

ETHICAL CULTURE.

THE SOCIETY FOR ITS PROMOTION.

DR. FELIX ADLER, HIS ANTECEDENTS, APPEARANCE AND ACQUIREMENTS—CHARACTER OF THE MAN AND HIS LECTURES—PRESENT POSITION OF THE LIBERAL JEWS—PROGRESS AND PROSPERITY OF THE SOCIETY FOR ETHICAL CULTURE.

The Society for Ethical Culture, which has attracted much attention and excited considerable interest of late in this community, is not yet quite two years old. It will be 24 months the coming May since a number of men of different nationalities, including Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Englishmen, and Americans, founded it, having felt, as they say, the need in the City of a permanent and effective organization to support the cause of enlightenment. The sentiments by which they were guided in the formation of such a union were definitely expressed in their preamble. They hold that the integrity and consistency of life, in all of its parts, is its noblest good, and its achievement the supreme duty of human existence. That insincerity, while it is justly condemned in every circumstance, deserves the severest reprobation when permitted to enter the fundamental questions directing the character and determining the moral welfare of man. That the forms of dogmatic belief, as currently taught, have ceased to satisfy the highest needs; that they obstruct the free development of mind and heart, and that to emancipate ourselves from so grievous a thralldom is at once a stern obligation and a privilege. That they recognize in the great truths of man's moral nature the essential safeguard of life, the source of nobleness in effort, of power in action, and of fortitude in affliction. That to further the recognition of these truths in word and deed is a sacred duty which they owe both to themselves and to their fellow-men, and whereby they shall best secure the common happiness, prosperity, and peace. That to insure the moral elevation of the "masses" in particular, with all the great benefits which that includes, they hold to be a lofty aim, and one well calculated to afford true satisfaction to all who behold in the work of progress the fitting accomplishment of human destiny. That it is desirable to transmit to the incoming generation the best convictions of the present unimpaired; to acquaint them in such manner as befits their years and understanding with the principles, aspirations, and consolations of the modern view of life; and thus to train them in the enjoyment of the inestimable benefits of liberty from their youth upward. That for all these purposes the necessity of united action, in which alone lies the pledge or extended usefulness, permanency, and strength, is self-evident. Any person of either sex may become a member of the society upon the approval of three-fourths of the Trustees present at a regular meeting of the board, at which the name of the candidate shall be presented and baloted for. No subscription or assent to any formula of faith, belief, or creed shall be required as a qualification for membership.

The Trustees, consisting of 15 members, shall look after and manage the affairs, financial, temporal, and social, of the organization, and shall be elected for one year. The first board consisted of Joseph Seligman, Albert A. Levi, Henry Friedman, Edward Lauterbach, William Byfield, Joseph Seidenberg, Max Abenheim, Max Landman, Emil Salinger, Meyer Jonasson, Jacob Stollheimer, Jr., Samuel V. Spoyer, Samuel A. Solomon, Julius Rosenbaum, and Marcus Goldman. It was entirely re-elected last year, we believe, and at present serves.

A lecturer (or lecturers) is chosen by the society, such lecturer being ex officio a member of the Board of Trustees. He delivers a lecture each week, in which the principles of ethics are developed and advanced among adults, and in part by the establishment of a school or schools wherein a course of moral instruction is supplied.

The lecturer who has been lecturing for some time past each Sunday morning for 8 months out of the 12, at Standard Hall, is Felix Adler, late Professor of Hebrew Literature and Oriental Languages at Cornell University. He lectured to a body of Liberal Jews, or Reformed Judaists, by whom the Society for Ethical Culture was originally formed, before its foundation, coming to the City from Ithaca on Saturday, and returning Sunday evening in time to discharge his professional duties. The chair he occupied had been endowed for three years by a number of wealthy liberal-minded men, who, at the expiration of the term, offered to re-endow it, provided Adler should fill it. The Professor, although he had secured the highest esteem of the Trustees for his personal worth and personal character, and their sincere admiration for his learning and talents, had proved too liberal in his religious views to meet what they conceived to be the spiritual requirements of an orthodox establishment. His lectures here had attracted attention, and unfolded rationalistic views, so that they were unwilling he should continue his connection with the University. They did not say so, however. They veiled their real sentiments by the assumption that they could not accept an endowment of a chair without naming the Professor who was to occupy it. Adler's friends, therefore, withdrew their generous offer, and he retired from the institution, which to this day remains without the Professorship of Hebrew Literature and Oriental Languages.

The endowment would probably have been tendered to Harvard University, and he would probably have occupied the same chair there as at Cornell, had he not, meanwhile, been urgently invited to be the regular lecturer before the Society for Ethical Culture, which had just been founded. Such position, though less remunerative in a pecuniary sense, and far more laborious, was in the direct line of his desires and aspirations, as well as of his intellectual equipment. Consequently, he accepted it as a solemn and conscientious trust, for upon him devolves more, especially the intellectual concerns of the society, and to him belongs the powers generally exercised by ministers of theological denominations.

Prof. Adler is a native of this City, son of Dr. Samuel Adler, a Jewish Rabbi of the more liberal persuasion—a German, long resident here, and noted for his profound learning and exalted character. The son was educated at the University of Berlin, having been for some time under the private instruction of the late Dr. Geiger, renowned throughout Europe for his mental force and ripe scholarship. He obtained at Berlin the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and, though but 28, has shown an intellect of the highest order, and distinguished himself by his erudition and the variety of his attainments.

He is of medium stature, rather slight, but of symmetrical figure, and faultlessly, even fastidiously neat in person and attire. His face is calm, mobile, full of intelligence, indicative of a very nervous, sensitive, imaginative, idealistic temperament. He has a somewhat prominent nose, a broad, well-shaped, idea-suggesting forehead, a delicate complexion, a sensitive, pleasant mouth, blue eyes, brown hair, mustache and whiskers, the last darker than his hair. His appearance and manner evince the thinker and the scholar, and his outgiving is one of great modesty, even of shyness, despite earnest convictions, great moral courage and elevated and inflexible purpose.

Dr. Adler, like most of the original members of his society, belongs or, more properly, belonged, to the Reformed Judaists, who, as he says, arose in Germany, and whose leading members have invariably been Germans. He and his people regard Moses Mendelssohn as the deliverer of the Jews from much of their narrowness, many of their ancient traditions, and time-honored prejudices, and thus Mendelssohn became the author, in the widest acceptance, of the reformatory movement. The Jews, according to Adler, have ceased to be a national unit, and will exist hereafter as a confederation of religious societies. The present condition of Liberal Judaism is nearly related to that of Liberal Christianity. The old is dead; the new has not been born. Such changes as have occurred in the constitution of the Jewish religion have not brought them in any wise nearer to Christianity. On the contrary, since the belief in a personal Messiah has been surrendered, the hope of their conversion has become more vague and visionary than ever. Those whom the worship of the synagogue and the temple no longer attracts either become wholly skeptical and indifferent, or, as is often the case, transfer their allegiance to the new humanitarian doctrine, which is fast assuming the character of a religion in its ardor it inspires and the strong spiritual union it cements. For the great body of the Jews, however, the central doctrine of Judaism remains unshaken, and doubtless so long as Christianity exists, Judaism as a distinct creed will coexist with it. As a religious society, they desire to remain distinct. But as citizens they are eager to remove whatever distinctions still hamper their intercourse with their neighbors of other creeds.

Latterly many persons have joined the society who are not Jews, who would ordinarily be ranked as Christians, although they are not such in a theological sense, because they are not believers in any Church, creed, or dogma. They are firm adherents and vindicators of the religion of humanity, their faith being confined to practical plans and effort in its behalf. The membership, which is steadily increasing, now numbers 700 or 800, and represents as many nationalities and differences of opinion on general subjects as any organization in the City.

Adler has proposed divers plans for bettering the condition of the working classes, such as colonization, apprenticeship, and co-operation, all of which are sensible and practical. He wholly discourages appeals to passion and prejudice, strikes and trade unions, which invariably do more harm than good. His measures are of a kind to enkindle hope and inculcate patience. Though the reverse of an alarmist, he sees danger in the present condition of things—in the concentration and glut of laborers in the cities, the hostile feeling between labor and capital, the lack of intelligence on one hand and the want of sympathy on the other, the absence of recognition of the humanity and manhood of the toiling millions. He is opposed to the giving of money without an equivalent. This leads to pauperism, and pauperism is the worst form of destitution, since it destroys dignity and the spirit of independence and self-respect. The laboring classes, to be truly and permanently benefited, must feel and see that the more fortunate and prosperous have their interest at heart, and are willing to help them to help themselves. They have the right to live, meaning the right to work, the right to cleanliness, and the right to be private and virtuous, which, in the crowded and poisonous tenement-houses of the City, they can never enjoy. Material reforms must come before moral reforms can be established. It is idle to talk of good conduct, self-restraint, regard for law and order until men are enabled to live decently and stand fairly and becomingly before their fellows.

The society established, Jan. 2, a free kindergarden at the National Assembly Rooms.

West Forty-fourth-street, between Eighth and Ninth avenues, for the benefit of children from 3 to 6 years of age, whose parents' means do not permit them to spend money for their education. Children who, too young to be left alone, require the constant attention and care of their mothers, are received at the kindergarden, and their mothers, thus relieved, can earn money for their support. The school began with six, and now has near 70 children, who illustrate the excellence of the system.

What may be called a direct result of the society and of Dr. Adler's teachings and endeavors, is the foundation of a working men's lyceum, with the avowed intent to help themselves. It has no political object or significance, no spirit of, or sympathy with, trades unions. Its aim is to so educate the laborer that he may understand his best interest, and to enlighten public opinion on the mutual and interdependent relations between him and society. There are now some 80 members, men of intelligence and character, who meet Saturday, fortnightly, in the Bond-Street Bank building, corner of Bond-street and the Bowery. They have collected some 600 volumes, and it is remarkable that they read the best of them, histories, philosophies, and works of science being the most sought. They hope ere long to secure able lecturers, who shall express their views on political economy and on such topics as immediately concern their welfare. One of their projects is the foundation, ultimately, of a Mechanics' Institute, differing from the Cooper Union and like institutions in this, that it shall be under the direction of, and be entirely administered by, the working men themselves.