

## RETARDED EVOLUTION.

BY H. R. VANDERBYLL.

IN THE May issue of *The Open Court* a splendid article appeared under the title, "Retarded Evolution", by T. Swann Harding. It is not my purpose to criticise the article in question merely for the sake of being critical. I heartily sympathize with Mr. Harding's main viewpoint. His ideas concerning healthy development of soul and intellect coincides with my own. But, somehow, Mr. Harding's article, to me at least, embodies not so much a statement as well as a question. That question is: why does the average man not like the things that are instructive to the mind and elevating to the soul?

It is a question which has been asked by all those who meditate on the mysttry of being and who love the beauties of the universe. It is also a question which has seldom been answered in an impartial manner. The emotions which a Chopin aroused in me once served as a standard that judged and condemned the apparently crude emotions of my fellow man. Goethe, Shakespeare, Emerson, brought out in somber relief the stupidity and the perverseness of the average man.

But the simple truth is, though our prejudice rather stubbornly refuses to recognize it, that man cannot be educated, coaxed, or threatened to like certain things. His likes and dislikes are part of his make-up. Or, better, they betray its nature. They roughly indicate how far along the road of human development the individual has traveled.

In this case, as in all problems touching on human existence, we must consider individuality. It is something which we do not consider enough. We admit that there are no two people alike. But we fail to see the fundamental truth of nature at which our admission hints. And we certainly retard our admission every time that we judge our fellow by ourselves, i. e., our mental, moral and artistic selves. For this is really what we

do when we think of our erring fellowman in connection with Emerson or Beethoven. *We* are the ones who seem to be capable of appreciating the great thinkers and composers, and it surprises *us* that the average man fails to appreciate them, and that he is not the least bit interested in what they wrote or composed.

Our likes and dislikes, however, whether they concern literature, music or recreation, roughly hint at a certain degree of human development. And there are as many degrees of human development as there are stars in the sky—a fact which we admit to be true in theory but not in practice. Theoretically, we divide humanity into races that represent different degrees of civilization. We dimly recognize that one nation belonging to a certain race is superior, intellectually, morally and artistically, to another belonging to the same race. Thus we place milestones along the road of human progress. We err, however, in that we do not line this road with an unbroken, closely packed row of such milestones. We do not seem to grasp that there are innumerable products of human evolution that gradually fill the intellectual and moral gap between ignorant, beastly John and brilliant, unselfish Harry.

The supreme mistake which we make in practice is that we do not consider individuality at all, with the exception perhaps of our own. We are deeply impressed with what *we* do, think, or like, and seem to take it for granted that it is possible and desirable that our fellow being does, thinks, likes or dislikes as we do. And so we send missionaries to savages to present them with a religion which is absolutely foreign to their nature and understanding. Not merely this! We actually ignore the existence of stepping stones between the savage and the genius—stepping stones of intellectual and moral development. We would present a heterogeneous humanity, with a billion degrees of brain-development, with a single religion. It's impossible, of course, as facts clearly prove.

But not only religion, also literature and music, painting and art in general, would we choose for and force upon our fellow being. Fortunately or unfortunately, as the case may be, we are never successful in an undertaking of this sort. We generally end with bitter criticism or condemnation, realizing inwardly that we are face to face with a hopeless task. If we could only realize that thoughts, ideals, conceptions of beauty, reveal the inner man, the mysterious personality which is evolving, should we not then be more willing to let nature take its course? Or should we conclude

that evolution in many cases is slow and sluggish, or that its progress has been retarded in some inexplicable manner?

I think that such a conclusion can only be forced upon us by our impatience, by our ardent desire to see humanity on a single intellectual and moral level, which also is our own. Impartial observation and reasoning should impress us with the fact that evolution, which is the deity's eternal weaving of the web of existence, must be beyond reproach and above criticism. There is only one present possible. It is here, now. To imagine a different present than the one existing is to imagine the gross imperfections of the nature of that which is perfect.

Evolution never jumps. It follows the alphabet of creation in a mathematical and logical manner. If to-day it says *a*, then to-morrow it will say *b*, not *x* or *z*. Humanity does not consist of blackguards and saints, of savages and genii. There are innumerable intermediate stages of human development that link these extremes. Between ignorance and wisdom, how many different combinations of ignorance and wisdom can be found? Immorality and morality meet almost imperceptibly. And likewise in music, there are instances where the naked rhythm that charms the savage blends with melody to produce music. In poetry this rhythm becomes the background against which the sublimity of thought must loom up.

The closer man is to the savage state, the cruder and the more primitive are his thoughts, his morals, and his art. If we have had an opportunity to dive into the depths of humanity, we must confess that quite a bit of the savage is still clinging to us. Manicures and tailor-made clothes cannot hide that fact. And the sort of music that we like, or the books that we love to read, or the nature of our recreations, will reveal it. Judging from the indifference displayed by the average man towards the great writers, thinkers and artists, humanity is not as remote from the savage state as we sometimes fondly dream. We have but to analyze popular literature, music, or recreations, to find the primitive in man hidden in a veneer of modernity and civilization.

How does the savage in man express itself? In love for self, in intense self-centeredness. In pre-historic times when evolution operated through simpler channels the *belly* was the individual's main concern. His feelings were reached through his stomach, and his mental life, his art, and his feasts were founded on appetite. To-day it is ME which concerns the individual most. And so long as this thought for and of ME is all-predominant, true civilization

is still in an embryonic state. When I stated that there are as many degrees of human development as there are stars in the sky, I had in mind the innumerable degrees of love for ME which we encounter. It is what evolution secretly tries to moderate, this originally intense self-centeredness. Its gradual destruction means growing enlightenment, increasing knowledge of the universe, greater appreciation of and love for beauty.

The most intense self-centeredness we find in the savage, the least intense in the highly developed human being. If we so desire, we may penetrate beyond the domain of man into that of the animal kingdom and find a still deeper darkness enveloping the individual. Further than this, we may consider the vegetable kingdom, say, a tree. There it stands, rooted in the soil, its limbs reaching towards the warm sky, utterly unaware of the existence of an infinite, many-membered universe. It is only sensitive to the impressions that benefit or harm its being, such as are caused by the sun, by the wind, by rain.

On a higher level of evolutionary development, among human beings, we find impressions that reach the individual from the external world limited to just a few that immediately concern his ME. Such a person is undeveloped. His being is surrounded by darkness, and the one thing of which he is constantly aware is his ME. Impressions and emotions are few and unvaried, experience is of a simple and uniform nature, and knowledge of the universe is of course almost completely absent. We find his particular degree of development revealed in his thoughts, his actions, his likes and dislikes, his loves and hates.

The being of the little self-centered person is highly sensitive to impressions from the external world. An infinite universe exists to him, stirs his soul, arouses his intellect. To him exist, as a consequence, mystery, thought, knowledge, emotion, experience, sadness, beauty. We admire him on account of the astonishing absence of thought of self in him, on account of his utter devotion to science, to art, to philosophy, or to humanity. We praise him for his intelligence, his goodness, his unselfishness, his great love for beauty. But there is no praise due him. His intellectual, artistic or moral qualities belong to him as perfume belongs to the rose. They are the necessary expressions of his particular being.

Here is the point that I wish to emphasize. No man is ultimately responsible for the manner in which he expresses himself in life. The simple truth is that he is not the author of his being.

The emotions that penetrate into his soul do so because his soul is what it is. The thoughts that awaken in his brain are determined by the quality of his gray matter. We unthinkingly wish that our neighbor would devote himself to the study of the philosophers, that he would read serious and mind-cultivating literature. These days, opportunity for intellectual development presents itself almost everywhere. And why then does he not avail himself of that opportunity? Perverseness, we say, or indifference, or laziness. Nothing of the kind! He turns his back to opportunity because he does not recognize it. It is not opportunity to him and for him. It offers intellectual development which is not required by his particular intellect.

Give the fishes their water, and the birds their air! Milk for babies, and meat for the grown man, says the Bible. Also, render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's. Allow the individual being its corresponding expressions of ignorance or wisdom, of ugliness or beauty. If knowledge be a pearl, shall not he who is incapable of assimilating it trample upon it, if not viciously then at least blindly? Was it not Jesus, the Christ, who fully recognized and considered the limitations of man as an individual being? His disciples were carefully chosen by Him. And if we translate the symbolic and poetic language of the Bible into plain, modern English, we read that He addressed them as follows: "Gentlemen, you are fortunate in being able to grasp the mysteries of the universe. I, your teacher, therefore speak to you plainly, calling things by their right names, acquainting you with all that I know. But the average man is incapable of understanding such matters. For that reason do I speak to him in parables. He will extract from these parables such truth as his brain is able to digest."

There is a very, very old saying: Where there is a pupil, there is a teacher. This saying embodies one of the most marvelous laws of life, viz., the law of intellectual and moral supply and demand. What most of us do not realize is that the things needed for the immediate development of our intellect and of our soul are scattered through life and through the universe. The fact to which we are completely blind is that the human being himself, in most cases unknowingly, from that unlimited supply picks the very things needed for his immediate intellectual, moral and spiritual development. The supply in question consists in many instances of experience with its resulting impressions and emotions. In other instances it is represented by books, teachers, music. In short,



contact with life, ultimately with the universe, is what develops the human being.

Experience teaches us daily, yearly, and has taught man through all the ages, that action, thought, likes and dislikes, cannot be prescribed for the individual. Yet there are teachers, it will be remarked, instructive books, and other instruments of education and development. So there are. But whether there shall be a pupil depends entirely on the nature of the individual whom the teacher desires to teach. Our pride in the successful conversion of a human soul to higher and better things is pardonable. However, if credit be due the teacher, an equal amount of credit is due the pupil. For it is the pupil who creates the teacher and not the teacher the pupil. The pupil being what he is, mentally and morally, demands the teacher's instruction for his immediate development were he representing either a higher or a lower degree of intellectual and moral development, the teacher should have nothing to teach him.

There are, of course, many such teachers whose words fall on deaf ears, either because they are above or below the average development of their audience. They have an audience nevertheless, to whose minds and souls their thoughts and ideas are necessary tonics. Souls and intellects are not alike: they are similar. They differ in degree of development. Hence many religions for many groups of souls that huddle together on certain sections of the road of human progress. Each religion reveals the average development of its worshipper, and furnishes the sort of intellectual and spiritual food which his nature demands. Take it away from him, his religion, and what will you give in return? A better one, one more closely approaching truth? He shall refuse it, with a shrug of the shoulders, or he shall pronounce it of the devil. A Dutch saying has it, that the peasant does not eat what he does not know.

And so we can never hope for a single literature for a single humanity. There are all sorts of written things for all sorts of people. What one person likes, the other does not like. Such likes and dislikes are determined by what a person is, fundamentally. They tell you how far evolution has progressed in moulding his particular being. His literature is the language that he speaks. Address him not in a language foreign to him! And the music which he likes is the song of his soul. Give him different music, and you produce a discord!

But because there are many people who love foxtrot music

only, and who limit themselves to the reading of cheap literature, we should not conclude that they are the representatives of a retarded evolution. We are tempted to arrive at such a conclusion because we know of Chopin and Beethoven, Goethe and Emerson, and because we are able to appreciate their genius. But the leaders of the human race do not point an accusing finger at evolution, no more than Jesus, the Christ, embodied a living condemnation of the entire human race. On the contrary, they hint at the definite plans of evolution concerning the moulding of the individual. They furnish us with an idea regarding the nature of some of the materials to be used by her in her future moulding process. As evolution, however, is a slow and gradual process, and not a series of spontaneous creations, we may not expect either of the present or of the future to produce nothing but lovers of Emerson and Beethoven. The clay which the mysterious potter is kneading at present is coarse or refined or of intermediate quality. And a long, long time will be required before the coarse clay shall have been manipulated sufficiently to produce a high-grade vessel.

Human society, moreover, would be an impossibility were every one of us capable of appreciating and understanding the great artists and thinkers. Society needs its rag-time lovers and prize-fight fans as well as its pilgrims to the shrine of a Beethoven. The community must consist of members who represent different degrees of development in order to be a community. For the activity of the member, as well as his literary and artistic taste, express what he is, fundamentally. And he is usefully active in behalf of the community in accordance with the nature of his being. It would be a calamity to business if the businessman were constantly pondering over the mysteries of existence. Neither Mr. Harding nor I would write the kind of articles that we write were we businessmen at heart.

No, there is nothing wrong with evolution. Evolution works on individual cases, and cannot be expected to raise a heterogeneous mass of humans to a common high level of development. There must be degrees of development lest the community perish. There must be degrees so that each member of society, being usefully active in accordance with his nature, may contribute towards preserving the whole. It is for that reason that man cannot coax evolution to work faster, to skip a few stages of her moulding process. Human evolution is first of all *in* man, not outside him. Man evolves himself, merely by being what he is, and by rubbing

gently or violently against life, nature, the universe. The manner in which the external world shall impress him depends entirely on the nature of his being.

There is an average development, of course, lying midway between the lowest and the highest. It expresses average thought, average ideal, average moral, average taste. It not only expresses these things, but demands them. Rag-time music and religions are made by man. He permits their existence by patronizing them. Governments, good or bad, are not forced upon him: he tolerates them. Thriving newspapers and magazines owe their success to the fact that they supply something which the average man wants. Leagues of nations are failures because average humanity has not developed sufficiently to desire them.

Unhappy the man who imagines that he can give man what he does not want!

Unhappy Wilson who foolishly and vainly tried to raise the level of development of the human world to his own regions of idealism! Unhappy "Tiger" of France who continued to hear thunder and war when the average man had sickened of the noise! Unhappy any man who gives his best mind and soul for the vain purpose of influencing the activities of wise evolution!

That we are compelled to let nature take her quiet and wise course, should not be a source of discouragement to us. If we are observant, we do not merely notice progress in individual cases, but we see average development reaching out for higher and better things. Here in California, which is my home, such groping for the ideal is very noticeable. Mr. Harding being a lover of music, I shall refer to this subject. In the City of San Francisco there are innumerable cafeterias where the seventy-five-dollar-a-month clerk eats his frugal lunch. Many young patrons cannot afford to spend more than twenty-five cents for their meal. However, there is music with their meal, which is an attraction. The nature of the music is surprising. There is a great deal of Wagner, of Schubert, of Schumann. There is also an occasional splash of ragtime, of course.

There are moving picture halls in that city—admission twenty-five and fifty cents—where a fifty-piece orchestra plays beautiful Sunday morning concerts. None of the great composers is omitted from the program. Again, occasionally, a rag-time piece is offered. The same procedure is being followed every Sunday in Golden Gate



Park—classical music with a dash of foxtrot—where the immense crowds of listeners would suggest the existence of a city of lovers of good music.

Such symptoms must seem encouraging to the good-music lover. They reveal the fact that the average soul is gradually becoming finer strung, and that feeling and emotion are in the process of evolving. Nor should it be imagined that circumstances, conditions and surroundings retard or alter the course of evolution. That which is in a man will express itself in spite of external conditions. I know of a department of a local oil refinery where four of its fifteen employes are thoroughly acquainted with classical music. The man who runs the air-compressors has heard most of the world's famous singers and pianists. On the graveyard-shift, when things happen to be dull, discussions take place on chemistry, physics, astronomy, philosophy, that would startle the superintendent, were he able to hear them.

On the whole, I find the moving finger of evolution more visible among average men than among the wealthy and so-called educated people. The *people* of America are evolving visibly. I have no doubt about it. And that they have already evolved beyond the intellectual and moral level of the average European man will be revealed by a close study of the people on both sides of the Atlantic. I do not deny that great intellectual and artistic geni were and are being produced in Europe. I honor them in silence, and greedily accept the gifts of truth and beauty which they offer to the world. But these men are like mountain summits rising high above the level land, their peaks hidden in an impenetrable mist. The intellectual gap between the European worker and the European leaders of thought and art is too immense. The same thing cannot be said about the American people. Perhaps it is true that Emerson should be read more widely. But I have found many of Emerson's thoughts in the minds of plain, common people who had never read his essays. I have seen those people *live* their thoughts. And I have come to the conclusion that the *average* development of the American people is higher than that of any other people. Why should this not be so? Evolution surely finds favorable conditions on American soil for the purpose of producing a better race. If my contention be true that higher human development means a less intense degree of self-centeredness with its corresponding expressions of broad-mindedness, unselfishness, and love for knowledge, shall we not

naturally seek this development here? The vastness of the country, the struggles with and the conquests of nature, the various thoughts and emotions contributed by immigrants, are not these things harmonious with the presence of a broadminded, generous people?