

THE MEMORY OF LAURENT CLERC

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"GRATITUDE is the remembrance of kindness received, the memory of a heart penetrated with a sense of profound respect and affection, and with measureless devotion."

Thus wrote Laurent Clerc on the 3d of July, 1815, when asked, "What is gratitude?" An audience composed of individuals of the highest standing in the social and political circles of England had assembled in London to listen to a lecture of the Abbé Sicard in exposition and illustration of the new French system of imparting instruction to the deaf and dumb. This system, originating with the Abbé de l'Épée, had been elaborated and improved by his successor, Sicard, in whose hands it had produced results, especially in the case of his now celebrated pupils, Massieu and Clerc, that excited the wonder and admiration of Europe.

Inspired by the occasion, by the presence of an assembly so distinguished for rank, beauty, and intelligence, and more than all by the sight of his beloved instructor and benefactor, whose sad, patient eye, pale cheek, and slender form spoke of toil, suffering, and self-sacrifice, for which the decorations that shone on his breast—gifts from the crowned heads of France, of Russia, and of Sweden—could be but a slight and feeble acknowledgment, Laurent Clerc looked into the depths of his soul, analyzed the sentiments and emotions that took shape and being at the thought of Sicard, and gave to the world his beautiful definition of "Gratitude."

Until the last day of his life he continued to regard the Abbé Sicard with this reverence and devotion. We of this country and generation, with our educational advantages and opportunities, cannot perhaps fairly estimate the difficulties which De l'Épée and Sicard had to overcome in their endeavors to enlighten the deaf-mute mind. The facilities at their disposal were utterly inadequate to the work. To gain pupils, they had to combat the distrust and prejudice of the poor; to acquire indispensable means, they had to contend with the scepticism and indifference of the rich. In order that the cause of their

* An address delivered at the dedication of the Clerc Memorial, Hartford, Conn., September 16, 1874.

hearts might live and triumph they denied themselves the necessities of life, and refused tempting offers of wealth and distinction.

"My poor children, I have wronged you of a hundred crowns," said De l'Épée during the rigorous winter of 1788, when, yielding to the prayers and remonstrances of his little family of deaf-mutes, he granted himself in his old age the indulgence of a fire in his apartment.

"Say to the Empress of Russia," said he to her ambassador, who had vainly pressed upon him valuable presents in the name of that sovereign, "that if my labors seem worthy of her consideration, the sole favor which I ask is, that she send me from her dominions some ignorant deaf-mute that I may instruct him."

The devotion of Sicard was not less touching. We can form some faint idea of the love and benevolence he manifested towards the deaf and dumb from the affection and gratitude they exhibited. When, during the Reign of Terror, Sicard was immured in the prison of the *Abbaye*, in hourly expectation of a violent death, Massieu, his favorite pupil, went without food and sleep until his release, and in one day more would have died of grief. At the head of his fellow-pupils he appeared at the bar of the National Assembly of France and presented a petition, which expresses happily, yet boldly and tersely, the feelings of their hearts:

"Mr. President," (thus runs the petition,) "they have taken from the deaf-mutes their instructor, their guardian, and their father. They have shut him up like a thief, a murderer. But he has killed no one; he has stolen nothing. He is not a bad citizen. His whole time is spent in teaching us to love our country. He is good, just, pure. We ask of you his liberty. Restore him to us, his children. He loves us with a father's fondness. He has taught us all we know. Without him we should be like the beasts. Since he was taken away we have been full of sorrow and distress. Return him to us, and you will make us happy."

In his twelfth year Laurent Clerc was transferred from the paternal domicile on the banks of the Rhone to the institution under the charge of Sicard. It was in the year 1797. Napoleon had just fought and won the marvellous campaign of Italy. France, whose prophetic eyes beheld in him the hero of the fu-

ture, hastened to place her welfare and her destinies at his feet. She allowed him to transform her fair domains into a military camp, with Paris for headquarters. Henceforth the sword and the musket were the sole passports to power and distinction. The pure flame of religion and the beneficent light of human progress paled in the lurid blaze of military glory. But Sicard, who had not been dismayed by the persecutions of the Reign of Terror, was not cast down when he saw that the ruler of France ignored his existence and looked coldly upon his cause. In the eighteen years that Laurent Clerc was associated with Sicard—during which period the star of Napoleon had risen above the horizon, attained its zenith, and set forever behind the lonely rock of St. Helena—he beheld his beloved teacher and friend ever at his post, applying himself, undisturbed by outside influences, to the sacred work of cultivating the minds and hearts of the neglected children of silence.

In this work, during the last eight years of Laurent Clerc's connection with the Paris Institution, he was Sicard's most earnest and successful co-laborer. In 1816, however, his life in France drew to a close. Thomas H. Gallaudet—revered be his memory!—repulsed from the institutions of Watson and Braidwood, that, as he sorrowfully expressed it, they might retain a "sad monopoly of the resources of charity," turned his face towards Paris. "Here, in the splendid metropolis of his ancestors," to use his own words, "the light of hope began to dawn on his path. For here, thanks to the ready kindness of the illustrious Sicard, he was furnished with every facility for obtaining the knowledge which he sought. And here, too, he was enabled to make such arrangements as to surprise his friends and supporters at home by an unexpected return with a colleague, whose peculiar condition and striking talents and attainments gave a new impulse to the enterprise" of educating the American deaf-mute.

It would appear at this distance of time to have been the most trying, as it was the most momentous, act of Mr. Clerc's life to *decide* to accompany Mr. Gallaudet to America. He must bid farewell to home, friends, and relations; to aged parents on the verge of the grave; he must leave forever the vine-clad hills and lovely vales of France; he must abandon Paris, with its palaces and gardens and fountains, its libraries and art-museums, its unrivalled resources for æsthetic and intellectual enjoyment,

so dear to the heart of the true Frenchman : he must prepare to see buried beneath the dust of disuse and oblivion his precious French, his only written language, mastered with the heavy tax of time and effort laid upon the deaf-mute ; he must tear himself from his beloved teacher and friend, Sicard, the tendrils of whose nature clung to the young *protégé* and assistant, loth to let him go—even on a mission of beneficence to which he himself had pointed the way by precept and by example.

Yet, from all we can learn, Mr. Clerc did not hesitate in making his decision. He won the reluctant consent of his parents ; he overcame the objections of Sicard one by one ; he took prompt leave of his friends and the scene of his labors and triumphs, and on the 18th of June he embarked for America with Mr. Gallaudet.

It was a great step to take ; one from which most men under similar circumstances would have shrunk. Allowing something to the persuasive pleading of Mr. Gallaudet, and to the contagion of his enthusiasm, and something also to the influence wrought upon Mr. Clerc's nature in breathing for so many years an atmosphere so pervaded with the fragrance of self-consecration and generous deeds, the fact remains that had not Laurent Clerc been a man of more than ordinary decision and benevolence of character, he would never have thus bidden farewell to France and come a voluntary exile to a foreign land.

The record of Mr. Clerc's life from the date of his arrival in America until his death, fifty-three years afterwards, is a familiar one to every educated mute. With the exception of a few months at three different times spent in visiting his native country, forty-one of these years were passed in the faithful and successful performance of duty as an instructor in the American Asylum. In the annual reports of that institution, where Mr. Clerc's name from first to last heads the list of the corps of instructors, repeated and honorable mention is made of his assistance in soliciting funds, of his valuable aid in training teachers for the Hartford, as well as other schools, of the high estimate in which his labors and counsels were held by the board of directors. The board at various times gave evidence of their sense of his important services by the bestowment of special favors and appropriations ; and in 1858, when, in his 73d year, he closed his active connection with the asylum, he retired in the receipt of a pension for life from its funds.

From this time Mr. Clerc spent his days in peaceful enjoyment of the rest he had so well earned. "Happy in his domestic and social relations," writes Rev. Mr. Turner in the *American Annals*, "he might be seen, in the streets, in the post office, and the reading-rooms of Hartford, almost every day, meeting his friends with a pleasant smile and graceful salutation, and expressing a deep interest in public events relating to the welfare of the country, and especially to the prosperity of the Asylum."

In June, 1864, Mr. Clerc, then in his 79th year, in spite of his many infirmities and the length and fatigue of a journey that would have deterred a younger man, travelled from his Hartford home to Washington, the capital of our country, in order to be present at the inauguration of the National Deaf-Mute College. He delivered a thoughtful and interesting address, closing with the earnest hope that "in his great work, his dear young friend, Edward M. Gallaudet, might be blessed and prospered, and receive for his efforts in behalf of the deaf and dumb such proofs of its benefits as would reward him for the glorious undertaking." Thus was Mr. Clerc permitted in his last days to behold the highest and grandest point reached in the cause of deaf-mute education—like Moses of old, after forty years of guidance and patient waiting, to look upon the promised land and give his dying blessing.

In his 84th year, Laurent Clerc, on the 18th of July, 1869, finished his earthly life, passing away in the hope of the Christian's immortality. His wife, faithful companion of half a century, and two children in mature life, survive, witnesses of the universal regard and affection in which his memory is held, and of the gratitude with which it is embalmed in the hearts of those whom his sacrifices and labors have benefited.

Yes; that affection, reverence, and devotion which were the natural and involuntary tribute to Sicard's character and deeds, we mutes of America render to Gallaudet and Clerc, our teachers, our friends, our benefactors. Twenty years ago we gathered here under the shadow of the walls he had done so much to erect, and dedicated to the memory of THOMAS H. GALLAUDET a token of our affection and our gratitude. And to-day we assemble again. We have come up, as then, "from New England hills and vales, from the rivers and lakes of the Empire State, from the City of Brotherly Love and its sturdy Commonwealth,

rom the Old Dominion, and further down in the regions of the sunny South, from the rolling prairies of the West—a mighty brotherhood”—and this time it is to LAURENT CLERC that we rear our memorial.

There it stands—monumental shaft and bust of bronze—on the soil which his feet trod as he went to and from his daily labors, and surrounded by mementos of his presence and his work. It will be first among the objects which catch the eager eye of the child of silence as he approaches the portals where the fetters that bind his mind shall be struck off; it will rise before his sight day by day as he pursues his round of duty and of study; it will be among the last of the familiar objects connected with school life to fade on his vision as he leaves his *Alma Mater* to fight the battle of life. To him, as it is to us all, it will be a reminder of sturdy endeavor, cheerful self-sacrifice, and faithful performance of duty, and of the obligation which conscience and gratitude lay upon him to prove worthy of one who embodied in his character these sterling traits.

But this stone will not only speak of Laurent Clerc's life and his work; it will be eloquent of the love and gratitude of the uncounted thousands whom that life and that work have blessed. It will proclaim that whatever may be their shortcomings, they can remember kindness and cherish the memory of a benefactor.

Yet far be it from us to claim that in erecting this memorial we regard ourselves as having discharged in whole or in part a debt. Not a hundred columns, with their summits among the clouds and their sides emblazoned with letters of gold, could do that. The debt we owe to Gallaudet and Clerc is immeasurable, eternal; not to be paid in things earthly and perishable, stone or gold. The memory of such lives as theirs will outlast the monuments we have erected. It will glow in the hearts of the innumerable crowd that comes after us long beyond that distant day when these shafts shall have fallen and mingled with the earth beneath.

That action or that life is indeed of trifling importance which depends for its perpetuation in human records upon slab or pillar, obelisk or pyramid. It was the astute Talleyrand who said: "The sovereign has a little mind who seeks to go down to posterity by means of great public structures. It is to confide to masons and bricklayers the task of writing history." Great deeds are the living lights of history; their undying

brightness shines in the darkness of the past, and sends rays of hope and encouragement down the vistas of the future. They contain within themselves the source of their own perpetual existence, needing no aid from the handiwork of man.

But, on the other hand, the generation, community, or people that rears a memorial, perishable though it be, whose front catches and reflects this immortal light, shows its appreciation of what is true and noble and great. It discharges a sacred duty; it performs a service to its day and generation in thus making the most prompt, the most public, and the most ample acknowledgment in its power of its obligations.

We glory in proclaiming our lasting indebtedness to Gallaudet and to Clerc. We write it on stone. We shall acknowledge it to future ages in tradition and in the records of the books. But there are other ways yet in which we can show our gratitude. We can prove ourselves worthy of the benefits which we have received. We can make ourselves honored members of society, gaining its respect by our industry and independence, our intelligence, our regard for morality and law. We can make the word "mute" a synonym for all that is desirable and admirable in the neighbor and the citizen. We can continue steadfast in the pursuit of knowledge and in the cultivation of the mind until we make our mark in literature, the arts, and the sciences. We can help to make the world better and purer by sustaining with credit the functions which religion demands of its supporters.

Then the record and influence of our lives will form a memorial which will tell the story of our devotion to our benefactors in the coming ages, when the marble that now bears aloft the names of Gallaudet and Clerc, yielding to the destroying hand of time, shall have vanished forever from mortal sight.