those flowers that unseen, give out sweet odors; her kindness was enjoyed, and its source never known.

A railroad was projected, to run by Mill-Hill. The Irish came (as where do they not?) to work upon it. The villagers were very much afraid of so lawless a horde; but Emma Maxwell, in the 'ladies' sewing society,' maintained, that if rightly treated, those people would be found honest and tractable. It proved so. She soon had an opportunity of showing kindness to a little orphan girl among them—*Anny Ryan*, whom she saw weeping inconsolably over the fresh grave of a sister, the last of her family. Emma managed to soothe her a little, and accompanied her to the *shanty*, where lived her only protectors, an Irish laborer and his wife, named *O'Neil*. The description of the dwelling is graphic.—And there are few Temperance orators who might not envy the eloquent power of Emma's appeal to Mike, against the jug of liquor. I beg the reader not to stop till he has read all the following extract:

'Emma had never before seen the inside of a shanty; and, though she was well acquainted with the poorest abodes of our native people, she was astonished to see so many human beings hale and thriving in such a habitation. There was no table, no chair save one broken one; boards fixed on blocks served to eat and sit on. On her first survey Emma concluded there was no bed, but a second view led her to believe that a heap of rubbish in one corner of the apartment had served as a bed, and that there poor Judy had died. In an opposite corner lay a bushel of potatoes. A junk of pork and half a newly-killed calf hung beside the door, while a bountiful mess was frying, and Dame O'Neil was stirring up a cake to bake before the fire. She first perceived the approach of Anny with her new friend. "Be quiet, Mike, and hold your tongues, men, will ye?" she said, to her husband and some half dozen men, who, with a jug of liquor beside them, were all talking in the same breath, "the lady is coming with Anny Ryan. Och, Rose, take the babby's hands out of the molasses. Biddy, move aside the pan of milk that bars the door, will ye? The Lord above bless ye, Miss," to Emma; "ye've had trouble enough with her?"

"Oh no," replied Emma, entering quietly, and accepting with a kind look of acknowledgment the seat offered her; "Anny is trying her best to feel and act right, and that's all we can any of us do, Mrs. O'Neil."

"That's true, indeed, in trouble and out of it."

"She tells me, Mrs. O'Neil, that you have been very kind to her and hers, and now she'll find it a comfort to do for you."

"Lord help the poor child, Miss, if she'll stop fretting it's all I ask of her. She's always ready to do little jobs for me; it's enough I have to do, my oldest being boys—make a bow to the lady, Pat—and no help like to me."

"But rather a hinderance, I should think, Mrs. O'Neil. Here's a school for boys near you, kept by a very good young man, where you can send those two little boys for twenty-five cents a week."

"Do you hear, Mike?" asked Katy O'Neil.

"And where's the twenty-five cents to come from?" answered Mike, "when we are all fed the week through, six of us, besides Anny Ryan, that shall have her full meal if the little reg'lars go starved."

"Oh, there is no starving in this land, my good friend, for the family of a stout working man with a busy wife at home. But

* We will copy it in our next. No.—[Ed. Mess.]

the mind must be fed as well as the body, or it will not thrive and grow. These are bright-looking boys of yours. They will soon learn to read, write, and keep accounts, if you will give them a chance. Is there nothing for which you spend twenty-five cents a week that you can as well do without?"

"It's the liquor you mane, Miss," said Mike, touching the jug with his foot; "troth, it's not I that cares for it; but, when the other boys drink, I must do my part."

"Perhaps the other boys have no children, and they cannot have the pleasure you will have in giving up drink for the good of your children. I see you love those little fellows—I see it by the way they hang round you; and there, the baby, as if to make my words good, is stretching out his arms to you. Surely, surely, Mr. O'Neil, those that have children to play with when they come in from their work don't need a drink to cheer them."

"And that's true, Miss."

"And then, when Sunday comes, it's good to have a store of pleasant thoughts; and what can be pleasanter than thinking that, instead of drinking up the money you have worked hard for, you have been laying it up, as it were, in these little boys' heads and hearts, to make them richer for this world; and, it may be, Mr. O'Neil, for the world to come? And, besides, ought you not to do this to show your gratitude to Him who gave you your children?—his very best gifts."

"Thank you, Miss, thank you," replied O'Neil, stroking his boys' heads and looking down, much pleased with Emma's proposition, but not quite prepared to accede to it.

"Good-night to you all," said Emma, and "good-night to you, Anny. Don't put your apron to your eyes again, my child; I will be sure to come and see you before many days, and then, Mrs. O'Neil, you can give me your husband's answer. Perhaps," she added, looking at O'Neil's companions, "some of your friends, whose families are not yet here, may have children they would like to send to the school."

"I thank ye, Miss," said one. "And ye'll be as sure to find children where there is a shanty, as bees where there's a hive," said another. Anny followed to the door. "How many days will it be?" she asked.

"Very, very few, and do not forget our talk at Judy's grave."

"Forget! I'll forget everything else, and mind nothing but Judy, and all ye said about her;" and she kissed Emma's gown as she stepped from the door, and, murmuring prayers and blessings, sunk down on the ground, and neither moved foot nor eye till Emma turned the road that led up the hill and was quite out of sight. As soon as she was out of hearing, one of the men within said, "There's not many the like of that young woman." "Her heart's blood is as warm as if she were born at home in old Ireland," said another. "And did not she plade for my stranger boys as if they were her own people's children?" asked Mike O'Neil.

The story has too many incidents, and too much good matter of various kinds, to indulge in further quotation: and abridgment is hurtful or insipid. It is deeply interesting; and would of itself be richly worth what the book costs.

This, this is the sort of books for Sunday schools.