

## GEORGE W. CURTIS

**G**EORGE WILLIAM CURTIS, American man of letters, publicist, and orator, was born at Providence, R. I., Feb. 24, 1824, and died on Staten Island, N. Y., Aug. 31, 1892. After attending school at Jamaica Plain, Mass., he removed to New York with his father in 1839, and was for a time engaged in mercantile pursuits. In 1842, he became a member of the Brook Farm Community in Massachusetts. Four years later he spent some years travelling in Germany, Italy, Syria, and Egypt. Returning to this country in 1850, he became a writer for the "New York Tribune," and a few years later was one of the editors of "Putnam's Monthly." He entered with fervor into the anti-slavery contest, speaking for the Republicans in 1856, and delivering in that year a memorable oration, here reproduced, on the duty of the American scholar to politics. From 1857 until his death he was political editor of "Harper's Weekly," and contributed to "Harper's Monthly" the series of papers known as the "Editor's Easy Chair." In his later years he was eminent as an advocate of Civil Service Reform. In 1871, he was appointed by President Grant member of a commission to embody rules for the regulation of the civil service, and for some years before his death was president of the National Civil Service Reform Association, and chancellor of the University of the State of New York. His chief writings are: "Nile Notes of a Howadji," "Lotus-Eating," "Potiphar Papers," "Prue and I," and a monograph on "Washington Irving."

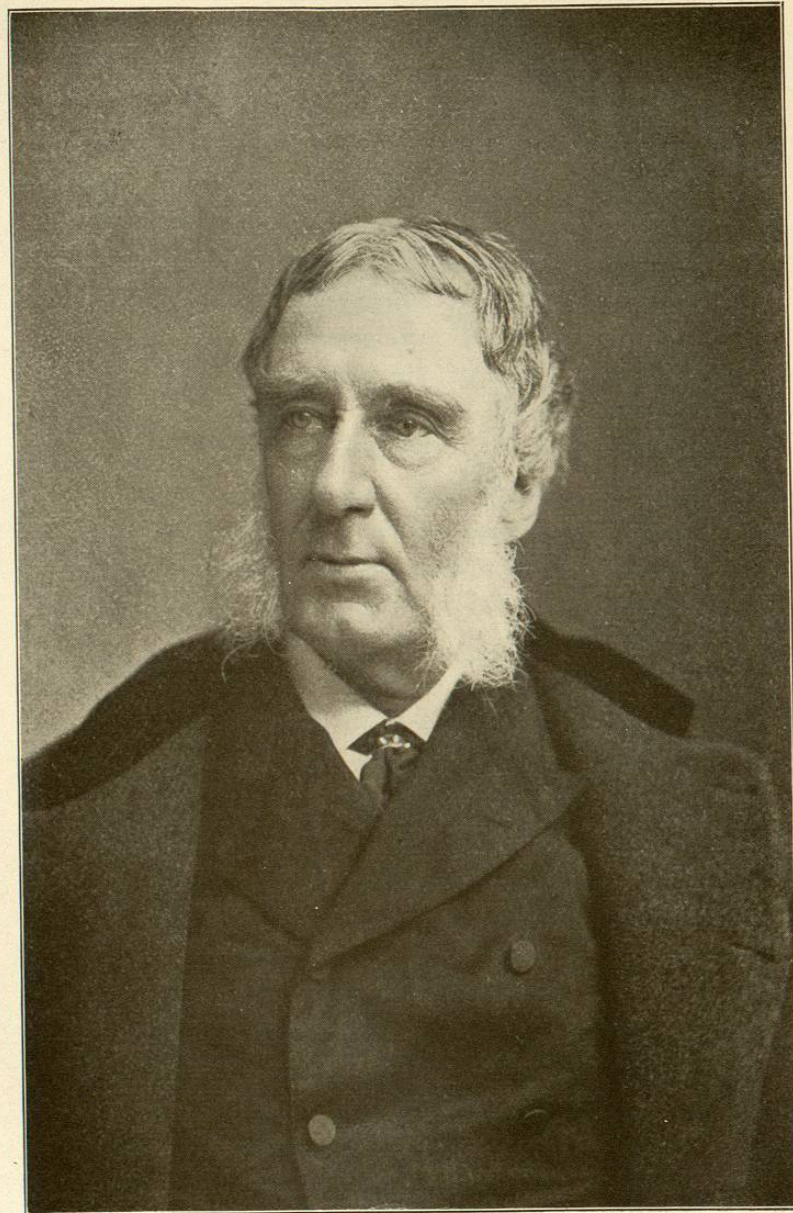
### THE DUTY OF THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

DELIVERED BEFORE THE LITERARY SOCIETIES OF THE WESLEYAN  
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**G**ENTLEMEN, the scholar is the representative of thought among men, and his duty to society is the effort to introduce thought and the sense of justice into human affairs. While other men pursue what is expedient, and watch with alarm the flickering of the funds, he is to pursue the truth, and watch the eternal law of justice.

But if this be true of the scholar in general, how peculiarly is it true of the American scholar, who, as a citizen of a Re-

(326)



GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS



public, has not only an influence by his word and example, but, by his vote, a direct agency upon public affairs. In a Republic which decides questions involving the national welfare by a majority of voices, whoever refuses to vote is a traitor to his own cause, whatever that cause may be; and if any scholar will not vote, nor have an opinion upon great public measures, because that would be to mix himself with politics, but contents himself with vague declamation about freedom in general, knowing that the enemies of freedom always use its name, then that scholar is a traitor to liberty, and degrades his order by justifying the reproach that the scholar is a pusillanimous trimmer.

The American scholar, gentlemen, has duties to politics in general; and he has, consequently, duties to every political crisis in his country; what his duties are in this crisis of our national affairs I shall now tell you as plainly as I can. The times are grave, and they demand sober speech. To us young men the future of this country is intrusted. What names does history love, and every honest man revere? The names of those who gave their youth and strength to the cause which is waiting for us to serve it.

The object of human government is human liberty. Laws restrain the encroachment of the individual upon society in order that all individuals may be secured the freest play of their powers. This is because the end of society is the improvement of the individual and the development of the race. Liberty is therefore the condition of human progress, and, consequently, that is the best government which gives to men the largest liberty and constantly modifies itself in the interest of freedom.

The laws of society, indeed, deprive men of liberty, and even of life, but only when by crime they have become in



jurious to society. The deprivation of the life or liberty of the individual under other circumstances is the outrage of those rights which are instinctively perceived by every man, but are beyond argument or proof.

Human slavery annihilates the conditions of human progress. Its necessary result is the destruction of humanity; and this not only directly by its effect upon the slave, but indirectly by its effect upon the master. In the one it destroys the self-respect which is the basis of manhood, and is thus a capital crime against humanity. In the other it fosters pride, indolence, luxury, and licentiousness, which equally imbrute the human being. Therefore, in slave States there is no literature, no art, no progressive civilization.

Manners are fantastic and fierce; brute force supplants moral principle; freedom of speech is suppressed because the natural speech of man condemns slavery; a sensitive vanity is called honor, and cowardly swagger, chivalry; respect for woman is destroyed by universal licentiousness; lazy indifference is called gallantry, and an impudent familiarity, cordiality. To supply by a travesty of courage the want of manly honor, men deliberately shoot those who expose their falsehoods. Therefore they go armed with knives and pistols, for it is a cardinal article of a code of false honor that it is possible for a bully to insult a gentleman. Founded upon crime, for by no other word can manstealing be characterized, the prosperity of such a people is at the mercy of an indignant justice. Hence a slave society has the characteristics of wandering tribes, which rob, and live, therefore, insecure in the shadow of impending vengeance. There is nothing admirable in such a society but what its spirit condemns; there is nothing permanent in it but decay. Against nature, against reason, against the human instinct, against the

divine law, the institution of human slavery is the most dreadful that philosophy contemplates or the imagination conceives.

Certainly, some individual slaveholders are good men, but the mass of men are never better than their institutions; and certainly some slaves are better fed and lodged than some free laborers; but so are many horses better fed and lodged than some free laborers; is, therefore, a laborer to abdicate his manhood and become a horse; and, certainly, as it exists, God may, in a certain sense, be said to permit it; but in the same way God permitted the slaughter of the innocents in Judea, and he permitted the awful railway slaughter not a month ago near Philadelphia. Do you mean that as comfort for the mothers of Judea and the mothers of Pennsylvania?

History confirms what philosophy teaches. The eastern nations and the Spanish colonies, Rome in her decline, and the southern States of America, display a society of which the spirit is similar however much the phenomena may differ. Moral self-respect is the first condition of national life, as labor is the first condition of national prosperity; but the laborer cannot have moral respect unless he be free.

The true national policy therefore is that which ennobles and dignifies labor. Cincinnatus, upon his farm, is the ideal of the citizen. But slavery disgraces labor by making the laborer a brute, while it makes the slaveholder the immediate rival of the free laborer in all the markets of the world. Hence, Tiberius Gracchus, one of the greatest of Roman citizens, early saw that in a state where an oligarchy at the same time monopolized and disgraced labor, there must necessarily be a vast demoralized population who would demand support of the state and be ready for the service of the



demagogue, who is always the tyrant. Gracchus was killed, but the issue proved the prophet.

The canker which Rome cherished in her bosom ate out the heart of Rome, and the empire whose splendor flashed over the whole world fell like a blighted tree. Not until slavery had barbarized the great mass of the Romans did Rome fall a prey to the barbarians from abroad.

Gentlemen, it is a disgrace for all of us, that in this country, and in this year of our history, the occasion should require me to state such principles and facts as these. History seems to be an endless iteration. But it is not so. Do not lose heart. It only seems so because there has been but one great cause in human affairs—the cause of liberty. In a thousand forms, under a thousand names, the old contest has been waged. It divided the politics of Greece and Rome, of England, France, America, into two parties; so that the history of liberty is the history of the world. . . .

Do you ask me our duty as scholars? Gentlemen, thought, which the scholar represents, is life and liberty. There is no intellectual or moral life without liberty. Therefore, as a man must breathe and see before he can study, the scholar must have liberty, first of all; and as the American scholar is a man and has a voice in his own government, so his interest in political affairs must precede all others. He must build his house before he can live in it. He must be a perpetual inspiration of freedom in politics. He must recognize that the intelligent exercise of political rights which is a privilege in a monarchy, is a duty in a republic. If it clash with his ease, his retirement, his taste, his study, let it clash, but let him do his duty. The course of events is incessant, and when the good deed is slighted, the bad deed is done.

Young scholars, young Americans, young men, we are all

called upon to do a great duty. Nobody is released from it. It is a work to be done by hard strokes, and everywhere. I see a rising enthusiasm, but enthusiasm is not an election; and I hear cheers from the heart, but cheers are not votes. Every man must labor with his neighbor, in the street, at the plough, at the bench, early and late, at home and abroad. Generally we are concerned in elections with the measures of government. This time it is with the essential principle of government itself. Therefore, there must be no doubt about our leader. He must not prevaricate, or stand in the fog, or use terms to court popular favor, which every demagogue and traitor has always used. If he say he favors the interest of the whole country, let him frankly say whether he think the interest of the whole country demands the extension of slavery. If he declares for the Union, let him say whether he means a Union for freedom or for slavery. If he swear by the constitution, let him state, so that the humblest free laborer can hear and understand, whether he believes the constitution means to prefer slave labor to free labor in the national representation of the Territories. Ask him as an honest man, in a great crisis, if he be for the Union, the constitution, and slavery extension, or for "Liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable."

Scholars, you would like to loiter in the pleasant paths of study. Every man loves his ease—loves to please his taste. But into how many homes along this lovely valley came the news of Lexington and Bunker Hill, eighty years ago, and young men like us, studious, fond of leisure, young lovers, young husbands, young brothers, and sons, knew that they must forsake the wooded hillside, the river meadows, golden with harvest, the twilight walk along the river, the summer Sunday in the old church, parents, wife, child, mistress, and