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DANGERS OF A COLLEGE LIFE:

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN NASSAU-HALL,

DECEMBER 3, 1843.

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To prevent erroneous conclusions, which might be drawn from the nature of the topics discussed in the following discourse, respecting the state of industry and morals in the College, it may be proper to say that the remarks made were not intended as a rebuke of existing evils, but as a caution and warning to the inexperienced. And in the fact that the students have requested a copy, we have gratifying evidence that they approve of the sentiments expressed in the address. We may also add, that we have seldom seen a session commence with fairer prospects of attention to study and of general correct deportment than the present.

SERMON.

PROVERBS i. 17.—Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird.

The book of Proverbs consists chiefly of unconnected maxims respecting human life and manners. To this remark there are a few exceptions. In the passage from which our text is taken, the sacred writer is exhorting a young man, whom he addresses as his son, to beware of the dangers to which he is exposed, especially from the influence of wicked companions, stating the inducements which such companions will hold out to the inexperienced and inconsiderate to join with them in schemes of wickedness—suggesting the advantages to be derived from the course proposed, and artfully concealing the dangers and evils that attend a departure from the path of rectitude. And in the course of his description of the inducements offered to join in wicked schemes, the sacred writer incidentally and by way of parenthesis throws in the remark, quoted as the motto of this address. *Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird.*

The method of taking birds with a net is nearly the

same in ancient and in modern times. Probably some of you have seen it done, and if so, you will the more readily perceive the connexion of the remark with the subject and the aptness of the illustration.

The fowler goes at night or at some other time when the birds are not present, to a place which they are accustomed to frequent, and scatters some kind of grain or seed as a bait and suffers the birds for several days to come and pick up the bait unmolested. After he has accustomed them to come daily without disturbance to the place which he has selected, he carefully folds up his net, attaches to it a spring and a rope, covers it over with leaves and makes the place look as nearly as possible like what it was, when the birds had visited it without harm. These arrangements made, he conceals himself in a place which he has previously prepared, and when the unsuspecting birds alight and commence picking up the bait, he draws the rope, springs the net, and incloses his game. Another stratagem is also sometimes used. A bird of the same species as those which the fowler wishes to take, is used as a decoy. And when the sportsman notices a flock of birds passing over, he causes his decoy to flutter and to appear to alight where his net is spread. This attracts the notice of the passing flock; and suspecting no danger they descend on the spot prepared for their destruction. The success of the sportsman greatly depends on the secrecy with which he conducts his operations. If he is seen spreading his net

or making his preparations, such is the sagacity of birds that they cannot be tempted to come near the fatal spot. These methods of taking birds in a net, illustrate in a plain and apt manner, the means by which young men are frequently allured from the path of duty and led before they are aware of danger into fatal snares.

Let us follow out the ideas suggested, and we shall see how aptly the allusion in our text illustrates the means by which young men are not unfrequently allured from the path of rectitude and led on step by step until they are involved in inevitable ruin.

We take it for granted that no one directly and designedly seeks his own ruin. The desire of happiness is so deeply implanted in the breast of every human being, and indeed of every animal, that no one seeks to make himself wretched. Yet many take such a course as according to the laws which God has established, terminates in disgrace and wretchedness. And how does this happen? I believe it will generally be found that it is through the influence and example of depraved and wicked companions. Suppose a youth approaching manhood leaves home for the first time as many of you have recently done, comparatively pure and innocent. He is thrown into promiscuous society, in which it would be strange, if there be not some who are not so correct in their principles and pure in their morals as the domestic circle in which the youth has been accustomed

to move. And as he is a social being he forms new acquaintances and new attachments.

And those are likely to engage his attention who are the most sociable, agreeable in their manners and manifest a frank and generous disposition. It is not always the most grossly immoral that are the most dangerous companions to a young man recently from the bosom of a pure and virtuous family. To such a one the grossness of vice is repulsive. He sees that such excesses and impiety are disgraceful and ruinous. If a young man can be pleased with the society of the grossly immoral and profane, it is a proof that he is himself corrupt, and needs very little inducement to lead him far astray.

The approaches of vice are usually gradual. And the tempter must not at first present vice in all its naked deformity—a veil must be cast over its hideous aspect and it must come dressed in ornaments which do not naturally belong to it. There are persons well qualified to present temptation in this form. They are genteel in their manners, social in their disposition, full of anecdote and interesting in their conversation. Perhaps they have very few positive vices. But they are indolent, not fond of study or of employment of any kind; and of course they have abundant time to spend in social intercourse. Their door is always open to receive visitors and they are sure to repay with interest all the calls which they have received. Their example and conversation lead the unsuspecting youth to for-

get the great object for which he left home. But he thinks it is only the commencement of his college course, and he intends to redeem lost time, by greater diligence hereafter. Thus, day after day and week after week passes away and when the close of the term is drawing near, he has hardly begun to apply himself to his studies. And as he has fallen far behind many of his classmates, he concludes it is in vain to attempt, the current session, to regain what he has lost. But he promises himself that he will make good all deficiencies in the approaching vacation, and especially the next session. The vacation passes and the next term passes, and the same and greater inducements to idleness return, and the youth sees others of inferior talents far before him, and he is mortified and ashamed to meet his fond parents, who expected to receive favourable reports of his progress in his studies.

By this time another and powerful cause has begun to operate, I mean, habits of idleness and inattention to study. When habit is fixed it becomes a second nature; and motives sufficiently powerful to produce reformation can hardly be presented. The admonitions of teachers, the displeasure of parents, and the prospect of future worthlessness are of no avail. Thus college life, the seed time of future respectability, passes away, with some occasional feeble and ineffectual efforts to throw off the fatal incubus. Towards the close of his college course perhaps the unhappy youth sees his error, laments his folly and

wishes it were possible to begin again. But the time has come, when he must commence the study of a profession and he consoles himself that he will begin a new course. But he soon finds his professional studies are as dull and as irksome as anything which he was required to learn in his academical course. And the indolent habits which he has acquired hold him as firmly as if he were bound with iron chains. Unprepared for any active and useful business, he becomes a cipher, a drone, if not something worse, in future life. This, my young friends, is not a fancy sketch. I have lived long enough to see it exemplified many, alas! too many times. I have seen the truth of what I have said verified so often, that I have laid it down as a rule, that the first session in college is an index of the whole academic course, and that the character acquired in college stamps itself on the whole future life. I admit that there are some few exceptions, but they are so few, that they need not be taken into the account in forming the general rule.

Perhaps the youth, who has left home with the purpose of cultivating his mind and of acquiring useful knowledge, falls into the company of some one, who in order to form an apology for his own idleness, inculcates the opinion that regular and close application to the studies of college is proof of a dull and plodding genius, intimating that if he should apply himself one half of the time to the prescribed studies, he could equal, if not excel, the best in his class. In some persons there is such a

preposterous desire to pass for a genius, that I have heard of some young men who would study nearly all night with windows closed; and sleep or run about from room to room through the day in order to gain the name of a genius by making a splendid recitation, without study. And this deception leads those ignorant of human nature to draw the erroneous conclusion that industry and application are not necessary for those who have talents.

Another pernicious notion is inculcated and sanctioned by the example of too many, that some or all of the college studies are of no practical use, and that it is much more profitable and a better preparation for usefulness in future life to pay little attention to college studies and to devote the time to reading, and by this means to acquire useful knowledge on various subjects. And as this notion falls in with the indolence natural to man, the opinion becomes popular and deceives many. The consequence is that a desultory course of reading is commenced, and whatever is most agreeable at the moment, is read. No one subject is fully investigated or understood—a vitiated taste is created—a confusion of thought produced—the energy of the mind weakened, and a habit of superficial attainment on every subject formed. In future life the same course will be pursued—the mind accustomed to attend to such subjects only as are most agreeable will shrink back from whatever requires intense and laborious thought, and will

either wholly neglect or skim over investigations demanding the undivided energy of the human intellect.

We deny the fact, that the studies of college are useless. And if the occasion would permit, we could support the assertion by substantial reasons. But supposing that what is learned in college, can be applied to no practical purpose in future life; still we maintain that the discipline of the mind, the training it to pursue a regular course of thought, the habit of fixing the attention on any given subject and of viewing it on all sides, is worth more than all the time expended.

The mind is thus prepared to arrange and to use the materials that may afterwards be collected by observation and reading. It is thus that the greatest and most useful men that have adorned our world have been trained and educated. And all the ingenuity of modern times has not been able to invent any machinery capable of dispensing with individual labour and exertion in a course of education. Desultory reading, admitting what is not always true, that the works read are harmless, requires no exertion. The mind is the mere passive recipient of the thoughts of others, and is required to put forth very little exertion of its own. The truth is that general desultory reading, to the neglect of prescribed studies, is very little better than absolute idleness.

Of all habits young persons ought to avoid idleness, because it is not only an evil in itself, a prelude to insignificance in future life, but it throws the idle into the so-

ciety of wicked and corrupting companions. The idle student, if I may use so absurd an expression, will rarely be contented to remain alone. If his mind be not occupied with his studies, he might feel as comfortable shut up in the solitary cells of a state prison as in college without associates. To relieve himself from his ennui, he will seek for companions. And who will he find ready to join him? Surely he will not wish to intrude himself on those who are engaged in their studies. If he do, he will soon find himself despised and shunned by all whose friendship ought to be sought. He must then associate with those who, like himself, have nothing to do. And it will be wonderful, if among these, he do not find the profane, the intemperate, the licentious, the scoffer at every thing sacred. He is now in the very spot where the net of the fowler is spread. But he apprehends no danger. The bait is scattered around in abundance. He enjoys the jest, the wit, the song, the history of college tricks, real or fictitious. He thinks of no danger. He cannot imagine that young men so pleasant, so kind, so agreeable, are plotting his ruin. And probably they have no such intention. Yet the means used generally lead to that result. With the wit and anecdote which delight and fascinate the social circle there is sometimes mingled a profane or obscene expression, or a sneer at something sacred. But this profaneness or obscenity appears so connected with the wit of the story, that it cannot well be separated.

And it is suffered to pass unnoticed and without any mark of displeasure. In a short time, our young man becomes so accustomed to conversation of this kind, that he can hear without alarm blasphemous and obscene language of a gross character. Perhaps he would rather it was not used. But his companions are, in other respects, so agreeable and have so many redeeming qualities, that he cannot think of separating himself from their society. And daily intercourse soon removes all his scruples. And he begins to think that profane language is a mark of a gentleman—that it gives point to a jest—that it adds embellishment to a story, which, repeated without oaths, would appear flat and insipid. From such motives, or perhaps from that principle of our nature which leads us to imitate those with whom we associate, he uses language which at a former period would have filled him with horror. And so rapid is his progress, that in a short time he equals in oaths and imprecations, those who have drawn in blasphemy with their mother's milk. The use of profane language obliterates from the mind reverence for the name, attributes and worship of the great God, and prepares the way for scoffing at, and turning into ridicule the most sacred and awful truths of the Bible. God, thus most justly provoked, withdraws the restraints of his providence and grace, and leaves the individual to work out his own ruin.

Perhaps a young man may not deliberately cast off the fear of God and reject the authority of the

Bible, as the first step in the road to ruin. Without reflecting on this subject and without intending to renounce the religious principles inculcated by a pious father or mother, he may through the influence of his associates, be induced to use intoxicating drinks. At first it may be drinks of the weaker class that he will venture to taste, and that only occasionally, on some holiday, or festive meeting, or anniversary. From the exhilarating effects he may be induced to repeat the experiment more frequently, until he acquires a taste for intoxicating drink, and then his history is soon told. With some, the progress is rapid. Tasting once or twice creates such an appetite that there is no stopping until they become frantic or beastly drunk. And some act of violence or mischief is committed, or such disturbance is made, that their condition cannot be kept secret. And what would not the unhappy youth then give could his disgrace be kept from the knowledge of his father and mother, and other friends at home? With others the progress is slow, but not less sure. That an individual has not become frantic—that he has not shouted like a mad-man—or committed any outrageous act, encourages him to seek the pleasant excitement again and again, until he feels miserable unless he is under the influence of artificial stimulants. And then his fate is fixed. He is in the net of the fowler. He becomes a miserable sot. In due time he returns home to his parents, a ruined son. Degraded in his own estimation—the shame and grief of parents and friends—unfit for any responsible and

honourable employment, he is compelled from the necessity of the case to associate with the lowest and most worthless in his neighbourhood. How often have I heard affectionate fathers say, "I had rather see my son brought home a corpse, than to return a drunkard." And the choice is certainly not to be condemned.

The danger of being caught in this net, arises from the fact that in the commencement no evil is apprehended. The youth sees the beginning, but the end is concealed. He sees the gayety of his companions, their antic pranks, their high glee, their jovial merriment, but he does not anticipate what they will be in a few years—lounging in the bar-room, tottering in the streets, wallowing in the mud and prematurely carried to the drunkard's grave, followed by broken-hearted parents. In the commencement of his own career he feels the exhilarating effects of the social glass—wrapped in a delightful reverie, he soars above the earth, and leaving all care and sorrow behind, he imagines himself able to perform exploits which he dared not attempt in his sober moments. His companions applaud the fluency of his expressions and the sportive flashes of his imagination, and he is encouraged to make higher and higher efforts. These scenes may be repeated again and again, and the youth may not go so far as to lose command of himself. He can talk and walk and control all his movements; so that he becomes confident that he can and will always stop at the right point, and will never get

drunk. But before he is aware habit is formed, and then reason and conscience and the prospect of eternal ruin cannot stop his onward progress. Pause, young man, and reflect on the consequences before you begin. Remember that many wise men have been deceived and many strong men have fallen in the way which we have described. If you would be safe, "touch not, taste not, handle not."

I omit to dwell on the quarrels and violent assaults among themselves or with others, that not unfrequently take place when young men are heated with drink, and also the mischief done to public and private property.

And I hasten to mention another net into which the unwary are sometimes decoyed by their companions—I mean, gaming. This vice, like many others, is connected with idleness, or want of occupation. When young men often meet together, the fund of wit and anecdote, and amusing story, soon becomes exhausted, and they cast about to find some way of killing time, and of relieving themselves from the monotonous and oppressive sameness of their winter evenings. It is proposed that a game at cards or some other game of chance be tried. And as there is to be no betting, such as have been taught to hold in abhorrence gaming, or playing for money, feel no alarm. Surely, it is said, there can be no harm in rattling a dice box, or in handling and shuffling and throwing on the table a few painted paste boards. But this amusement soon becomes dull. And small bets are proposed to give an interest to the game—say

a few cigars, a glass of ale, a bottle of champagne, or an oyster supper. The hazard is not great, and the loser will have the advantage of sharing the enjoyment of the stakes. Here the play begins, but this is not the end. A passion for play is created; money is staked and lost and won, and the bets run higher and higher, according to the ability of the persons concerned. And when the infatuation has got possession of the soul bets are repeated and doubled, until some one or more are stripped of the funds which kind parents have provided for necessary expenses. Then begins a system of deception and falsehood in order to induce parents or guardians to furnish additional funds. And if the demand is complied with, the probability is that the funds afforded will be expended in the same way. To some this description may appear exaggerated and so improbable that it can never be realized. We know it is not so. There is something in gaming so infatuating, so bewitching, that motives which ought to govern a rational being have no influence. I could point you to a man not far distant, who has run the course described, with this difference, that at the age of twenty-one he came into possession of a handsome estate, and before he reached the age of thirty it was all gone. It was right and wise in the trustees of this college to prohibit all plays likely to create a spirit of gaming, whether money be staked or not.

And, my young friends, let me advise you when you see the card-table placed before you, to remember how carefully the fowler conceals his net.

There is another sin, which we are not often permitted to mention in promiscuous assemblies, into the practice of which young men are liable to fall before they are aware of its ruinous consequences. I do not know that the temptations to commit this sin are greater here than elsewhere, except it be that the conversation of those who are already licentious may be the means of leading others astray. But taking human nature as it is, there is danger every where; and young men cannot too carefully avoid loose companions, licentious books and even unchaste thoughts. The approaches of this sin are more seductive, and the passion once excited is more difficult to be controlled than any other. I recommend you to read at your leisure the graphic description given in the sixth and seventh chapters of the book of Proverbs, of the arts used to inclose young men in this fatal net.

I shall not attempt a detail of the awful consequences which follow indulgence in this sin. I simply remark that there is no other sin on which God has so visibly stamped his curse, as on that of lewdness. The displeasure of the Almighty against this sin is seen in the haggard countenance, the decrepit frame, and the premature death of many of its votaries. It is seen in the degradation and wretchedness of the female sex—in the mortification and untold agonies of parents and friends—in the horrid and unnatural crimes to which a desire to conceal their shame not unfrequently impels its victims. And yet young men often think lightly and speak lightly of this sin, which,

if generally prevalent, would rob social and domestic life of all its endearments. The relation of husband and wife, of parent and child, of brother and sister, would lose all its charms. All the sacred ties which bind affectionate hearts would be broken, and our public as well as our domestic institutions would be torn into fragments. It is a delusion, an infatuation of the worst kind, which tempts young men to hazard consequences so appalling. Young man, beware of the smile on the lips and the roses on the cheek of the deceiver, sensual pleasure—"Her end is bitter as wormwood; sharper than a two edged sword; her feet go down to death, and her steps take hold on hell."

We might point out other dangers connected with a college life. But enough has been said to show that there is cause of alarm and caution. A single step now taken in a wrong direction may decide your future destiny. That step may at first appear to diverge not far from the path of duty, but it leads farther and farther from the right way, until the young traveller is lost in mazes from which he cannot extricate himself. Some of the dangers which I have pointed out are not peculiar to a college life. Many young men run a short and ignoble course, who have never entered the doors of a college. But when a young man who has had the advantages of a liberal education, returns home indolent in his habits and corrupt in his morals his parents and friends are apt to attribute his ruin to the place of his education. Yet

it may be that if he had remained at home, he would have been as worthless as he has become in his absence from his father's house. The dishonour that will fall on the place of his education, ought to be a motive to every ingenuous student to act in such a way that the cause of education may not suffer through his misconduct.

One reason why some students fail to answer the expectations of their friends is, that at the outset they form an erroneous opinion respecting the relative importance of intellectual and moral improvement. They think that the sole object of education is to cultivate the intellect and to acquire knowledge, forgetting that they have moral as well as intellectual powers, and that their moral nature far excels in dignity and importance their intellectual. Their whole attention is directed to the improvement of the one to the entire neglect of the other. Yet it is as impossible to become a good man without constant vigilance and exertion, as it is to become an intelligent and learned man without laborious study. By neglecting to cultivate moral feelings and virtuous habits, some young men who aim at high intellectual distinction, fail in attaining their object. Sensual appetites and passions get the mastery over them, engross their whole souls, and finally extinguish the desire of mental excellence. And suppose they should not fall into such gross sins as shall benumb and stupify their intellect, what good can they expect to accomplish in the world? They are only preparing themselves to be a curse to all within their influence.

If my young friends, in your present situation there are dangerous snares, which we do not wish to conceal, yet it is a good school, provided you act as you ought, to prepare you to meet the dangers with which you shall have to combat in future life. If you pass through this most critical period, without being caught in the net of the fowler, we shall hope to see you in future life, soaring like the eagle, far above all the low and dirty baits, which allure meaner birds. And what is there to prevent so desirable a result? Some have and some do pass through their College course as pure as when they entered, with their moral principles more established and their virtues more bright. And why may not you, every one of you, do the same? What is wanting to insure your escaping every danger? Nothing, under God, except a firm and fixed resolution that you will do what is right; that you will resist the devil on the first suggestion of what is wrong; that you will make the word of God the rule of your conduct; and that you ask his counsel and pray him to be the guide of your youth. At what higher and nobler object can you aim than to break the chains of low and grovelling appetite and passion, and to advance in purity and virtue until you attain the image of your Father in heaven?

When I look around on this assembly, my heart within me is agitated with hopes and fears difficult to be expressed. I think how many affectionate parents are directing their anxious thoughts to this place, and some of them by day and by night lifting

up their hearts in prayer to God in behalf of their absent sons, beseeching him to deliver them from the dangers to which they are exposed. If these prayers should be heard and answered, and the beloved boy should return home at the close of his College course, pure in his morals, industrious in his habits, and improved in useful and ornamental knowledge, what delight would brighten a father's eye, what joy would swell a mother's bosom! On the other hand, should his parents meet him at the homestead-threshold, bloated with intemperance, decrepit with the effects of licentiousness, as ignorant as when he left home, and unfit for any useful and honourable employment, who can imagine the disappointment, the anguish! The father silent with grief—the mother bathed in tears. Oh! that none of you may ever witness such a scene!

Some of you have no father or mother living to care for you, to warn you of danger, to pray for you. Destitute of the best earthly advisers, you are left during the most perilous period of life solely to your own guidance. The responsibility of choosing your course and of forming your character is left chiefly to yourselves. How great your responsibility, and how vigilant and how careful should you be to avoid the dangers that surround your path!

I look forward; and I see you in a short time all scattered to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, each bearing with him the character and the habits which he has formed here, and exerting an

influence for weal or woe on those around him. Hundreds may hereafter revere and bless your name and memory, or hundreds may curse the day on which they came within the sphere of your influence. It is not too much to hope that some of you shall hereafter hold high and responsible stations in public life. How important that you should now lay a firm and sure foundation on which to build your future eminence!

Our country at this time spreads before you a wide and extensive field, demanding the labours of her most gifted and virtuous sons, to cultivate and to gather in the rich harvest. And is it time for you, who expect to enter this field, to fold your hands, to slumber, and to enervate your bodies and souls in sloth and sensuality? For myself, and in behalf of my colleagues, I will say, we will do what we can to aid you in your studies and to prepare you for the destinies before you; but truth compels me to say that without your co-operation we can do nothing to any good purpose.

In conclusion, let me again remind each of you of your personal responsibility not only to your parents and friends and country, but especially to God. He requires and expects that you will improve the opportunities which you have of cultivating both your intellectual and moral powers, and that you will consecrate all your attainments to his glory. And if these opportunities be neglected, or these attainments be perverted, such is the wise and righteous order of the divine government, that "whatsoever a man soweth that also shall he reap."—"He that soweth the wind, shall reap the whirlwind." Finally, remember that no talent or acquirement, however great, can receive the divine approbation, unless it be sanctified and consecrated to the glory of God and the good of mankind.