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Jane Haldimand Marcet

Excerpt

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CONVERSATION I.

INTRODUCTION.

ERRORS ARISING FROM TOTAL IGNORANCE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY. — ADVANTAGES RESULTING FROM THE KNOWLEDGE OF ITS PRINCIPLES. — DIFFICULTIES TO BE SURMOUNTED IN THIS STUDY.

MRS. B.

WE differ so much respecting the merit of the passage you mentioned this morning, that I cannot help suspecting some inaccuracy in the quotation.

CAROLINE.

Then pray allow me to read it to you; it is immediately after the return of Telemachus to Salentum, when he expresses his astonishment to Mentor at the change that has taken place since his former visit; he says, “Has any misfortune happened to Salentum in my absence? the magnificence and splendour in which I left it have dis-

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appeared. I see neither silver, nor gold, nor jewels, the habits of the people are plain, the buildings are smaller and more simple, the arts languish, and the city is become a desert." — "Have you observed," replied Mentor with a smile, "the state of the country that lies round it?" — "Yes," said Telemachus, "I perceive that agriculture is become an honourable profession, and that there is not a field uncultivated." — "And which is best," replied Mentor, "a superb city, abounding with marble, gold, and silver, with a steril and neglected country; or a country in a state of high cultivation, and fruitful as a garden, with a city where decency has taken place of pomp? A great city full of artificers, who are employed only to effeminate the manners, by furnishing the superfluities of luxury, surrounded by a poor and uncultivated country, resembles a monster with a head of enormous size, and a withered, enervated body, without beauty, vigour, or proportion. The genuine strength and true riches of a kingdom consist in the number of people, and the plenty of provisions; and innumerable people now cover the whole territory of Idomeneus, which they cultivate with unwearied diligence and assiduity. His dominions may be considered as one town, of which Salentum is the centre; for the people that were wanting in the fields, and superfluous in the city, we have removed from the city to the fields."

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Well, must I proceed, or have I read enough to convince you that Mentor is right?

MRS. B.

I still persist in my opinion; for though some of the sentiments in this passage are perfectly just, yet the general principle on which they are founded, that town and country thrive at the expence of each other, I believe to be quite erroneous; I am convinced, on the contrary, that flourishing cities are the means of fertilizing the fields around them. Do you see any want of cultivation in the neighbourhood of London? or can you name any highly improved country which does not abound with wealthy and populous cities? On the other hand, what is more common than to observe decayed cities environed by barren and ill cultivated lands? The purple and gold of Tyre during the prosperity of the Phœnicians, far from depriving the fields of their labourers, obliged that nation to colonize new countries as a provision for its excess of population.

CAROLINE.

That is going very far back for an example.

MRS. B.

If you wish to come down to a later period, compare the ancient flourishing state of Phœnicia,

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with its present wretchedness, so forcibly described by Volney in his travels.

CAROLINE.

Has not this wretchedness been produced by violent revolutions, which during a course of ages have impoverished that devoted country, and does it not continue in consequence of the detestable policy of its present masters? But in the natural and undisturbed order of things, is it not clear that the greater number of labourers a sovereign should, after the example of Idomeneus, compel to quit the town in order to work in the country, the better that country would be cultivated?

MRS. B.

I do not think so; I am of opinion on the contrary, that the people thus compelled to quit the town, would not find work in the country.

CAROLINE.

And why not?

MRS. B.

Because there would already be as many labourers in the country as could find employment.

CAROLINE.

In England that might possibly be the case, but would it be so in badly cultivated countries?

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MRS. B.

I think it would.

CAROLINE.

Do you mean to say that if a country which is ill-cultivated were provided with a greater number of labourers it would not be improved? You must allow that this requires some explanation.

MRS. B.

It does so, and perhaps even more than you imagine; for you cannot well understand this question without some knowledge of the principles of political economy.

CAROLINE.

I am very sorry to hear that, for I confess that I have a sort of antipathy to political economy.

MRS. B.

Are you sure that you understand what is meant by political economy?

CAROLINE.

I believe so, as it is so often the subject of conversation at home; but it appears to me the most uninteresting of all subjects. It is about custom-houses, and trade, and taxes, and bounties, and smuggling, and paper money, and the bullion committee, &c. which I cannot hear named without

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yawning. Then there is a perpetual reference to the works of Adam Smith, whose name is never uttered without such a respectful, and almost religious veneration, that I was induced one day to look into his work on Political Economy to gain some information on the subject of corn, but what with forestalling, regrating, duties, drawbacks, and limiting prices, I was so overwhelmed by a jargon of unintelligible terms, that after running over a few pages I threw the book away in despair, and resolved to eat my bread in humble ignorance. So if our argument respecting town and country relates to political economy, I fancy that I must be contented to yield the point in dispute without understanding it.

MRS. B.

Well then, if you can remain satisfied with your ignorance of political economy you should at least make up your mind to forbear from talking of it, since you cannot do it to any purpose.

CAROLINE.

Oh! that, I assure you, requires very little effort; I only wish that I was as certain of never hearing the subject mentioned, as I am of never talking upon it myself.

MRS. B.

Do you recollect how heartily you laughed at

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poor Mr. Jourdain in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, when he discovered that he had been speaking in prose all his life without knowing it? — Well, my dear, you frequently talk of political economy without knowing it. But a few days since I heard you deciding on the very question of the scarcity of corn; and it must be confessed that your verdict was in perfect unison with your present profession of ignorance.

CAROLINE.

Indeed I only repeated what I had heard from very sensible people, that the farmers had a great deal of corn; that if they were compelled to bring it to market there would be no scarcity, and that they kept it back with a view to their own interest, in order to raise the price. Surely it does not require a knowledge of political economy to speak on so common, so interesting a subject as this first necessary of life.

MRS. B.

The very circumstance of its general interest renders it one of the most important branches of political economy. Unfortunately for your resolution, this science spreads into so many ramifications that you will seldom hear a conversation amongst liberal-minded people without some reference to it. It was but yesterday that you accused the *Birming-*

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ham manufacturers of cruelty and injustice towards their workmen, and asserted that the rate of wages should be proportioned by law to that of provisions; so that the poor might not be sufferers by a rise in the price of bread. I dare say you thought that you had made a very rational speech when you so decided?

CAROLINE.

And was I mistaken? You begin to excite my curiosity, Mrs. B.; do you think I shall ever be tempted to study this science?

MRS. B.

I do not know; but I have no doubt that I shall convince you of your incapacity to enter on most subjects of general conversation, whilst you remain in total ignorance of it; and that however guarded you may be, that ignorance will be betrayed, and may frequently expose you to ridicule. During the riots at Nottingham I recollect hearing you condemn the invention of machines, which, by abridging labour, throw a number of workmen out of employment. Your opinion was founded upon mistaken principles of benevolence. In short, my dear, so many things are more or less connected with the science of political economy, that if you persevere in your resolution, you might almost as well condemn yourself to perpetual silence.

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CAROLINE.

I should at least be privileged to talk about dress, amusements, and such lady-like topics.

MRS. B.

I have heard no trifling degree of ignorance of political economy betrayed in talking on dress. "What a pity," said one lady, "that French lace should be so dear; for my part I make no scruple of smuggling it; there is really a great satisfaction in cheating the custom-house." Another wondered she could so easily reconcile smuggling to her conscience; that she thought French laces and silks, and all French goods should be totally prohibited; that she was determined never to wear any thing from foreign countries, let it be ever so beautiful; and that it was shameful to encourage foreign manufactures whilst our own poor were starving.

CAROLINE.

What fault can you find with the latter opinion? It appears to me to be replete with humanity and patriotism.

MRS. B.

The benevolence of the lady I do not question; but without knowledge to guide and sense to regulate the feelings, the best intentions will be frustrated. The science of political economy is

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intimately connected with the daily occurrences of life, and in this respect differs materially from that of chemistry, astronomy, or electricity; the mistakes we may fall into in the latter sciences can have little sensible effect upon our conduct, whilst our ignorance of the former may lead us into serious practical errors.

There is scarcely any history or any account of voyages or travels that does not abound with facts and opinions, the bearings of which cannot be understood without some previous acquaintance with the principles of political economy: besides, should the author himself be deficient in this knowledge, you will be continually liable to adopt his errors from inability to detect them. This was your case in reading *Telemachus*. Ignorance of the principles of political economy is to be discovered in some of the most elegant and sensible of our writers, especially amongst the poets. That beautiful composition of Goldsmith, the *Deserted Village*, is full of errors of this description, which, from its great popularity, are very liable to mislead the ill-informed.

CAROLINE.

I should almost regret to learn any thing which would lower that beautiful poem in my estimation.

MRS. B.

Its intrinsic merit as a poem is quite sufficient to