

ON THE GAINS AND LOSSES IN
HISTORIC PROGRESS.

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IN the recent festive season, which, besides its sacred associations, has been so indissolubly linked with our literature, in the works of Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, Charles Dickens, and others, I had the opportunity of hearing, in a distant part of the country, a Lecture on CHRISTMAS CAROLS, which was accompanied by many interesting poetical and musical illustrations. Some of the older carols quoted were characteristic and quaint: some of the later ones were genial and appropriate; but, between these, there came some, which truly to describe is to say that they were of the vilest character of badness. The "sense" was nonsense; the measure was doggerel; the tunes (I cannot say, the music) were the veriest sing-song. These were the carols of the last century. There was no good carol-singing then. There were no good carols to sing. Now this, which appears to be *two* facts, is only *one*. And if we look at it, closely and carefully, we shall find that it very noticeably exemplifies a principle which further enquiry will shew us to be of very wide and general application. It is this:—

When a thing is neglected, the power of appreciation dies out: and the neglect of one age entails a positive loss upon succeeding generations. The age which cared nothing for Christmas carols, left the following age no Christmas carols worth caring for. One age stands still, and the next retrogrades.

I think the principle here indicated is of very extensive application ; that it illustrates and accounts for many incidents and apparent anomalies in that erratic thing called Human Progress ; and that its manifestations are consistent and uniform, though its operations are in fields utterly remote and diverse.

Look, for instance, into our own immediate subject of Archæology. Is there not, in every volume it unrolls, a story told, of attainments made and then surrendered ; of successive arts arrived at and then lost ; of craft, and cunning, and skill, in design and workmanship, which we admire and wonder at, but which we cannot emulate or imitate ;—which have died, either with the hand that wrought them, or with the generation in which they flourished ? When “ there arose up a new king “over Egypt, which knew not Joseph,” (Êxodus i, 8,) then all the blessings which had been showered on Egypt through the incoming of the Hebrew immigrants were forgotten ; and the race which one grateful Pharaoh had delighted to honour became the object of oppression and cruelty to his degraded successor.

All History tells the same story.* So also does Art. The massy construction of the Pyramids was effected by mechanism of which succeeding ages were as ignorant as the savage of

* The generation which denounced mince pies, and suppressed the Christmas festival, by Act of Parliament, did not stop there. They deprived their children not only of Plum Pudding, but of King, and Church, and Archbishop, and House of Lords : and the profanation and destruction which an American Bishop has so glowingly described in the verses given below,+ have been followed by this result—that from that day until our own, during a period of not less than two centuries—there never was built a single church in this country which any man of taste and knowledge is not ashamed of. I say this, remembering all the while the great merits of the works of Wren. But though St. Paul's is a magnificent building, it is not a Church.

+ “ And a lawless soldier tramples
Where the holy loved to kneel,
And he spurns a Bishop's ashes
With his ruffian hoof of steel !
Ay, horses have they stabled
Where the blessed martyrs knelt,
That neigh where rose the Anthem,
And the Psalm that made us melt.

There once a glorious window
Shed down a flood of rays—
With rainbow hues and holy,
And colours all ablaze !
Its pictured panes are broken,
Our fathers' tombs profaned,
And the font where we were christened
With the blood of brothers stained.”

Christian Ballads.—By Bishop COXE, of Western New York.

the wilderness. The sculpture and the architecture of ancient Greece stand at a point which leaves all after generations far behind. We cannot paint like Raphael, or Titian, or Rubens. We cannot fabricate the light and graceful work of such artificers in iron as Quentin Matsys. We are only just groping and finding our way back to something like, yet far inferior to, the work which the unknown architects of our abbeys and cathedrals wrought in the middle ages, poising the "high-embowed roof," in an airy lightness which seems too fragile to endure, yet which stands to-day as firmly as it did five centuries ago. We admire, but we despair of imitating, the exquisite work in silver of Benvenuto Cellini. The art by which our fathers stained the glass which let in the "dim religious light" on Milton's yet undimmed vision, is lost to their descendants: and the mysterious combination of materials by which the potters of days long past produced their matchless ware, leaves their products matchless, for we know not how they made them. Majolica, Chelsea, and other rare examples of earthenware are not only rare, but becoming rarer; for as the specimens perish, they cannot be replaced.

If this were the fitting time and place, and I the proper person to draw attention to it, I suppose the most direct and telling evidence in illustration of this subject could be drawn from the History of Religion in this country. I can only treat the matter historically, not polemically,—in the spirit of the critic, not in that of a partisan;—and in this way I call your attention to the fact, that what in one place is called "Church Restoration," and in another "Religious Revival,"—while it is styled "Development" by one school, and stigmatized as "Innovation" by another, is, after all, marked by one character, and is referable to one cause, namely, the desire to reach a point which has once been attained, and then lost;—the burning longing to vitalize forms which have become dead; to revive doctrines which have lost their hold; to renew what

has become obsolete ; and to make the men of this generation answer to appeals which thrilled to the very core, in days gone by, brave men and strong,

“ Whose bones are dust,
Whose swords are rust,
Whose souls are with the saints we trust.

Thus, whether the watchword and the striving of the zealous be for “ Primitive Christianity,” “ the Catholic Faith,” or “ Evangelical Religion ;” the motive and the purpose are the same, in each case. Martin Luther and George Fox ; John Wesley and Edward Irving ; not to speak of our own times, and quote the names of living men—all owned the power of this spell ; all acted under this impulse ; all strove, in their manner, and after their light and power, to awaken men’s souls, as St. Paul had done, and to make it visible before the world, that “ GOD had not left Himself without a witness ” in the dreariest and most degenerate times ; but that CHRIST was verily, as He had promised to be, with His own people, always, “ even to the end of the world.”

But perhaps this is to regard the subject in an aspect too serious for the occasion. And, to come down to lower themes, is it not true that if you neglect any faculty of the body, or attribute of the mind, its strength fails, its purpose is imperfectly fulfilled, it dies away for want of exercise ? Neglect a child, and it will die. Neglect a plant, and it will perish. Cease to care properly for anything, and you will soon have nothing to care for.

So in like manner, in the life of the body politic. If you have gained a footing in advance, you must maintain it. We are laboriously and painfully toiling up hill in all the victories we achieve over matter and the powers of resistance—physical and moral. We are urging on before us a spherical body, which, if it is not pushed onwards, will roll backwards. It can only be moved onwards and upwards by our unflagging,

energetic efforts : it will not stand still, even, unless we hold it there ; and if we leave it to itself, the advantages so hardly gained are speedily lost again. I think I have heard it stated that in some departments of medical science the ancient sages unlocked mysteries, and found secrets revealed to them, which have ever since been closed against their successors. The Ancient Masters in painting are at once the admiration and the *despair* of their posterity. The art of teaching the deaf and dumb was discovered and actually applied by a Spanish monk (Pedro Ponce de Leon) in the thirteenth century : but it was not until the middle of the eighteenth that the steps were taken which have led to the establishment of schools for their instruction—nearly all within the last fifty years—in almost every country in Europe, and the principal States in America.

So in our Literary history. After the age of Elizabeth had been dazzled with the splendour of Shakspeare, Spenser, and other great men of those days, the reign of James had nothing to amuse itself withal but the antics of the pigmies. After Milton and Dryden, and the great names of the Restoration period, had departed ; and Addison, Swift, and Pope, had given their lustre to the reign of Queen Anne, we drop down upon the dreary *regime* of the Georges : and though Johnson and Goldsmith are to be mentioned with honour, we cannot forget that even Johnson himself, in those degenerate days, could condescend to notice, and to commend, the rubbish of the so-called “English Poets,” whose natural dead weight would have sunk them into oblivion, if their critic—Johnson himself—had not by his notices of their eventless lives and dreary works, floated them into familiar knowledge, though not to fame. Indeed I know scarcely any more humiliating period in our history than that which Thackeray has included in the term of the “Four Georges.” In morals and religion, in public spirit and political sagacity, in art and science, in

all, or *nearly all*, that makes a people great, and a nation prosperous, this country was in a position which one cannot but regard with shame. I have purposely said in "nearly all" respects, for I must, from the sweeping denunciations of these various particulars, except *one*. It is this. The country which, whatever its other short-comings and offences, could annex India to the British dominion, actually by the courage of a mere handful of men fighting against millions; which could afford to lose America and be none the weaker; and to battle with and crush Napoleon and his power, and be none the poorer for it; which sent forth the fleets of Nelson, the armies of Wellington, and the expeditions of Cook, had power and life within it which have now, thank God, borne worthier fruits in other fields. May they be perpetual!

Every privilege gained, every right conferred, every difficulty overcome, every advance achieved, must be *held good*. *Quod tuum, tene*, was the motto of one of the most illustrious of Lancashire worthies (Sir Humphrey Chetham). In its best sense, it should be ours. The attainments, the victories, the gains of every generation, are the patrimony and heritage of their posterity. The voices of all the ages past, the claims of contemporary interests, and the rightful expectations and demands of the ages to come, all express themselves in the charge of the aged apostle to his disciple Timothy—"Keep that, which I have committed unto thee."