

The Bible Christian.

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POPULAR POWER AND ITS PROPER GUIDANCE.

[A DISCOURSE PREACHED IN THE UNITARIAN CHURCH ON SUNDAY THE 16TH INSTANT.]

"Behold the people shall rise up as a great lion."
—Numbers xxiii. 24.

It has been said that "the proper study of mankind is man." Undoubtedly this is so; for such a study will lead mankind to a knowledge of themselves, which is to them the most important of all knowledge. To study man in his vast, and complicated, and momentous relations, is a task of surpassing interest. The human being, living and breathing, furnished with a rational soul, invested with tremendous powers for good or evil, willing and acting, now in silence and alone before his God, and now in the busy presence of his fellow-men, shaping his course, forming his character, and diffusing his influence, is an object most worthy of all attention. Viewed in his social capacity—linked with others by the ties of common necessities, hopes, fears, and enjoyments—he presents a spectacle to the contemplative mind, than which nothing can be more imposing and absorbing.

Human society—what a complex and wonderful structure it is! What a variety of elements enter into it! How strange and curious are their action and counter-action! How various the interests involved, and how powerful the passions called into operation! Gradually expanding itself from a simple type, it has now become a most complicated organization. In the patriarchal times, the head of the household was at once the prophet, priest, and king. His family of wives, children, and servants regarded him with veneration. To augment his store, they toiled, and derived pleasure from the increase of his flocks and herds. With a careful and paternal eye he overlooked the whole, and felt a lively interest in the welfare of all. In another stage of society, the distinctive families became merged into tribes, and then again tribes became merged into nations. On the abandonment of the patriarchal state, a way was opened for strife and rivalry for domination. The stronger men gradually rose above the weaker ones, and the strongest man found his way to supreme power. This is the natural order of things. Amongst a rude and barbarous people, where physical force was the highest law, he who possessed the most daring heart and the most stalwart arm, speedily became chief. Amongst a people of more advanced condition, disposed to give some practical respect to moral force, he who was sage in counsel, prompt in action, qualified to controul and direct the body social—he by degrees found his way upward. And all this by virtue of a natural law. For as certainly as the lighter body rises to the surface of the weightier element, so surely will the more forcible men gain an ascendancy over the less forcible.

But the natural order of things was not suffered to take its course. It has always been the mistake of mankind that they interfered too much with this, not only in relation to society, but in almost every other circumstance connected with human life. Even their own bodies they have swathed unnaturally. They have eaten unnatural food, and drunk unnatural drink. In the social institutions which they have formed, they have laboured to construct false foundations for social supremacy. Something else beside inherent forcibleness of character, springing from proper physical, mental, and moral causes—something else beside this has been made the ground and basis of social elevation. A fictitious importance has been given to the accident of birth, to the possession of wealth, and some such things. And the consequence has been, and still is, that multitudes of persons from the mere circumstance of being fortunately born, secure a certain eminence in society, and certain social privileges, who, had they been left to abide the proper result of nature's law, would have silently sunk

into the common crowd of "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Whilst, on the other hand, multitudes of other persons, who really possess some force of character, find themselves so hemmed in and cramped by the false arrangements of society, that they can never rise out of the dimness of comparative obscurity.

We do not mean to insinuate here that the proper happiness of the individual depends upon his enjoyment of social eminence and distinction. Far, indeed, from it. We believe there is more real felicity among the humbler classes of society, than among the more exalted. What we mean to assert simply is, that each person will be most happy himself, and most useful to others, in that position to which his natural tendencies direct him, and in which his natural capacities have the freest scope for exercise. The endowments of heaven should be permitted full play without let or hindrance from the false and intricate arrangements of man. To whatever extent the interference of these is sensibly felt, to that extent will discontent be generated, and the seed sown which will one day or other bring forth disastrous fruit.

A great many of the false arrangements which originated in a less advanced condition of society still linger in it, and constitute what might be fitly enough styled a chronic disease of the general body. There are certain great primary wants of nature which must be satisfied else society could not exist for a week. Men must eat and drink, else they could not live, nor sustain any form of social organization.—The first necessities of life, food and clothing, come by the labour of the hands. Somebody, therefore, must work. Then there is a great variety of other conveniences, which habit has converted into necessities, and to procure these requires, likewise, a large amount of attention and labour. In consequence of all this, a large proportion of mankind must still be engaged in actual, and absolutely necessary, work. Then there is still another proportion—a small one to be sure—who do not work and cannot work—weak persons, wanting energy either of mind or body, or both. These are paupers, and are either lodged in workhouses, or permitted to go abroad in idle and miserable freedom.—And there is another proportion still, who do not work either with mind or body—who think themselves privileged at once to idleness and social eminence. All these are pressed together into one vast community, and come into contact at almost every turn. Where there is a great disproportionateness of social privilege and condition without any proper or reasonable ground being evident for it, there can never be entire social security, but rather in most cases where knowledge has made any progress, a vast degree of danger. Men, as soon as they receive any light, will begin to compare the conditions, and question why and wherefore these things should be so. If satisfactory answers cannot be had, the seeds of discontent commence to germinate. If the privileged classes, born to social eminence and superior sway, neglect the dictates of justice, and remain blind to the humanity of the masses—that is if they remain blind to the fact that they are men with human ideas and human feelings—they commit a capital mistake. The prince and the pauper are brothers of a race. As men they are subjects of like passions. Reflect upon the masses of society, then,—consider the human thoughts and passions which lie pent up there, and you will perceive that a tremendous force remains lodged in them. An individual may be powerful, and by virtue of his personal power raise himself to the very summit of the social scale. A class may be powerful, and by virtue of its power exercise a most extensive social influence. But most powerful of all, are the great masses of society. And though their power be not put openly forth, it is latent. It is in them, like the strength of the lion as he slumbers, or lies indolently in his lair. And when touched and aroused by any sense of wrong—real or supposed—they can rise like a lion and put it forth. In such a case, as the text saith, "the people shall rise up as a great lion."

Intelligence of a most remarkable and exciting character has recently reached us from the other side of the Atlantic. Revolutions and rumours of revolutions—evidences of

deep and wide-spread discontent amongst the masses of many of the countries of Europe—tidings of these daily reach us. No thoughtful mind can regard such intelligence otherwise than with deep interest. No religious mind can think lightly of these manifestations of God's providence. They will form an important chapter in the world's history, and this is but the history of the ways of God in relation to the human race. For no event takes place without his knowledge and permission—not even the falling of a sparrow to the ground, or that of a hair from our heads.

One revolution—one thorough revolution—has been effected. One of the leading countries of the civilized world has made its monarch a fugitive. It has entirely remodelled its form of government, and proposes to effect most important alterations in the organization of society. Other nations have manifested a kindred spirit, and seem involved in trouble and tumult. The social and political aspects of many of the European countries are anything but permanent at the present time. Perhaps there never was a period when the symptoms of change were so generally manifest. It forms no part of our design now to offer any opinion on the precise character of those changes which have taken place, or which may yet possibly take place, as the result of the present movements. We propose to direct attention rather to the power, by the instrumentality of which such changes are effected, and to some considerations relative to that power, with respect more particularly to its proper guidance and direction.

It was the people of France who dethroned their King, and sent him to seek an asylum in a foreign land. It is the people of Prussia, and Bavaria, and Austria, and Lombardy, and Sicily, and elsewhere, who occupy a threatening attitude before their rulers, demanding concessions. They have risen "as a great lion," and the princes flee, or quail before their power. The power, then, by which such changes are effected comes from popular opinion and popular energy. It is the power of the people.

Now this is a matter which closely concerns us all. The people we have always with us in every nation, and in every nation they possess the same essential characteristics. In every nation a latent power lies in the masses which may one day burst forth for great good, or for tremendous evil. How shall we avoid the latter result? Only by one method—only by giving the power which lies in the people a wise and enlightened direction. The people must be educated; they must be educated on wise and enlightened principles; they must be taught a knowledge of themselves—of their own nature—of their duties—of their rights and responsibilities as men, as citizens, and as Christians.

We may safely say that it is one of the most hopeful signs of the times, that the importance of educating the people is becoming every day more generally recognized. There was a time, and that not very long ago, when a class of persons—and an influential class, too—had no hesitation in asserting and maintaining that it was dangerous to impart knowledge to the masses. But such a doctrine had its foundation in a false view of self-interest, not in eternal truth, and it could not stand. As the world advances, all men obtain clearer and truer views of things, and it is now seen that the best security for the social fabric is to be found in the enlightenment, not in the ignorance of the people.

The people, we say, should be educated as mental, moral, and religious beings. To commence this aright, we must, in the first place, be thoroughly convinced of the intrinsic worth of human nature. We must be enabled so far to overcome common prejudices as to perceive in the person of the humblest man something of higher consideration than the whole material universe. We must be thoroughly persuaded of the great religious idea that nothing else which the world presents to our view can equal or approach, in value, a human soul. The poorest child that wanders neglected through our streets, though he be sent by starving parents to beg an alms,

or by depraved parents to pick our pockets, has nevertheless an immortal germ within him, which, if wisely and religiously trained, will connect him by an everlasting bond with the truly great, both of heaven and earth, and elevate him to a spiritual union with God himself. If we are possessed of these persuasions of the exalted worth of humanity—of the character of its capacities, and the nature of its destiny—we shall be enabled to commence the work of popular education in the right spirit and at the right place. In the efforts generally made to promote the education of the people, the view taken has not been sufficiently extended—the aim not sufficiently high. Governments in general have provided but poorly for it. Its importance has been recognized, to be sure, and perhaps been loudly talked of; but the place it has occupied on the list of estimates, has always been low enough. Compare the amount of money which has been voted for the maintenance of armies, and navies, and forts, and arsenals, with that which has been given for the education of the people, and you will perceive what a mournful contrast that comparison presents. Men have hitherto sought to rule the world, and control and regulate its destinies by wrong methods, and a most costly and destructive experiment it has been. They have sought to mould its forms, and to shape its courses, by physical force outwardly exercised, instead of by the influence of moral power inwardly nurtured and respected. God never intended that human society, with its vast and varied moral elements, should be shaped into its proper form like a mere material lump, by some outward force or pressure brought upon it. It is not to be pressed into shape like a cheese, nor struck into form in a die, and thrown out perfect like a coin from the mint. No. Human society, like the individual, is destined to grow from within. The rational and moral elements which enter into it are to be gradually developed. These are to be unfolded, as the natural powers of a plant are unfolded, by virtue of an inherent force lodged by God there. Had this been always properly understood, and had the ten thousandth part of the money and exertions been devoted to the peaceful work of educating the great masses of the people, which have been expended on warlike preparations and enterprises, the world would now present an entirely different aspect. Instead of wars and rumours of wars,—instead of revolutions and rumours of revolutions,—placing life and property in jeopardy, the progress of the race would be peaceful and harmonious, tempered and modified at every advancing stage by the happy influences of an increasing Christian love.

To educate the people properly it is not sufficient merely to teach them to read and write and cast up accounts. They should be instructed in a knowledge of their own nature—in a knowledge of outward nature—in a knowledge of God. To know themselves—their character and capacities—the relations in which they stand to every thing else—this is the first, the fundamental knowledge. When all come properly to understand the worth of the individual man, and his natural and inalienable rights, then shall we have those rights respected. To have this accomplished would be a step of very great importance. For let us consider a moment to what distracting consequences a neglect of those rights has led. Some of the most mournful pages of history are those which record the suffering of men on account of their conscientious opinions. Now if men had been properly instructed concerning their own nature they would have known that diversity of opinion was to be expected—that uniformity was not to be looked for in this respect any more than uniformity of countenance. And had they known this they would have been prepared for it, and permitted it to take its course unmolested. Men would not have quarrelled on account of difference of opinion. But each would have allowed the other to enjoy and confess his own, not only without let or hindrance, but with perfect good will.

If men were properly instructed concerning their own capacities for mental and moral