


EDWIN P. WHIPPLE

DWIN PERCY WHIPPLE, American essayist, critic, and lecturer, was born at Gloucester, Mass., March 8, 1819, and died at Boston, Mass., June 16, 1886. He received his education at the English High School, Salem, and for some years was employed in a broker's office at Boston, and in 1837 became superintendent of the reading-room of the Merchants' Exchange. This position he retained until 1860, when he concluded to devote himself to a literary life. When but a youth he used to write for the newspapers, and an article contributed to the "Boston Miscellany," on Macaulay, attracted attention and secured him fame. In 1843, he entered the lecture field with a series of biographical and critical addresses, afterwards published in book form under the title of "Literature and Life." He devoted himself wholly to literary work after 1860, and was for a time reviewer for the "Boston Globe." His judgments on his contemporaries were regarded as discerning as well as just. He also occasionally wrote on finance and politics, and was a personal friend of the leading authors of his day. He was engaged on a life of Governor Andrew when he died in his sixty-eighth year. Among his best-known books are, "Character and Characteristic Men" (1866); "The Literature of the Age of Elizabeth" (1869); "Success and Its Conditions" (1871). In 1887-88, selections from his writings were published under the titles, "Recollections of Eminent Men," "American Literature and Other Papers," and "Outlooks on Society, Literature, and Politics" (1888). Whipple was an able, yet not indiscriminating, literary critic. Pungent as well as true was his criticism on Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass"—that "it had every leaf except the fig leaf."

PATRIOTIC ORATION

DELIVERED AT BOSTON, JULY 4, 1850

THE history, so sad and so glorious, which chronicles the stern struggle in which our rights and liberties passed through the awful baptism of fire and blood, is eloquent with the deeds of many patriots, warriors, and statesmen; but these all fall into relations to one prominent and commanding figure, towering up above the whole group in unapproachable majesty, whose exalted character, warm and bright with every public and

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private virtue, and vital with the essential spirit of wisdom, has burst all sectional and national bounds and made the name of Washington the property of all mankind.

This illustrious man, at once the world's admiration and enigma, we are taught by a fine instinct to venerate and by a wrong opinion to misjudge. The might of his character has taken strong hold upon the feelings of great masses of men, but in translating this universal sentiment into an intelligent form, the intellectual element of this wonderful nature is as much depressed as the moral element is exalted, and consequently we are apt to misunderstand both. Mediocrity has a bad trick of idealizing itself in eulogizing him, and drags him down to its own low level while assuming to lift him to the skies. How many times have we been told that he was not a man of genius, but a person of "excellent common sense," of "admirable judgment," of "rare virtues;" and by a constant repetition of this odious cant we have nearly succeeded in divorcing comprehension from his sense, insight from his judgment, force from his virtues, and life from the man. Accordingly, in the panegyric of cold spirits, Washington disappears in a cloud of commonplaces; in the rhodomontade of boiling patriots he expires in the agonies of rant. Now the sooner this bundle of mediocre talents and moral qualities which its contrivers have the audacity to call George Washington is hissed out of existence the better it will be for the cause of talent and the cause of morals; contempt of that is the beginning of wisdom. He had no genius it seems. O no! genius we must suppose is the peculiar and shining attribute of some orator whose tongue can spout patriotic speeches, or some versifier whose muse can "Hail Columbia," but not of the man who supported states on his arm and carried America in his brain. The madcap Charles Townsend, the motion of whose pyro-

technic mind was like the whiz of a hundred rockets, is a man of genius; but George Washington raised up above the level of even eminent statesmen and with a nature moving with the still and orderly celerity of a planet round its sun,—he dwindles in comparison into a kind of angelic dunce! What is genius? Is it worth anything? Is splendid folly the measure of its inspiration? Is wisdom its base and summit,—that which it recedes from or tends toward? And by what definition do you award the name to the creator of an epic and deny it to the creator of a country? On what principle is it to be lavished on him who sculptures in perishing marble the image of possible excellence and withheld from him who built up in himself a transcendent character, indestructible as the obligations of duty and beautiful as her rewards?

Indeed, if by the genius of action you mean will enlightened by intelligence and intelligence energized by will; if force and insight be its characteristics and influence its test; and especially if great effects suppose a cause proportionably great, that is, a vital, causative mind, then is Washington most assuredly a man of genius and one whom no other American has equalled in the power of working morally and mentally on other minds. His genius it is true was of a peculiar kind, the genius of character, of thought, and the objects of thought solidified and concentrated into active faculty. He belongs to that rare class of men,—rare as Homers and Miltons, rare as Platos and Newtons,—who have impressed their characters upon nations without pampering national vices. Such men have natures broad enough to include all the facts of a people's practical life and deep enough to discern the spiritual laws which underlie, animate and govern those facts. Washington in short had that great-

ness of character which is the highest expression and last result of greatness of mind, for there is no method of building up character except through mind. Indeed, character like his is not built up, stone upon stone, precept upon precept, but grows up through an actual contact of thought with things,—the assimilative mind transmuting the impalpable but potent spirit of public sentiment, and the life of visible facts, and the power of spiritual laws, into individual life and power so that their mighty energies put on personality as it were and act through one centralizing human will. This process may not if you please make the great philosopher or the great poet but it does make the great man,—the man in whom thought and judgment seem identical with volition, the man whose vital expression is not in words but deeds, the man whose sublime ideas issue necessarily in sublime acts not in sublime art. It was because Washington's character was thus composed of the inmost substance and power of facts and principles that men instinctively felt the perfect reality of his comprehensive manhood. This reality enforced universal respect, married strength to repose, and threw into his face that commanding majesty which made men of the speculative audacity of Jefferson and the lucid genius of Hamilton recognize with unwonted meekness his awful superiority.

But you may say how does this account for Washington's virtues? Was his disinterestedness will? Was his patriotism intelligence? Was his morality genius? These questions I should answer with an emphatic yes, for there are few falser fallacies than that which represents moral conduct as flowing from moral opinions detached from moral character. Why, there is hardly a tyrant, sycophant, demagogue, or liberticide mentioned in history, who had not enough moral opinions to

suffice for a new Eden; and Shakespeare, the sure-seeing poet of human nature, delights to put the most edifying maxims of ethics into the mouths of his greatest villains, of Angelo, of Richard III, of the uncle-father of Hamlet. Without doubt Cæsar and Napoleon could have discoursed more fluently than Washington on patriotism, as there are a thousand French republicans of the last hour's coinage who could prattle more eloquently than he on freedom. But Washington's morality was built up in warring with outward temptations and inward passions, and every grace of his conscience was a trophy of toil and struggle. He had no moral opinions which hard experience and sturdy discipline had not vitalized into moral sentiments and organized into moral powers; and these powers, fixed and seated in the inmost heart of his character, were mighty and far-sighted forces which made his intelligence moral and his morality intelligent, and which no sorcery of the selfish passions could overcome or deceive. In the sublime metaphysics of the New Testament his eye was single, and this made his whole body full of light. It is just here that so many other eminent men of action, who have been tried by strong temptations, have miserably failed. Blinded by pride or whirled on by wrath they have ceased to discern and regard the inexorable moral laws, obedience to which is the condition of all permanent success; and in the labyrinths of fraud and unrealities in which crime entangles ambition, the thousand-eyed genius of wilful error is smitten with folly and madness. No human intellect however vast its compass and delicate its tact can safely thread those terrible mazes. "Every heaven-stormer," says a quaint German, "finds his hell as sure as every mountain its valley." Let us not doubt the genius of Washington because it was identical with wisdom, and because its energies worked with and

not against the spiritual order its "single eye" was gifted to divine. We commonly say that he acted in accordance with moral laws, but we must recollect that moral laws are intellectual facts, and are known through intellectual processes. We commonly say that he was so conscientious as ever to follow the path of right and obey the voice of duty. But what is right but an abstract term for rights? What is duty but an abstract term for duties? Rights and duties move not in parallel but converging lines; and how in the terror, discord, and madness of a civil war, with rights and duties in confused conflict, can a man seize on the exact point where clashing rights harmonize and where opposing duties are reconciled and act vigorously on the conception without having a conscience so informed with intelligence that his nature gravitates to the truth as by the very instinct and essence of reason?

The virtues of Washington therefore appear moral or mental according as we view them with the eye of conscience or reason. In him loftiness did not exclude breadth, but resulted from it; justice did not exclude wisdom, but grew out of it; and, as the wisest as well as justest man in America, he was pre-eminently distinguished among his contemporaries for moderation,—a word under which weak politicians conceal their want of courage, and knavish politicians their want of principle, but which in him was vital and comprehensive energy, tempering audacity with prudence, self-reliance with modesty, austere principles with merciful charities, inflexible purpose with serene courtesy, and issuing in that persistent and unconquerable fortitude in which he excelled all mankind. In scrutinizing the events of his life to discover the processes by which his character grew gradually up to its amazing height, we are arrested at the beginning by the

character of his mother, a woman temperate like him in the use of words, from her clear perception and vigorous grasp of things. There is a familiar anecdote recorded of her, which enables us to understand the simple sincerity and genuine heroism she early instilled into his strong and aspiring mind. At a time when his glory rang through Europe; when excitable enthusiasts were crossing the Atlantic for the single purpose of seeing him; when bad poets all over the world were sacking the dictionaries for hyperboles of panegyric; when the pedants of republicanism were calling him the American Cincinnatus and the American Fabius—as if our Washington were honored in playing the adjective to any Roman however illustrious!—she, in her quiet dignity, simply said to the voluble friends who were striving to flatter her mother's pride into an expression of exulting praise, "that he had been a good son, and she believed he had done his duty as a man." Under the care of a mother who flooded common words with such a wealth of meaning, the boy was not likely to mistake mediocrity for excellence, but would naturally domesticate in his heart lofty principles of conduct, and act from them as a matter of course, without expecting or obtaining praise. The consequence was that in early life, and in his first occupation as surveyor, and through the stirring events of the French war, he built up character day by day in a systematic endurance of hardship; in a constant sacrifice of inclinations to duty; in taming hot passions into the service of reason; in assiduously learning from other minds; in wringing knowledge, which could not be taught him, from the reluctant grasp of a flinty experience; in completely mastering every subject on which he fastened his intellect, so that whatever he knew he knew perfectly and forever, transmuting it into mind, and sending it forth in acts.

Intellectual and moral principles, which other men lazily contemplate and talk about, he had learned through a process which gave them the toughness of muscle and bone. A man thus sound at the core and on the surface of his nature; so full at once of integrity and sagacity; speaking ever from the level of his character, and always ready to substantiate opinions with deeds; a man without any morbid egotism, or pretension, or extravagance; simple, modest, dignified, incorruptible; never giving advice which events did not endorse as wise, never lacking fortitude to bear calamities which resulted from his advice being overruled: such a man could not but exact that recognition of commanding genius which inspires universal confidence. Accordingly, when the contest between the colonies and the mother country was assuming its inevitable form of civil war, he was found to be our natural leader in virtue of being the ablest man among a crowd of able men. When he appeared among the eloquent orators, the ingenious thinkers, the vehement patriots of the Revolution, his modesty and temperate professions could not conceal his superiority; he at once, by the very nature of great character, was felt to be their leader; towered up, indeed, over all their heads as naturally, as the fountain sparkling yonder in this July sun, which, in its long, dark, downward journey forgets not the altitude of its parent lake, and no sooner finds an outlet in our lower lands than it mounts by an impatient instinct, surely up to the level of its far-off inland source.

After the first flush and fever of the Revolutionary excitement was over, and the haggard fact of civil war was visible in all its horrors, it soon appeared how vitally important was such a character to the success of such a cause. We have already seen that the issue of the contest depended, not on