

SOCIETY IN AMERICA.

P A R T III.

CIVILISATION.

“ This country, which has given to the world the example of physical liberty, owes to it that of moral emancipation also ; for as yet it is but nominal with us. The inquisition of public opinion overwhelms, in practice, the freedom asserted by the laws in theory.”

Jefferson.

THE degree of civilisation of any people corresponds with the exaltation of the idea which is the most prevalent among that people. The prominent idea of savages is the necessity of providing for the supply of the commonest bodily wants. The first steps in civilisation, therefore, are somewhat refined methods of treating the body. When,

by combination of labour and other exercises of ingenuity, the wants of the body are supplied with regularity and comparative ease, the love of pleasure, the love of idleness, succeeds. Then comes the desire of wealth; and next, the regard to opinion. Further than this no nation has yet attained. Individuals there have been, probably in every nation under heaven, who have lived for a higher idea than any of these; and insulated customs and partial legislation have, among all communities, shown a tendency towards something loftier than the prevalent morality. The majesty of higher ideas is besides so irresistible, that an involuntary homage, purely inefficacious, has been offered to them from of old by the leaders of society.

“ Earth is sick,
And Heaven is weary of the hollow words
Which States and Kingdoms utter when they talk
Of truth and justice.”

Though, as yet, “ profession mocks performance,” the profession, from age to age, of the same lofty something not yet attained, may be taken as a clear prophecy of ultimate performance. It shows a perception, however dim, a regard, however feeble, from which endeavour and attainment cannot but follow, in course of time. But the time is not yet. In the old world, the transition is, in its most en-

CIVILISATION.

3

lightened parts, only beginning to be made, from the few governing the many avowedly for the good of the few, to governing the many professedly for the good of the many. The truth and justice under whose dominion every man would reverence all other men, would renounce himself for the sake of others, and feel it to be the highest destiny “not to be ministered unto, but to minister,” are still “hollow words.” The civilisation of the old world still corresponds with the low idea, that man lives in and for the outward, in and for what is around him rather than what is within him. It is still supposed, that whatever a few individuals say and do, the generality of men live for wealth, outward ease and dignity, and, at the highest, lofty reputation. The degree of civilisation corresponds with this. There is scarcely an institution or a custom which supposes anything higher. What educational arrangements there are, are new, and (however praiseworthy as being an actual advance) are so narrow and meagre as to show how unaccustomed is the effort to consider the man as nobler than the unit of society. The phrase is still the commonest of phrases in which parents, guardians, schoolmasters and statesmen embody their ambition for their wards—that any such ward “may become a useful and respectable member of society.” The greater number of guardians would be terrified at the idea of

B 2

their wards becoming anything else; anything higher than “useful and respectable members of society,” while it is as clear as noon-day that room ought to be left,—that facilities ought to be afforded for every one becoming whatsoever his Maker has fitted him to be, so long as it appears that the noblest men by whom the earth has been graced, have been considered in their own time the very reverse of “useful and respectable members of society.” The most godlike of the race have been esteemed “pestilent fellows” in their day and generation. No student of the ways of Providence will repine at this order of affairs, or expect that any arrangement of society can be made by which the convictions and sympathies of the less gifted should be enabled suddenly to overtake those of the more gifted. He will not desire to change the great and good laws by which the chosen of his race are “made perfect through sufferings,” and by which the light of reason is ordained to brighten very gradually from dawn into day. He will only take note of the fact, that it is a low state of civilisation which presupposes specified and outward aims, and relies with such confidence on the mechanical means of attaining them as to be shocked, or anything but gratified, at the pursuit of singular objects by unusual methods. The observer will rightly judge such to be a low state of

civilisation, whatever lamentations or exultations he may daily hear about the very high point civilisation has reached, when the schoolmaster is abroad, when people can travel at the rate of fifty miles an hour, and eminent cooks are paid 1,200*l.* a-year. While truth and justice remain “hollow words,” so far as that men cannot live for them, to the detriment of their fortunes, without being called mischievous and disreputable members of society, no one can reasonably speak of the high civilisation of the country to which they belong.

The old world naturally looks with interest to the new, to see what point of civilisation it reaches under fresh circumstances. The interest may be undefined, and partly unconscious; but it is very eager. The many, who conceive of no other objects of general pursuit than the old ones of wealth, ease, and honour, look only to see under what forms these are pursued. The few, who lay the blame of the grovelling at home upon outward restrictions alone, look to America with extravagant expectations of a perfect reign of virtue and happiness, because the Americans live in outward freedom. What is the truth?

While the republics of North America are new, the ideas of the people are old. While these republics were colonies, they contained an old people, living under old institutions, in a new country.

Now they are a mixed people, infant as a nation, with a constant accession of minds from old countries, living in a new country, under institutions newly combined out of old elements. It is a case so singular, that the old world may well have patience for some time, to see what will arise. The old world must have patience; for the Americans have no national character yet; nor can have, for a length of years. It matters not that they think they have: or it matters only so far as it shows to what they tend. Their veneration of Washington has led them to suppose that he is the type of their nation. Their patriotic feelings are so far associated with him that they conclude the nation is growing up in his likeness. If any American were trusted by his countrymen to delineate what they call their national character, it would infallibly come out a perfect likeness of Washington. But there is a mistake here. There were influences prior to Washington, and there are circumstances which have survived him, that cause some images to lie deeper down in the hearts of Americans than Washington himself. His character is a grand and very prevalent idea among them: but there are others which take the precedence, from being more general still. Wealth and opinion were practically worshipped before Washington opened his eyes on the sun which was to light him to his deeds;

and the worship of Opinion is, at this day, the established religion of the United States.

If the prevalent idea of society did not arise out of circumstances over which the mutations of outward events exercise but a small immediate influence, it is clear that, in this case, the idea should arise out of the characters of the benefactors who achieved the revolution, and must be consistent with the solemn words in which they conveyed their united Declaration. The principles of truth, and the rule of justice, according to which that Declaration was framed, and that revolutionary struggle undertaken and conducted, should, but for prior influences, have been the spirit inspiring the whole civilisation of the American people. There should then have been the utmost social as well as political freedom. The pursuit of wealth might then have been subordinated at pleasure: fear of injury, alike from opinion and from violence, should have been banished; and as noble facilities afforded for the progression of the inward, as for the enjoyment of the outward, man. But this was not given. Instead of it there was ordained a mingling of old and new influences, from which a somewhat new kind of civilisation has arisen.

The old-world estimation of wealth has remained among them, though, I believe and trust, somewhat diminished in strength. Though every man works

for it in America, and not quite every man does so in England, it seems to me that it is not so absolutely the foreground object in all views of life, the one subject of care, speculation, inquiry, and supposition, that it is in England. It is in America clearly subordinate to another idea, still an idol, but of a higher order than the former. The worship of Opinion certainly takes precedence of that of wealth.

In a country where the will of the majority decides all political affairs, there is a temptation to belong to the majority, except where strong interests, or probabilities of the speedy supremacy of the minority, countervail. The minority, in such a case, must be possessed of a strong will, to be a minority. A strong will is dreaded by the weaker, who have so little faith as to believe that such a will endangers the political equality which is the fundamental principle of their institutions. This dread occasions persecution, or at least opprobrium: opprobrium becomes a real danger; and, like all dangers, is much more feared than it deserves, the longer it lasts, and the more it is dwelt upon. Thus, from a want of faith in the infallible operation of the principles of truth and the rule of justice, these last become "hollow words" in the States of the new, as in the kingdoms of the old world; and the infant nation, which was expected

CIVILISATION.

9

to begin a fresh and higher social life, is acting out in its civilisation an idea but little more exalted than those which have operated among nations far less favoured than herself in regard to political freedom.

CHAPTER I.

IDEA OF HONOUR.

“Talent and worth are the only eternal grounds of distinction. To these the Almighty has affixed his everlasting patent of nobility; and these it is which make the bright, ‘the immortal names,’ to which our children may aspire, as well as others. It will be our own fault if, in our own land, society as well as government is not organised upon a new foundation.”

Miss Sedgwick.

It is true that it is better to live for honour than for wealth: but how much better, depends upon the idea of honour. Where truth and justice are more than hollow words, the idea of honour is such as to exclude all fear, except of wrong-doing. Where the honour is to be derived from present human opinion, there must be fear, ever present, and perpetually exciting to or withholding from action. In such a case, as painful a bondage is