

CHAPTER 34 - A Question and an Answer

In "A Question and an Answer," the author responds to an intriguing query from an admirer about the necessities for social success. The admirer's note stands out among the author's usual stack of morning correspondence, sparking his determination to address this complex question. He acknowledges the perplexing nature of social ascendancy—how certain individuals with seemingly lesser qualities triumph in society's eyes, while others, ostensibly more deserving, lag behind.

The author delves into societal dynamics, suggesting that while society is capable of appreciating intelligence and talent, social favorites often lack these very qualities. He posits that the pursuit of being loved and respected, aligning well in societal perspectives, ranks as a legitimate ambition driving much of human effort. This pursuit can stem from pure intentions, such as a breadwinner aiming for a better life for their family, demonstrating that seeking social elevation isn't always a selfish endeavor.

Furthermore, the author reflects on the ingrained notion of success within society. From childhood, individuals are conditioned to aim for success, engraining a societal standard that equates worth with achievement. This culture of success, he argues, sets the stage for the high value placed on social standing, suggesting that social success becomes a tangible, desirable achievement especially in environments like the United States where societal mobility appears more accessible.

Returning to the matter of achieving social success, the author likens the process to Darwin's theory of "natural selection." In societal contexts, certain individuals are naturally attuned to thrive in social settings, embodying characteristics that make them socially appealing and capable of navigating the intricate dynamics of social circles. Success in social realms, as in nature, results from a mix of natural inclination and relentless effort—where individuals dedicate themselves to their social ambitions, undistracted by other pursuits.

In essence, the chapter posits that social success is not predicated on intelligence, attractiveness, or manners alone, but rather on a combination of natural predisposition towards social life and a dedicated pursuit of social ambitions. The author suggests that just as in nature, society undergoes a form of selection, elevating those who are most committed to and capable of flourishing within its bounds.