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Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)SHOOTING NIAGARA : AND AFTER ?¹

[August 1867]

I

THERE probably never was since the Heptarchy ended, or almost since it began, so hugely critical an epoch in the history of England as this we have now entered upon, with universal self-congratulation and flinging-up of caps ; nor one in which,—with no Norman Invasion now ahead, to lay hold of it, to bridle and regulate it for us (little thinking it was *for us*), and guide it into higher and wider regions,—the question of utter death or of nobler new life for the poor Country was so uncertain. Three things seem to be agreed upon by gods and men, at least by English men and gods ; certain to happen, and are now in visible course of fulfilment.

1° *Democracy* to complete itself ; to go the full length of its course, towards the Bottomless or into it, no power now extant to prevent it or even considerably retard it,—till we have seen where it will lead us to, and whether there will *then* be any return possible, or none. Complete “liberty” to all persons ; Count of Heads to be the Divine Court of Appeal on every question and interest of mankind ; Count of Heads to choose a Parliament according to its own heart at last, and sit with Penny Newspapers zealously watching the same ; said Parliament, so chosen and so watched, to do what trifle of legislating and administering may still be needed in such an England, with its hundred-and-fifty

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millions 'free' more and more to follow each his own nose, by way of guide-post in this intricate world.

2° That, in a limited time, say fifty years hence, the Church, all Churches and so-called religions, the Christian Religion itself, shall have deliquesced,—into "Liberty of Conscience," Progress of Opinion, Progress of Intellect, Philanthropic Movement, and other aqueous residues, of a vapid badly-scented character;—and shall, like water spilt upon the ground, trouble nobody considerably thenceforth, but evaporate at its leisure.

3° That, in lieu thereof, there shall be Free Trade, in all senses, and to all lengths: unlimited Free Trade,—which some take to mean, 'Free racing, ere long with unlimited speed, in the career of *Cheap and Nasty*';—this beautiful career, not in shop-goods only, but in all things temporal, spiritual and eternal, to be flung generously open, wide as the portals of the Universe; so that everybody shall start free, and everywhere, 'under enlightened popular suffrage,' the race shall be to the swift, and the high office shall fall to him who is ablest if not to do it, at least to get elected for doing it.

These are three altogether new and very considerable achievements, lying visibly ahead of us, not far off,—and so extremely considerable, that every thinking English creature is tempted to go into manifold reflections and inquiries upon them. My own have not been wanting, any time these thirty years past, but they have not been of a joyful or triumphant nature; not prone to utter themselves; indeed expecting, till lately, that they might with propriety lie unuttered altogether. But the series of events comes swifter and swifter, at a strange rate; and hastens unexpectedly,—'velocity increasing' (if you will consider, for this too is as when the little stone has been loosened, which sets the whole mountain-side in motion) 'as the *square* of the time':—so that the wisest Prophecy finds it was quite wrong as to date; and, patiently, or even indolently waiting, is astonished to see

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itself fulfilled, not in centuries as anticipated, but in decades and years. It was a clear prophecy, for instance, that Germany would either become honourably Prussian or go to gradual annihilation: but who of us expected that we ourselves, instead of our children's children, should live to behold it; that a magnanimous and fortunate Herr von Bismarck, whose dispraise was in all the Newspapers, would, to his own amazement, find the thing now doable; and would do it, do the essential of it, in a few of the current weeks? That England would have to take the Niagara leap of completed Democracy one day, was also a plain prophecy, though uncertain as to time.

II

The prophecy, truly, was plain enough, this long while: *Δόγμα γὰρ αὐτῶν τίς μεταβάλλει*; "For who can change the opinion of these people!" as the sage Antoninus notes. It is indeed strange how prepossessions and delusions seize upon whole communities of men; no basis in the notion they have formed, yet everybody adopting it, everybody finding the whole world agree with him in it, and accept it as an axiom of Euclid; and, in the universal repetition and reverberation, taking all contradiction of it as an insult, and a sign of malicious insanity, hardly to be borne with patience. "For who can change the opinion of these people?" as our Divus Imperator says. No wisest of mortals. This people cannot be convinced out of its "axiom of Euclid" by any reasoning whatsoever; on the contrary, all the world assenting, and continually repeating and reverberating, there soon comes that singular phenomenon, which the Germans call *Schwärmerei* ('*enthusiasm*' is our poor Greek equivalent), which means simply '*Swarmery*,' or the 'Gathering of Men in Swarms,' and what prodigies they are in the habit of doing and believing, when thrown into that miraculous condition. Some big Queen Bee is in the centre of the swarm; but any commonplace stupidest *bee*, Cleon the Tanner, Beales, John of

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Leyden, John of Bromwicham, any bee whatever, if he can happen, by noise or otherwise, to be chosen for the function, will straightway get fatted and inflated into *bulk*, which of itself means complete capacity; no difficulty about your Queen Bee: and the swarm once formed, finds itself impelled to action, as with one heart and one mind. Singular, in the case of human swarms, with what perfection of unanimity and quasi-religious conviction the stupidest absurdities can be received as axioms of Euclid, nay, as articles of faith, which you are not only to believe, unless malignantly insane, but are (if you have any honour or morality) to push into practice, and without delay see *done*, if your soul would live! Divine commandment *to vote* ("Manhood Suffrage,"—Horsehood, Doghood ditto not yet treated of); universal "glorious Liberty" (to Sons of the Devil in overwhelming majority, as would appear); count of Heads the God-appointed way in this Universe, all other ways Devil-appointed; in one brief word, which includes whatever of palpable incredibility and delirious absurdity, universally believed, can be uttered or imagined on these points, "the equality of men," any man equal to any other; Quashee Nigger to Socrates or Shakspeare; Judas Iscariot to Jesus Christ;—and Bedlam and Gehenna equal to the New Jerusalem, shall we say? If these things are taken up, not only as axioms of Euclid, but as articles of religion burning to be put in practice for the salvation of the world,—I think you will admit that *Swarmery* plays a wonderful part in the heads of poor Mankind; and that very considerable results are likely to follow from it in our day!

But you will in vain attempt, by argument of human intellect, to contradict or turn aside any of these divine axioms, indisputable as those of Euclid, and of sacred or quasi-celestial quality to boot: if you have neglected the one method (which was a silent one) of dealing with them at an early stage, they are thenceforth invincible; and will plunge more and more madly forward towards practical fulfilment.

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Once fulfilled, it will then be seen how credible and wise they were. Not even the Queen Bee but will then know what to think of them. Then, and never till then.

By far the notablest case of *Swarmery*, in these times, is that of the late American War, with Settlement of the Nigger Question for result. Essentially the Nigger Question was one of the smallest ; and in itself did not much concern mankind in the present time of struggles and hurries. One always rather likes the Nigger ; evidently a poor blockhead with good dispositions, with affections, attachments,—with a turn for Nigger Melodies, and the like :—he is the only Savage of all the coloured races that doesn't die out on sight of the White Man ; but can actually live beside him, and work and increase and be merry. The Almighty Maker has appointed him to be a Servant. Under penalty of Heaven's curse, neither party to this pre-appointment shall neglect or misdo his duties therein ;—and it is certain (though as yet widely unknown), Servantship on the *nomadic* principle, at the rate of so many shillings per day, *cannot* be other than misdome. The whole world rises in shrieks against you, on hearing of such a thing :—yet the whole world, listening to those cool Sheffield disclosures of *rattening*, and the market-rates of murder in that singular 'Sheffield Assassination Company (Limited),' feels its hair rising on end ;—to little purpose hitherto ; being without even a gallows to make response ! The fool of a world listens, year after year, for above a generation back, to "disastrous *strikes*," "merciless *lockouts*," and other details of the nomadic scheme of servitude ; nay, is becoming thoroughly disquieted about its own too lofty-minded flunkies, mutinous maid-servants (ending, naturally enough, as "distressed needle-women" who cannot sew ; thirty-thousand of these latter now on the pavements of London), and the kindred phenomena on every hand : but it will be long before the fool of a world open its eyes to the taproot of all that,—to the

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fond notion, in short, That servanthip and mastership, on the nomadic principle, was ever, or will ever be, except for brief periods, possible among human creatures. Poor souls, and when they have discovered it, what a puddling and weltering, and scolding and jargoning, there will be, before the first real step towards remedy is taken!

Servanthip, like all solid contracts between men (like wedlock itself, which was *once* nomadic enough, temporary enough!), must become a contract of permanency, not easy to dissolve, but difficult extremely,—a “contract for life,” if you can manage it (which you cannot, without many wise laws and regulations, and a great deal of earnest thought and anxious experience), will evidently be the best of all.¹ And this was already the Nigger’s essential position. Mischief, irregularities, injustices did probably abound between Nigger and Buckra; but the poisonous taproot of all mischief, and impossibility of fairness, humanity, or well-doing in the contract, never had been there! Of all else the remedy was easy in comparison; vitally important to every just man concerned in it; and, under all obstructions (which in the American case, begirt with frantic “Abolitionists,” fire-breathing like the old Chimæra, were immense), was gradually getting itself done. To me individually the Nigger’s case was not the most pressing in the world, but among the least so! America, however, had got into *Swarmery* upon it (not America’s blame either, but in great part ours, and that of the nonsense *we* sent over to them); and felt that in the Heavens or the Earth there was nothing so godlike, or incomparably pressing

¹ *Ilias (Americana) in Nuce.*

‘PETER of the North (to PAUL of the South): “Paul, you unaccountable scoundrel, I find you hire your servants for life, not by the month or year as I do! You are going straight to Hell, you —!”’

‘PAUL: “Good words, Peter! The risk is my own; I am willing to take the risk. Hire you your servants by the month or the day, and get straight to Heaven; leave me to my own method.”’

‘PETER: “No, I won’t. I will beat your brains out first!” (And is trying dreadfully ever since, but cannot yet manage it.)—T. C.

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to be done. Their energy, their valour, their etc. etc. were worthy of the stock they sprang from:—and now, poor fellows, *done* it they have, with a witness. A continent of the earth has been submerged, for certain years, by deluges as from the Pit of Hell; half a million (some say a whole million, but surely they exaggerate) of excellent White Men, full of gifts and faculty, have torn and slashed one another into horrid death, in a temporary humour, which will leave centuries of remembrance fierce enough: and three million absurd Blacks, men and brothers (of a sort), are completely “emancipated”; launched into the career of improvement,—likely to be ‘improved off the face of the earth’ in a generation or two! That is the dismal prediction to me, of the warmest enthusiast to their Cause whom I have known of American men,—who doesn’t regret his great efforts either, in the great Cause now won, Cause incomparably the most important on Earth or in Heaven at this time. *Papæ, papæ*; wonderful indeed!

In our own country, too, *Swarmery* has played a great part for many years past; and especially is now playing, in these very days and months. Our accepted axioms about “Liberty,” “Constitutional Government,” “Reform,” and the like objects, are of truly wonderful texture: venerable by antiquity, many of them, and written in all manner of Canonical Books; or else, the newer part of them, celestially clear as perfect unanimity of all tongues, and *Vox Populi vox Dei*, can make them: axioms confessed, or even inspirations and gospel verities, to the general mind of man. To the mind of here and there a man it begins to be suspected that perhaps they are only conditionally true; that taken unconditionally, or under changed conditions, they are not true, but false and even disastrously and fatally so. Ask yourself about “Liberty,” for example; what you do really mean by it, what in any just and rational soul is that Divine quality of liberty? That a good man be “free,” as we call it, be permitted to

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unfold himself in works of goodness and nobleness, is surely a blessing to him, immense and indispensable;—to him and to those about him. But that a bad man be “free,”—permitted to unfold himself in *his* particular way, is contrariwise the fatalest curse you could inflict on him; curse and nothing else, to him and all his neighbours. Him the very Heavens call upon you to persuade, to urge, induce, compel, into something of well-doing; if you absolutely cannot, if he will continue in ill-doing,—then for him (I can assure you, though you will be shocked to hear it), the one “blessing” left is the speediest gallows you can lead him to. Speediest, that at least his ill-doing may cease *quam primum*. Oh, my friends, whither are you buzzing and swarming, in this extremely absurd manner? Expecting a Millennium from “extension of the suffrage,” laterally, vertically, or in whatever way?

All the Millenniums I ever heard of heretofore were to be preceded by a “chaining of the Devil for a thousand years,”—laying *him* up, tied neck and heels, and put beyond stirring, as the preliminary. You too have been taking preliminary steps, with more and more ardour, for a thirty years back; but they seem to be all in the opposite direction: a cutting asunder of straps and ties, wherever you might find them; pretty indiscriminate of choice in the matter: a general repeal of old regulations, fetters and restrictions (restrictions on the Devil originally, I believe, for most part, but now fallen slack and ineffectual), which had become unpleasant to many of you,—with loud shouting from the multitude, as strap after strap was cut, “Glory, glory, another strap is gone!”—this, I think, has mainly been the sublime legislative industry of Parliament since it became “Reform Parliament”; victoriously successful, and thought sublime and beneficent by some. So that now hardly any limb of the Devil has a thrum or tatter of rope or leather left upon it:—there needs almost superhuman heroism in you to “whip” a garotter; no Fenian taken with the reddest hand is to be

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meddled with, under penalties; hardly a murderer, never so detestable and hideous, but you find him "insane," and board him at the public expense,—a very peculiar *British* Prytaneum of these days! And in fact, THE DEVIL (he, verily, if you will consider the sense of words) is likewise become an Emancipated Gentleman; lithe of limb, as in Adam and Eve's time, and scarcely a toe or finger of him *tied* any more. And you, my astonishing friends, *you* are certainly getting into a millennium, such as never was before,—hardly even in the dreams of Bedlam. Better luck to you by the *way*, my poor friends;—a little less of buzzing, humming, *swarming* (*i.e.* tumbling in infinite noise and darkness), that you might try to look a little, each for himself, what kind of "way" it is!

But indeed your "Reform" movement, from of old, has been wonderful to me; everybody meaning by it, not 'Reformation,' practical amendment of his own foul courses, or even of his neighbour's, which is always much welcomer; no thought of that whatever, though that, you would say, is the one thing to be thought of and aimed at;—but meaning simply "Extension of the Suffrage." Bring in more voting; that will clear away the universal rottenness, and quagmire of mendacities, in which poor England is drowning; let England only vote sufficiently, and all is clean and sweet again. A very singular *swarmery* this of the Reform movement, I must say.

III

Inexpressibly delirious seems to me, at present in my solitude, the puddle of Parliament and Public upon what it calls the "Reform Measure"; that is to say, The calling in of new supplies of blockheadism, gullibility, bribeability, amenability to beer and balderdash, by way of amending the woes we have had from our previous supplies of that bad article. The intellect of a man who believes in the possibility of "improvement" by such a method is to me a

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finished-off and shut-up intellect, with which I would not argue: mere waste of wind between us to exchange words on that class of topics. It is not Thought, this which my reforming brother utters to me with such emphasis and eloquence; it is mere 'reflex and reverberation,' repetition of what he has always heard others imagining to think, and repeating as orthodox, indisputable, and the gospel of our salvation in this world. Does not all Nature groan everywhere, and lie in bondage, till you give it a Parliament? Is one a man at all unless one have a suffrage to Parliament? These are axioms admitted by all English creatures for the last two hundred years. If you have the misfortune not to believe in them at all, but to believe the contrary for a long time past, the inferences and inspirations drawn from them, and the '*swarmeries*' and enthusiasms of mankind thereon will seem to you not a little marvellous!—

Meanwhile the *good* that lies in this delirious "new Reform Measure,"—as there lies something of good in almost everything,—is perhaps not inconsiderable. It accelerates notably what I have long looked upon as inevitable;—pushes us at once into the Niagara Rapids: irresistibly propelled, with ever-increasing velocity, we shall now arrive; who knows how *soon*! For a generation past, it has been growing more and more evident that there was only this issue; but now the issue itself has become imminent, the distance of it to be guessed by years. Traitorous Politicians, grasping at votes, even votes from the rabble, have brought it on;—one cannot but consider them traitorous; and for one's own poor share, would rather have been shot than been concerned in it. And yet, after all my silent indignation and disgust, I cannot pretend to be clearly sorry that such a consummation is expedited. I say to myself, "Well, perhaps the sooner such a mass of hypocrisies, universal mismanagements and brutal platitudes and infidelities *ends*,—if not in some improvement, then in death and *finis*,—may it not be the better? The