THE NATURAL HISTORY OF REFORM

BY CHARLES KASSEL

BECAUSE of the European war, and the break-up of old and the creation of new states, with the huge overturn in Russia and the dictatorship in Italy and elsewhere, the present is destined to be known as one of the great revolutionary epochs. We are still too close to these events rightly to appraise them. What lasting influence they are to have on the history of mankind we do not know as yet. Certain it is, however, that these newlyturned pages in the world's annals have stirred the thoughts of men as they have not been stirred for centuries.

The cataclysmic nature of recent changes, however, has served unduly to emphasize the revolutionary idea. The spectacle of age-old institutions toppled from their bases, and venerated laws and usages disappearing as by a flash, has wrought upon susceptible minds in every land. Even in our democracies, where the machinery exists for effectuating the popular will and no occasion offers for violent change, the passing of the old order in Europe has evoked the ferment which such a leaven inevitably produces.

Democratic human nature, truth to say, upon which rests the sensitive governmental structure in democratic lands, appropriates very slowly the tremendous lessons of modern political progress. Subconsciously, too many of us live in the days when republics were undreamed of and revolution was the instrument of political change. Such volcanic eruptions, therefore, as we have beheld in the old world still carry a powerful challenge to the imagination. The methods, indeed, of the common run of reformers, whose temper and whose weapons are borrowed from the past, may constitute a concession to this weakness. That in free governments the instrument of reform is education—that in such lands slow and solid

preparation for every forward step is a necessity and that power is futile without popular understanding—these sober and humdrum truths, though familiar in the abstract, have not wrought themselves into the texture of popular thought.

The calm reformer—broad, well-poised and highly-informed—is a necessary factor in a democracy. Much of modern progress is distinctly traceable to such personalities. The narrow, inflammatory radical serves merely as an irritant, producing heat where light is needed. In absolute and semi-absolute states such individuals, by their fiery spirit, may kindle a successful insurrection and thus accomplish a result which can not otherwise be attained. In democracies, where legislation is the reflection, not of royal or oligarchical but of public sentiment, they hinder, rather than help, by their intemporate zeal, the causes they espouse.

Nor does the fierce crusader find any just sanction for his methods in the misunderstanding and abuse which even the true reformer usually encounters. The intelligent innovator expects no less. It is part of the first cost of all change. Indeed, it is precisely at this point that the leading difference appears between the large-minded reformer and his anti-type. The latter despises the conser-vative instinct while the former values it. In the slowness of man to depart from his accustomed ways he recognizes the working of a beneficent principle. Instead of writhing with impatience before the obstacles which conservatism places in his path he welcomes them. To him these obstacles are an assurance that the new, when it triumphs at last, will root itself deep in the human soil and hold against mischievous attack in some mad and revolutionary hour.

The inadaptation of the swashbuckling spirit to political reform in modern democracies is re-enforced by the general lessons of evolution. Mother nature herself is the true reformer's mentor. Viewing the long story as a whole he sees in the instinct that weds man to old walks and old ways a universal, and on the whole, a salutary trait of human nature. It is this alone that has made possible the slow upgrowth of the social and family virtues against the pressure of the primitive impulses.

With lessons for the higher type of reformer no period of history is freighted more richly than that which records the development of English laws and institutions during the nineteenth century. There we see accomplished by slow and halting but orderly processes what

in France had been achieved only by blood and fire and at the cost of a reaction which should else have been avoided. The Reform Acts, by which the British toiling classes were admitted to a voice in the councils of their nation—the Factory Laws, through which the English government reached out a sheltering arm to the child-workers in the factories—the system of Public Education, by which the state took up the task of enlightening the ignorance of the masses; these, though but a few, are the chief of the measures which saved to England the horrors of a revolution.

But while these concessions to the fundamental rights of man were vast strides forward, and were gained without the blight of civil strife, it is far from true that they were obtained without a struggle. No student of history, familiar with the story of that momentous epoch, need be told of the bitterness with which the conservative classes battled against the innovations, nor of the dread felt by many able and honest thinkers whose bias for venerated traditions and ideals blinded them to the essential justice of the new doctrines.

For the heady tendency which too often marks the mere radical there is no surer antidote than the study of such a cross-section from the structure of political history. It sets off, as nothing else can do, the superiority of the evolutionary over the revolutionary method of reform. A perusal of such pages in the annals of progress impresses the lessons of patience and of tolerance and charity toward opposition. The student beholds, as under a glass, the tangled and divergent influences which constitute the springs of action and belief, and sees that those who cry down movements and measures that make for change are, where erring, largely honest.

With the history of the agitation in England that placed the ballot in the hands of the common man, the name of John Bright is imperishably linked. It was in large part through the efforts and the eloquence of this intrepid reformer that the English masses came into that tardy heritage. Enthusiastic in every cause to which he lent his aid, yet patient of criticism and opposition, too brave to quail before numbers and influence yet too kindly to harbor resentment even against those who assailed him the most bitterly, the Rochdale manufacturer, who rose from the bier of a dead wife to consecrate himself to humanity, has intertwined his fame with much that is best in modern British chronicles.

The pen of the historian pauses fondly upon Bright's superb courage, his genial and generous magnanimity and the majestic eloquence that made truth seem nobler from his lips; yet the same pen goes on reluctantly to record that this man was bemeaned and reviled by half of England because he bespoke for the toiling thousands a larger voice in the affairs of their country. Moses Coit Tyler, in his *Glimpses of England*, writing of Bright while the latter was striking his most powerful blows in behalf of the disfranchised classes, observes, "By an infallible test we are forced to decide that Mr. Bright is the foremost man now extant in England, —he is the most abused man in England—Throughout these islands, every number of every Tory paper, and of every demi-Tory paper, as surely, as systematically, flings its little stone, or its little dust, or its little mud, at John Bright, as it prints its heading in big letters and its leaders in small ones". (Putnams, 1898, p. 157).

Much in the same strain writes Justin McCarthy, in his *History of Our Own Times*. "His scheme," says McCarthy, "was talked of at that time by some of his opponents as if it were a project of which Jack Cade might have approved. It was practically a proposal to establish a franchise precisely like that we have now, ballot and all, only that it threw the expense of the returning officer on the county or borough rate, and it introduced a somewhat larger measure of redistribution of seats". (Harpers Edition, 1900, Vol. 1, Chapter 40, page 139).

The brilliant Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, we are told by another writer, cried out upon the movement as one for the "enfranchisement of impatient poverty and uninstructed ignorance" (*History of Modern England*, by Herbert Paul, Macmillan, 1904, Vol. 2, Ch. 9. p. 201) and those who sought to stem the tide by half-measures pointed to Bright's plan as "an example of what reckless demagogues would bring about if conservative reformers did not have their way" (*History of Modern England*, Paul, Vol. 2, pp. 198-199). Yet even the "conservative reformers" of that day would have been accused of flagrant heresy a few decades before. When in March, 1831, Lord John Russell asked leave to introduce the first Reform Bill in the House of Commons,—a bill so mild it would have been hailed with approval twenty-five years later by Bright's most stubborn opponents,—his speech was met with "deri-

sive cheers and laughter." (*Epochs of English History,* by Rev. M. Creighton, Chapter 9.)

Looking back through the century from the vantage-ground of today, how hard to believe that those men were sincere who stood out against these small concessions to fundamental human rights! So transparently rightful in our eyes are the demands to which Bright gave his tongue and pen, so manifestly in keeping with all our ideas, of political justice, we can scarcely keep down a feeling of resentment, as we turn the pages of that great epoch, against those who barred from any voice in the nation's councils the classes that fought its battles and tilled its soils. Yet our own views might have been fully as cramped had we lived in that day and shared the feelings and traditions which for centuries had been so closely interwoven with the national life. We are too apt to forget the ripening touch of time upon the judgment alike of a people and of its units. Whether as a race or as an individual, the loftier the heights we scale, the wider grows the sweep of the horizon and the clearer becomes the vision. In the twilight of imperfect knowledge, truths that beam benignant in the fuller dawn often seem grotesque and forbidding.

Mighty a weapon is the ballot in the hands of a people, it is a vain, if not a harmful, gift, when unaccompanied by knowledge and sober judgment. In popular enlightenment alone do we find the sure safeguard of freedom—the ballot is only the means. American statesmen, from the first hour of the republic, felt this truth, and, too jealous of the principle to entrust that sacred function wholly to private hands, the American commonwealths took up the task of popular education as a branch of governmental duty. With us, therefore, the idea is a familiar one, and the states of the American union have always vied with one another in their contributions to the cause of education. Indeed, at any time during the history of the nation, the man who proposed that the states give up the work of instructing the young through teachers paid from the public revenues, would have been jeered at even by the narrowest of those who opposed governmental interference with the affairs of the citizen. This was a species of paternalism which all recognized as wholesome.

England, however, halted for long behind us. The sanest and soundest of her statesmen could not be weaned from the idea that the education of the people was no part of the business of govern-

ment, and they fought doggedly every measure which might commit Parliament to the policy of national education. It seems strange at this day that even John Bright—whose voice rings so clear through the century's history upon the suffrage question — should have joined in the sneer against the government turning school-master. Speaking of the bill offered by Sir John Russell in 1847, carrying a small government donation to the cause of education, Herbert Paul says in the work from which we have already quoted (Vol. 1, Ch. 4, p. 74), "Lord John's proposals were resisted by Roebuck, Bright and other radicals because education was not the business of the State."

Fortunately, however, the bill was not without an eloquent champion,—one who, if he had not Bright's sympathies with the toiling classes, and so entire a trust in their fitness for the ballot, yet possessed a clearer mind for general questions of government. It was Macaulay who rose from his place during the debate upon this bill to deliver one of the most impressive speeches to be found in his pages. "He has sat down," said the great essayist, "without dropping one word from which it is possible to conceive whether he thinks that education is, or that it is not, a matter with which the state ought to interfere. Yet that is the question about which the whole nation has, during several weeks, been writing, reading, hearing, speaking, thinking, petitioning, and on which it is now the duty of Parliament to pronounce a decision. That question once settled, there will be, I believe, very little room for dispute."

The succeeding passages of Macaulay's argument, though of rare persuasiveness, are too long to warrant quotation in a paper of limited scope, but at the conclusion of that fine deliverance we find this prophetic utterance: "From the clamor of our accusers, I appeal with confidence to the country, to which we must in no long time render an account of our stewardship. I appeal with still more confidence to future generations, which while enjoying the blessings of an impartial and efficient system of public instruction; will find it difficult to believe that the authors of that system should have had to struggle with a vehement and pertinacious opposition, and still more difficult to believe that such an opposition was offered in the name of civil and religious freedom." (*Macaulay's Works*, Harpers Edition, 1899, Vol. 5, p. 446). How complete has been the fulfill-

ment of this prediction no one familiar with the history of modern England need inquire.

At this point, however, the thoughtful reader must pause for a reflection. Why was it, the mind may well ask which muses over the story of those years, that the brilliant Macauley, whose vision was so broad and just upon this great question, should have been unable to throw off a traditional prejudice upon that other mighty issue of the day,—the extension of the ballot to the masses? Here Bright towered far above him. True, Macaulay spoke for the Reform Bill of 1832, which the growing clamor of the outcast classes forced from a reluctant Parliament, but that measure, though no unimportant one at the time, left the great body of the toilers still unenfranchised; and in his speech in the Commons Macaulay gave expression to a peculiarly specious and unstatesmanlike view of the right of the masses to representation in Parliament.

" I say, sir," he declared, "that there are countries in which the condition of the laboring classes is such that they may safely be entrusted with the right of electing members of the Legislature. If the laborers of England were in that state in which I from my soul wish them, if employment were always plentiful, wages always high, food always cheap, if a large family were considered not as an encumbrance but as a blessing, the principal objections to universal suffrage would, I think, be removed. Universal suffrage exists in the United States, without producing any very frightful consequences; and I do not believe that the people of those states, or of any part of the world, are in any good quality naturally superior to our own country. But, unhappily, the laboring classes in England, and in all old countries, are occasionally in a state of great distress. Some of the causes of this distress are, I fear, beyond the control of government. We know what effect distress produces even on a people more intelligent than the great body of the laboring classes can possibly be. We know that it makes even wise men irritable, unreasonable, credulous, eager for immediate relief, heedless of remote consequences. . . . It is therefore no reflection on the poorer classes of England, who are not, and who can not in the nature of things, be highly educated, to say that distress produces on them its natural effects—those effects which it would produce on Americans, or any other people—that it blinds their judgment, that it inflames their passions, that it makes them prone to believe those

who flatter them, and to distrust those who would serve them. For the sake, therefore, of the whole society, for the sake of the laboring classes themselves, I hold it to be clearly expedient that in a country like this the right of suffrage should depend upon a pecuniary qualification." (*Macaulay's Works,* Harper's Edition, 1899, Vol. 5, p. 19).

It is hard, indeed, to reconcile this view with the broad attitude of Macaulay on other great public questions. To acknowledge the sufferings of the laboring classes, and to admit that many of their wrongs were within the control of government, and yet to withhold from them the only mouthpiece through which they could effectually speak—and to do this, moreover, in the name of an illiteracy and poverty due in large part to the age-long denial of the very right it was sought to confer—was a species of reasoning which any mind can recognize now as absurd. Yet Macaulay never wholly changed his opinion and he died before the legislation of 1867 crowned the great crusade of Bright—legislation which led naturally to the Act of 1884 committing England to what was in effect, if not in name and form, universal manhood suffrage.

The English toiler of our day enjoys a voice in his country's affairs scarcely less pronounced than that of which his fellow in America can boast; yet the fears that disturbed Macaulay have found no echo in events. Indeed, it is precisely in the legislation of her Parliament since all classes have been admitted to representation that England has displayed the highest sagacity in her colonial government, the loftiest humanity in her code of crimes and punishments and the greatest wisdom and firmness in the promulgation and enforcement of laws for the health, the morals and the happiness of her people.

It is not unfitting that, after a glance into the history of suffrage in England and the trials and final triumph of the movement of the supervision of education by the state, that splendid body of laws should claim our attention which is only next to the ballot and the school in importance—namely, the English Factory Acts. But lest those not familiar with the development of factory legislation in England may suppose those enactments to have been accomplished without a long and bitter struggle, we hasten to read from the century's annals the story of the great movement which called those laws into being. Here again, the name of a single man comes to the

tongue as the leading factor in that signal triumph of patient and persistent humanitarianism.

Lord Ashley, afterward the Earl of Shaftesbury, and the seventh of an ancient and distinguished family to bear that title, was one of those rare personages who united with nobility of name an equal nobility of character and intellect. Though the master of rich estates, and possessed of physical graces and mental accomplishments that gave him a hearty welcome to every aristocratic drawing-room, the luxuries of wealth and the blandishments of titled society made less deep an appeal to his compassionate nature than the wants and woes of his less fortunate fellow-creatures; and giving up in early prime the pleasures of society he began his memorable crusade for the alleviation of factory evils.

The amount of interference with factory management involved in Lord Ashley's first bill was insignificant, yet mine owners and manufacturers sneered, quibbled and raged, and orthodox leaders of thought lifted their hands in terror; but Lord Ashley persisted, and fourteen years of patient agitation crystallized public sentiment and brought forth laws whch have ripened into the wise and humane regulations of today.

The earliest bill with which the name of Lord Ashley is associated followed close upon the heels of the Reform Bill of 1832, and shows how quickly the new sense of accountability to the humbler classes had begun to humanize Parliament. Space forbids a description in detail of the conditions which prevailed when this first, faltering experiment in factory legislation was made, but we may quote a paragraph from Goldwin Smith's *The United Kingdom*, which will afford a passing view of the evils it was sought to reach. "In the Factory Acts," says this writer, "the Legislature enlarged its sphere and verged on socialism; so at least it appeared to the strict economists, who viewed this legislation with misgiving, as well as to the manufacturers and coal owners whose personal interests were touched. Yet the government does nothing socialistic or beyond its sphere in protecting those who cannot protect themselves. The factory system, while it was adding vastly to the wealth of the nation, was showing its darker side in the ruthless employment of infant labor. Children had been sent by parishes which wished to get rid of them to distant factories as little slaves, and manufacturers had sometimes covenanted to take one idiot in every twenty. Nor

was the cruelty much less when the supply of infants was produced on the spot. Children eight years old, or even younger, were kept at work for twelve or thirteen hours a day, in rooms the air of which was foul and the moral atmosphere equally tainted, to the certain ruin of their health as well as of their character and happiness. Attention had been drawn to the evil, and something had been done for its mitigation, under George III: but the voice of philanthropy was little heard amid the din of the great war. Stubborn was the struggle made by the voice of avarice against humanity, which in the person of Lord Ashley pleaded for mercy to the children." (Macmillan & Co. 1900, Vol. 2, Ch. 9, p. 372.)

It well-nigh staggers belief that in the face of such revolting conditions disinterested individuals could be found so completely shackled by inherited ideas of government as to oppose Lord Ashley's measure with passion and bitterness, upon no other ground than that such interference was outside the true province of government. Yet so blinding is the force of tradition, that upon this principle alone, now obsolete in every civilized government, hundreds of otherwise sane and charitable people raised their voices to stay even the inconsiderable legislation Lord Ashley's bill proposed.

"The controversy during Lord Ashley's agitation"—we quote again from Justin McCarthy—"was always warm and impassioned. Many thoroughly benevolent men and women could not bring themselves to believe that any satisfactory and permanent results could come of a legislative interference with what might be called the freedom of contract between employers and employed. . . . Some of the public men afterwards most justly popular among the artisan classes were opposed to the measure upon the ground that it was a heedless attempt to interfere with fixed economic laws. With our recent experiences, we can only be surprised that a few years ago there was such a repugnance to the modest amount of interference with individual rights which Lord Ashley's extremest proposals would have sought to introduce." (*History of Our Own Times*, Harper's Edition, 1900, Vol. 1, Ch. 13, p. 204.) In another work, the writer last quoted says: "It is now admitted that the legislation for the factories has worked with almost entirely beneficent results. None of the evils anticipated from it have come to pass. Almost all the good it proposed to do has been realized. Each further step of extension in the same direction has been made

with satisfactory results." (*The Epoch of Reform, Scribners,* 1900, p. 97-8.)

How painful to record, as we turn away from the subject, that on the factory bills of Lord Ashley—even the earliest, which only sought to reduce somewhat the hours of children and young persons—the great John Bright lent his voice and vote to the opposition! "All the great and splendid services which John Bright rendered his country," exclaims Herbert Paul, "can not efface the memory of the speeches he made against this bill." (*History of Modern England,* Vol. 1, Ch. 4, p. 72.)

Bright was himself a manufacturer: such had been his father before him, and, as we can not doubt Bright's honesty, we can only regret the prejudices of the manufacturer should have been so deeply ingrained in his make-up and that all the splendor of his intellect and all the greatness of his character could not rescue his judgment from error. Our sense of disappointment softens somewhat, too, when we recall that while Bright could not see either the wisdom or the propriety of government interference with factory management. Lord Ashley, despite his profound sympathies with the laboring classes, could not see the justice or expediency of allowing to the masses representation in the Commons and cast the weight of his name and influence against that great reform. The vision was warped in the one case by the inherited feeling of the capitalist, in the other by the instinctive dislike of popular government which aristocratic descent and station had bred and confirmed.

Such in brief, is the story of the three great reforms which did so much to make the nineteenth century a notable one in English history. The trials and triumphs of those struggles reveal the same forces of human nature which are helping or hindering philanthropic measures and movements of our own time. The Brights, the Russells, the Ashleys of our age must contend with the same cleaving to the traditional, the same blindness to the fact that the ways of yesterday will not avail under the vastly changed conditions of today, the same readiness of humanity to obey the selfish instincts and forget the call of duty toward its unfortunates. On the other hand, through all the annals of the race, whatever the obstacles and however tardy the progress, we see that every humane cause triumphs at last, and in the end claims among its champions and defenders the very classes which at first distrusted or opposed.