CHAPTER XXIII.

Raising the Poor to a Condition of Ease and Culture—Are the Results we Aim at Chimerical?

3. THAT the task of raising the poorer classes throughout the world to a condition of ease and culture is a hopeless one, we strenuously deny. That it may be a difficult one—a tedious one—that it can only be achieved slowly, gradually, partially, and with more or less of completeness—yes. But that it is hopeless none will believe who will take the trouble to trace the course of the future by the bearings of the past, and who have faith that progress will lead us somewhere, instead of nowhere. To state it broadly, the dead wall that stands between the rude peasant and the finished gentleman is poverty with its disabilities. Remove but that, and there will potentially reside in the one all the elements and capabilities of culture possessed by the other. Nature distributes her favours of congenital strength, symmetry and beauty, both of body and mind, on quite different lines from those on which society is distributed into classes, and the average infant of the poor is not inferior to the average infant of the rich of the same race.

What the respective destinies of these infants may be in regard to future happiness, education and sufficiency of means will doubtless decide. Not that the education need be more than sound for the poor child, while it may be brilliant for the rich; or that the sufficiency of means need be more than a negation of poverty for the former, while it is affluence for the latter. The man who has enough is, in essentials, as well off as the man who has more than enough. Shakespeare is still Shakespeare whether he be read from a cheap copy or from a gorgeously bound edition. Life is rendered only a little more enjoyable by great wealth, while it is made barely endurable by excessive poverty. Of the two extremes of superfluity and destitution, the latter far more depresses man than the former raises him. To eliminate the latter is therefore a far more important object than to promote the former. A household, earning a sufficiency for physical comfort and for mental improvement, is placed under conditions highly favourable to the attainment of the utmost amount of human felicity.

It has been alleged that a rise in the rate of wages generally leads the recipients either to increased intemperance or to increased idleness. This is only true in exceptional cases; for instance, when the rise has been great and sudden, not gradual and enduring, or when it has occurred among the poorest and most ignorant of the labour-sellers; and even then only for a time, until the excitement and novelty had worn off. The general and permanent effect of steadily high wages has been in every way most salutary. Emancipation from the miserable shifts and temptations of hopeless and abject poverty generates in the man a feeling of self-respect, whence there spring in due time, the habit of self-command, the wish to advance in the social scale, and, as a consequence,

the desire for mental improvement. As a rule, it is the higher-paid artisans who swell the amount annually invested in savings-banks and thus become capitalists; they are the men who frequent reading-rooms and lectures, and whom books and newspapers are educating to the proper exercise of the voting power. Compare the badly-paid English working man of two generations ago with the better-paid working man of the present day, and we shall find that in education, manners, temperance, and thrift, the latter is immeasurably superior.

Why should not the same process be continued with the same effect? The vast and compact mass of poverty and ignorance existing throughout the world may, at first sight, seem too huge and dense to be broken up by the advance of civilisation and progress, but it must be remembered that every individual who may be rescued and detached from it forms a step towards its disintegration. There is so much less left to be done, and as our attacks make larger breaches, so will the resistance to them become feebler.

One of the mainsprings to human effort is emulation—the desire to excel. Wherever it is not either latent or obliterated, it exerts a mighty influence over the intensity of man's efforts, whether directed to the highest or the lowest objects. It is a force which exists for good or for evil, according to the purpose for which it is used. So powerful a lever should carefully be pressed into the service of the right and the true. "Onwards and upwards' is the motto of the poet who spiritualises life; of the painter who idealises nature; of the musician

who fashions sounds into lovely shapes and meanings; and of the orator who brands his words into the minds of his hearers. Each strives to do his best and his uttermost. And it is a similar craving for success which gives life and animation to the very lowest forms of competition. It inspires the jockeys, the pugilists, the athletes, down to the drunken miner who trains his bull-pup "to fight and to conquer" other dogs. All these, equally with the poet and orator, strain every nerve to triumph in their respective ways.

"How different the aims!" will you say? Very true, but you must nevertheless recognise the force and energy with which, in each case, the mainspring, emulation, manifests its influence. As it exists in all human hearts, so our business should be to turn it to the best account and give it the right tendencies. The diversity of aims is the outcome of the diversity of education and surroundings. These man's action can shape and modify, and therefore it is in his power to give a proper direction to those energies which, in some direction or the other, will ever result from the impetus of emulation.

4. That in our enumeration of the means by which the masses may be raised in the scale of being we have omitted the powerful leverage of religious influence we admit, and we justify the omission. In a mere economic work like this, such a consideration would be out of place. It is with man as a human being, and not with man as a spiritual being, that we have here to do. Our task is to work out man's material—and through it his

mental and moral—well-being, by means of the natural and mundane elements at our disposal. Moreover, our subject is cosmopolitan; we are addressing men, not of one, but of all religions. On which form of belief could our appeal to the religious element in man be grounded, without its being distasteful or, at least, unacceptable to the rest? It is on the undisputable data which human experience furnishes, and not on the disputed data which theology puts forward, that economic science must rely for its progress. The modes of action which have been urged, have no special connection with, nor do they offer the smallest opposition to, any of the four or five great divisions into which the religious belief of the world has grouped itself.

5. That our scheme is Utopian, and that the results at which we aim are chimerical, are objections to which we have already incidentally adverted. But we must be allowed a few more words on the subject, since we anticipate that this form of argument will again and again be addressed to us. "Utopian and chimerical!" say you? Well! we accept the omen. Those are the very words which have invariably been applied to large schemes on the eve of their practical accomplishment. Those were the very words used by the learned Dr. Lardner when he pooh-poohed the idea of a steam-vessel ever crossing the Atlantic; the very words used by consummate European politicians when apprised of the intention of General Washington, Mr. B. Franklin, and a few other private individuals, to organise the British colonists of North America into an independent federal republic; the very words

used by the experienced Post Office functionaries when consulted on Rowland Hill's scheme of penny postage; the very words used by eminent English engineers and statesmen in reference to the Suez Canal, projected by that energetic performer of impossibilities, Ferdinand de Lesseps; in short, the very words which always foreshadow the advent of some important practical improvement, which they are intended to denounce and deride, but which they rarely succeed even in delaying. They really convey no argument, but are the mere ejaculations of startled routine-lovers, and have been so often misapplied, that they have lost all force and significance.

Those who use the cry of which we have just disposed, are actuated by a variety of divergent and even conflicting fallacies. These we may briefly summarise as follows:—Ignorance of the truth, whence belief in the error; indifference to the truth, whence tolerance of the error; selfish interest in the error, whence aversion to the truth; disbelief as to any remedy, whence meek acceptance of the evil; fear of future disturbance, whence submission to present wrong; unreasoning dread of all change, whence unreasonable antagonism to all improvement.

On the whole, all these obstructions to the right current of thought resolve themselves into a desponding view of the future of the human race. They amount to this, that whatever has hitherto been the rule must ever continue to be the rule. History, so runs their argument, tells us that men have always been at overt, or covert, war with each

other, therefore war is natural to man; that every country has always been adverse to buying from other countries (though willing enough to sell to them, as if one were possible without the other), therefore commercial isolation is natural to man; that among all nations the great bulk of the population has always been steeped in poverty and ignorance, therefore poverty and ignorance are natural to the bulk of mankind, and so on. They then proceed to argue that as the evils referred to are within the very conditions of man's nature, and as it is impossible to change man's nature, it is impossible for men to exist without wars, without hostile tariffs, without poverty, and without ignorance.

All this would be very discouraging, were it not, fortunately, quite illogical. It does not at all follow because no remedy has hitherto been found for certain evils, that those evils are irremediable. Scientific discoveries, each of which supplied some deficiency, or remedied some evil, till then deemed inseparable from human weakness, have been, since the thirteenth century, strewed along the path of Time as thickly as stars to our vision along the milky way. Let us take one of the earliest, and one of the latest instances. In the olden time, it was very inconvenient to steer vessels at night by the stars, often obscured by cloud or fog; but it was deemed irremediable, since it was the result of nature's laws. Nevertheless, the remedy came in the shape of the mariner's compass. Till quite recently, a man could not converse with a friend a few miles off without personal access to him — an inconvenience which was deemed irremediable, since it

was the result of nature's laws. Nevertheless, a remedy came in the shape of the telephone. Of intermediate instances, the list is innumerable. Who then dare come forward and assert that all those evils are irremediable which have not yet been remedied? Or, worse still, to pronounce it chimerical even to seek to remedy those evils, because they are, from their very nature, irremediable. It is moral cowardice, as well as bad logic, to believe so readily in the invincibility of evil.

If the evils which at present attend our social condition be so inherent to it as to be inseparable from it, whither are our boasted civilisation and our restless advance in physical science bearing us? Is their result to be merely to deepen the grooves in which society at present runs without altering their direction? Will their effect be only to make wars more destructive, to render national jealousies more bitter, and to heighten the painful contrasts which already exist between the splendour of wealth and the squalor of poverty? If that be all that civilisation and science are competent to effect for us, then well may we despair of the future of humanity. If the evils of which we complain are so ingrained in man's nature, and so beyond all cure, that even to seek for a cure is Utopian, then why strive further? Why worry ourselves with useless efforts? Let us sit down, fold our hands, and meekly moralise over the evils which, as we are told, we cannot prevent.

As for ourselves, we earnestly repudiate this doctrine of despondency. We firmly believe that civilisation and science have a far higher mission

than is assigned to them by that doctrine. We believe that their agency will largely promote the creation of wealth, will equalise its distribution, and will thus conduce to the physical and moral well-being of a larger and larger circle of human beings, ever increasing, till the great majority, if not the totality, of mankind shall be embraced within it. As the causes which retard this consummation are gradually removed, there is no reason why it should not finally become of universal application. A noble task! to which we believe civilisation and the progress of science to be fully competent, and we look to them trustfully for its completion.

It may be said that, granting the possibility of accomplishing the ends which we have in view, the means which we have suggested are not those best adapted for the purpose. It may be so. We have recommended those measures which, according to our lights, have appeared to us the fittest. But if other means, more conducive to the desired end, be proposed, we shall hail them with delight and eagerly adopt them in lieu of our own. All that we contend for, and strenuously insist on, is that the baneful causes to which we have referred, as obstructing man's advance in material and moral well-being, have not, as despondent sceptics maintain, their source in man's very nature, are not inextricably interwoven into his destiny, but are remediable and removable at man's will.

Let us, however, suppose that the full and complete attainment of all the objects which we have in view be morally impossible, that is no argument against using our best endeavours to move steadily

forward in the right direction, so as to attain as many of those objects as possible, as soon as possible, and as completely as possible. This is not a case of all or nothing. Every single step we take in the way of reform is accompanied by some corresponding improvement in the condition of humanity. We have never expected, or held out the expectation, that the reforms which we have advocated would or could be adopted all at once, or everywhere at once. But we are quite sure that as these reforms, or some of them, or instalments of some of them, shall be in process of adoption, the effect of such partial progress will be to facilitate and hasten the adoption of the rest. Every single impulse given to, every single obstacle removed from, the creation of wealth; every item of waste that is avoided (whether of the power to produce, or of the wealth produced); every single human being redeemed from ignorance and poverty; each of these is a step in advance, not only beneficial in itself, but preparing the way for a further advance.

It is not a fair representation of our argument to exclaim, "Here is a visionary who thinks that if we abolish war, establish free trade, educate the common people, and adopt a few other similar measures, we shall forthwith create an Elysium on earth." Our pretensions are far more modest. We simply look for a large alleviation of the present amount of human suffering through processes which will only be adopted slowly and after many struggles. We may not be able to make earth an Elysium, but we may prevent its being made a hell. It is true that the wealth necessary to man's

well-being will not grow spontaneously, and must ever necessitate man's labour both of body and mind. But for that very reason, it is deplorable that war, which creates a large number of unproductive consumers, Protection which creates a far larger number of only half-productive producers, and ignorance which keeps the bulk of mankind toiling in a faint-hearted manner on unremunerative work with semi-starvation as the result, should enormously curtail and stunt the production, and consequently the distribution of wealth.

As things now are, to take the world at large, the human race do not produce probably one hundredth part of what they might produce if their labour were properly and intelligently applied. Do away with the agencies that interfere with abundant production, and a largely multiplied amount of wealth will of necessity be created. What will be done with this surplus production? It must either be destroyed or consumed. If to be consumed, it must be distributed, as the lesser amount now created is distributed; but with this essential difference, that in the latter case many people run short, whereas in the former case there would, from the abundance of production, be plenty for all. This result may not be Elysium, but none will deny that it would be a vast improvement on the prevailing extremes of plethoric opulence and grim want.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Expansibility of Man's Productive Power—The Interests Advocated are not National, but Universal—Conclusion.

IN presenting wealth-creation as the great material desideratum necessary to produce a great moral improvement, we have only followed the natural order in which the moral is developed in man out of the physical. The *corpus sanum* is, as a rule, the best guarantee for the *mens sana*. An ill-balanced or unhealthy brain can hardly secrete a high order of thought. Even the soundest and most capacious brain becomes useless for good, and is often deflected to evil, under the influence, ere it is fully matured, of abject poverty or evil surroundings. There can be no mental development without a certain amount of ease, education, and leisure, which abundant wealth-creation alone can confer on the many. Of those men who can boast of a classical education, of cultured minds, of social, literary, or political success, how very few there are who do not owe their advantages to inherited competence? Surely it is not for these to disparage the laborious pursuit and hard-earned acquisition of that wealth which has bestowed on them such privileges.

But even among professed political economists we occasionally find men to whom "material interests" are objects of scorn—with whom gold is dross, and money-making contamination. For instance, Louis Reybaud, in his "Economistes Modernes," talking of the advocates for peace,