

usually manifest; but in general what can be more difficult and uncertain than to pass judgment upon an age, to pronounce it glorious or the contrary? "Glorious" is a relative term; we can have no right to award it until we have made a comparison between the age in question and other ages. Now the only age we can know well is our own, for it is the only one we can observe closely; but for the purpose of comparison we ought to know many ages; and to know many ages, even sufficiently is the boast of but few historical students.

We try to judge without a standard, to find our bearings without a compass. Who does not know how idle and empty are all those speculations, which used to be so fashionable, as to whether the old time was better or worse than the present? We smile now when we hear speak of the good old time; and not less unreal is the bad old time which haunts the brain of modern revolutionaries, an imaginary period when mankind were given over to monstrous tyrannies and superstitions. Both the good and the evil seem supernatural only because in the region of the past we are unfamiliar, because we lose the measure of things and the use of our judgment. In like manner about the Victorian age we may easily fall, when we try to form a general estimate of it, into vague exaggeration. If we are so inclined, we easily persuade ourselves that it far surpasses all former ages; on the other hand, those who are otherwise inclined—and at this moment of depression, confusion, and anxiety there are not a few—might without much trouble dress up a paradox to the effect that all its glories are a vain delusion, and that it is in reality a period of dissolution and decline.

I do not, indeed, think that such a paradox could ever produce conviction. When the Queen began to

reign, the world was full of St. Simonian doctrines, which turned on the idea of progress, of a heaven in the future of society, of a golden age before us, not behind us. The idea has now passed into a commonplace, into a fixed belief, which we may be in danger of exaggerating but are in no danger of renouncing. The older idea of a law of degeneracy of a "fatal drift towards worse," is as obsolete as astrology, or the belief in witchcraft. The human race has become hopeful, sanguine. Hence we are no longer easily frightened or depressed, and you might unroll a most dismal catalogue of the evils of the time, but you would never induce this present generation to admit that the course of things is downward, for they have come to regard it as an axiom—unreasonably, as it seems to me—that we move upward. Such a sanguine spirit "overcomes evil with good," sweeps the evil out of sight, leaves it behind, forgets to think of it, and in any case absolutely refuses to submit to it. Such a spirit has been favoured in the present age by the extremely palpable, startling character of the progress made in certain departments. Discoveries in almost every branch of science that take our breath away, inventions that transform human life and that bring the whole planet under our control, a rush of new ideas and views overwhelming the faculty of apprehension—all this converts the idea of progress into an evident fact. And, therefore, however much may be alleged by way of drawback, this age will, I think, continue to believe in itself. And when a French poet predicts that a hundred years hence it will be remembered as an age of brass, we shall answer that an age of mere material progress might deserve such an epithet, but that this is also an age of unparalleled scientific discovery.

It is also true, however, that after