

THE WICKEDNESS OF POVERTY.

It is wicked to be poor. Of course this is only a work-day sentiment. We have something better for Sundays. In church we avouch the blessedness of poverty, and accept with fervour all the fine things that can be said about it. But then that is poverty in the abstract. Picturesque poverty—long-ago poverty mellowed and tempered with the halo that ages of faith have cast around it—is the sort of thing we associate with beatitudes. That is a very different thing to the actual poverty of the day—the sordid, loud, clamorous, and altogether unlovely poverty that forms the dry-rot of the community, which would be so sound and wholesome without it. And if on Sunday—when it does not intrude itself in church, but hides away far from us its infectious loathsomeness—we half admit that real poverty may be cousin-german to Scriptural poverty, that impression does not survive Monday morning. The dawn of that practical day is quite enough to dissipate any sentimental notions, and then we admit—or at least act in a manner which is an admission—that the rich are the salt of the earth, that to “get on” is the true Kingdom of Heaven, and that it is wicked to be poor.

There is so little credit in blinking the true state of the case, that I have no hesitation in putting it thus frankly. In fact it is better to do so, because we put ourselves in a ridiculous position by claiming credit for our Sunday sentiment and acting on our work-day one. In our heart of hearts we all know and on week-days all admit, that poverty is a curse. We have, now even, a misgiving, amounting to an unexpressed conviction, that the poor—certainly the very poor—must have done something to bring this curse upon them. It is hard to believe that poor wretches who have hardly bread to eat, and do not know where to lay their heads from night to night, are as virtuous and exemplary as “carriage people” who wear purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day. We readily accept the surroundings of the wealthy as indications that they deserve well of Providence, and have been treated accordingly. On the other hand, it is so hard, so very hard, to believe in undeserved misfortune and sheer ill-luck; and so we come to feel indignant with people for being poor, since, as we think, they could have helped it if they liked, just as people can help being wicked in other and less offensive ways.

It is perhaps a little odd that people should like to be poor; but “we can’t go into that.” There they are, in hundreds and thousands, all over the land, and very troublesome and annoying they make themselves. And that it is wicked to be troublesome and annoying, no person of well-regulated mind can doubt. These wicked people may be divided into two classes—those who contrive to eke out a bare existence through their own efforts and the assistance of friends, and those who have gone over the edge and dropped plump into the abyss of pauperism. Among the former there are degrees of wickedness. They are not all equally bad. Among the latter of course there are hardly discernible shades of difference. To be a pauper is to have reached the lowest depths of turpitude, and to have to be treated accordingly.

Opinions differ as to the measure of criminality which attaches to being a poor relation. It is undoubtedly very wrong. On that point no one who has poor relations ever entertains a doubt. Even Charles Lamb, who wrote an essay on him, could not, with all his kindness of heart, help letting us see how hideous an object he is. He calls him a “a frog in your chamber, a fly in your ointment, a mote in your eye—the one thing not needful.” The female variety he regarded with especial disfavour. You may pass the male relation off as “a character” who dresses meanly and affects poverty; but “in the indications of female poverty there can be no disguise. No woman dresses below herself from caprice.” Hence her garb, which is a compromise between a gentlewoman and a beggar, inevitably betrays her—and you—to the scorn and contempt of friends, and here again a tendency to poverty is most reprehensible.

Poverty is the bane of true friendship. That quality which has become so much maligned as a sham and a fraud owes half its ill-fame to those who abuse it by becoming poor. How frank, open, and unrestrained is the intercourse between friends of equal means! But how can friendship flourish in an atmosphere in which one of the parties to it is afraid to unbend or to give vent to the generous sentiments of the heart for fear of stimulating a request for the loan of a trifle until Wednesday week? The first clear duty of a friend is not to become poor; but if his innate depravity carries him away in that direction, then the solemn obligations of friendship should induce him to take himself and his poverty off—to the kingdom of Prester John, or to any other community in which poverty is a favourable credential, sure to secure him a hearty welcome.

From observation I am inclined to believe there may be—outside our own circle, and so not at all likely to make appeals to us—such a thing as *virtuous poverty*. There is not much of it, you may be sure; but when I read about “deserving cases,” and hear good people talk of “poor clients” of theirs, I am amazed at the calamities which can befall unfortunates possessed of every virtue under the sun. In these “cases”—the doctor’s term “cases” is used, I suppose, because the people are socially and pecuniarily out of health—one meets with miracles of industry and endurance, of exceptional cleverness combined with supernatural cleanliness, always a piety that is exemplary and an

instinctive tendency to “know their stations, bless the squire and his relations,” and all that sort of thing, which makes one half believe in the possible—if very occasional—association of poverty with virtue itself! Such cases merit relief; only don’t let us make any mistake. They are not the cases which it is eminently Christian to relieve. I suspect that the noble Pagan was ready to give when he saw there was desert and gratitude. The relief of the undeserving and the ungrateful is the Christian characteristic.

In these degenerate days when Knights are in fashion, we are bigoted to Orders. Men, like watches work the better upon jewels. Man is, at the best, a puppet; and is only put into dignified motion when pulled by Blue or Red Ribands. Now, as few, indeed, of us can get stars or garters, let us have Orders of our own. Let us with invincible self-complacency ennoble ourselves.

With all our worst carelessness towards the Order of the Golden Fleece, we never felt for it the same pitying contempt we feel towards an Order worn by many—not at their button-holes, not outside their breasts, but in the very core of their heart,—the Order of the Golden Calf. It is a glorious community. What a look of easy triumph they have! With what serene self-satisfaction they measure the wide distance between mere paupers—the Knight of the Order of Nothing—and themselves!

A most fatal honour is this Order of the Golden Calf. It is worn unseen in the hearts of men; but its effects are visible; the disease speaks out in every atom of flesh, and throbs in every muscle. It poisons the soul; gives the eye a squint; it blinds and deafens the wearer to the glories and harmonies ministrant to poorer men.

At this moment great is this Order throughout the land! Tyrannous its laws, reckless its doings. It is strong, and why should it be just? To be of this Order is now the one great striving of life. They alone are men who wear the jewel—wretches they without it. Man was originally made from the dust of the earth; he is now formed of a richer substance; the true man is made of gold.

The true dignity of honest, virtuous poverty has not yet been fully acknowledged, although the nineteenth Christian century has almost filled its course.

Let the poor man take heart, the Order of Poverty against the Order of the Golden Calf; will it not be a merry time when men with an open look, shall not be ashamed to confess that they are poor? When they shall be to the world, what they are to themselves? When the lie, the shuffle, the bland, yet anxious hypocrisy of seeming and seeming only, shall be a creed forsworn? When Poverty asserts itself, and never blushes and stammers at its true name, the Knights of the Golden Calf must give ground. Much of their strength, their poor renown, their miserable glory, lies in the hypocrisy of those who would imitate them. They believe themselves great, because the poor, in the very ignorance of the dignity of poverty, would ape their magnificence.

And so, in the mind of wisdom, is poverty ennobled. And for the Knights of the Order of the Golden Calf, how are they outnumbered! Let us, then, revive the Order of Poverty. Ponder, reader, on its antiquity! For was not Christ himself Chancellor of the Order, and the Apostles Knights Companion?

Quevedo Redivivus.

THE OLD MASTERS.

It is sometimes as difficult to decide on the genuineness of an old picture, as it is to estimate the years of a fashionable dame, who has attained to what the French call—“a certain age.” The skilful application of rouge and powder, of puffs and padding, of false hair and false teeth, will at a distance often give the glamour of youth and age. And, on the other hand, a skilful imitation in form and colour, upon a worm-eaten panel, or, an old piece of canvas, super-added with sundry coatings of varnish, duly blistered, patched, and smoked, have not unfrequently enabled the vast army of Chattertons in pictorial art to impose worthless imitations of the the old Masters, as originals, even upon Connoisseurs. The late Sir Charles Eastlake, who was one of the highest authorities, of the early Italian school, was himself deceived in a bogus Montegna (if we remember the name aright) which he bought for the National Gallery. Mr. Ellis, an intelligent and appreciative patron of English art, did not discover till 1871, that the picture which he most admired as a Turner among the half dozen Turners he possessed, had never been painted by Turner. Sydney Cooper told the writer, that his pictures were sometimes so cleverly copied, that he had to communicate with those who purchased the originals from him before he could with certainty arrive at a decision. We once brought a small marine sketch to Montague, the painter, for authentication, and after some hesitation, he called for the assistance of his wife, whose sharper eye assured us that it was a counterfeit. In the Louvre there is said to be a Madonna of Raffaele which high authorities pronounce to be only a good copy; and many similar illustrations might be advanced, if it were necessary.

In view of the ability and frequency of these frauds, the owners of valuable paintings, especially by the Old Masters, rarely offer them for sale, and judicious purchasers will not buy, without seals and documents sufficient to establish their genuineness. We have seen the back of small panels nearly covered with