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The Coming Civilization

Author(s): Felix L. Oswald

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## THE COMING CIVILIZATION.

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THE philosophers of pagan antiquity derived many of their theories from the results of astronomical studies, and the sum of their cosmic knowledge was expressed in the apothegm that "the steps of nature move in eternal circles."

"The path of nature is a path of progress," was the axiom of the earlier evolutionists. "The evolutions of nature progress in undulations," is the verdict of modern science. In other words, the progressive tendencies of the physical universe are disguised in a rhythm of rise and decline, of ebb and tide, of growth and decay, or even of apparent death. When the poet-philosopher Lucretius wrote his didactic rhapsody, the experience of mankind seemed to justify the belief in the possibility of a constant progress from barbarism to higher and higher planes of culture; the stock of human knowledge had for ages increased by a simple process of aggregation, and, for more than a thousand years, the civilization of the Mediterranean nations had advanced with the triumphant steadiness of a rising sun. But the world had to witness the decline of that sun and its ultimate extinction in the gloom of a night that threatened to outlast the hopes of a dawn.

Daylight has, after all, returned, and the law of eventual progress has already been vindicated in the fact that, in several essential respects, the brightness of the new morning has undoubtedly eclipsed the brightness of any former day. Light has spread from the hilltops to the valleys and plains of science. The temples of dogmatism have ceased to throw their gigantic shadows, and the waning of ancient loadstars is compensated by the simultaneous disappearance of vampires and night-hags. The traditions of the long night still cloud the eastern horizon, but the ascendancy of civilization is progressing as unmistakably as the rise of a March sun through winter mists to the brightness of a higher noon, or like the advance of a river, long lost in

caves, and emerging to pursue its way with a broader and swifter stream. That swiftness of progress has, indeed, increased at a portentous, and certainly unprecedented rate ; but the impetuous force of the current may, after all, not presage the brink of an abyss, but derive its impetus from the rush of the dam-breaking waters—the long pent-up waters freed by the outburst of the Protestant revolt. Dam-breaking rivers are apt to make up for lost time ; though, on the other hand, it is not impossible that the very force of that impulse may have hurried the stream far beyond the fair highland regions of its course, and that the free horizon of the widening plain may presage an age of prose and the neighborhood of the coast swamps. The land of promise has its limits, and we have traveled far.

But though the sailors on the river of time cannot predict the distance of the sea, their pilots may, at least, read the promise of the morrow and foresee cliffs or shallows by ascertaining the general direction of the stream. The science of prognostication has, indeed, been defined as the “art of distinguishing the main current of tendencies from the incidental ripples of the stream ;” and within the last fifty years the currents of civilization have revealed their direction by symptoms of rather unmistakable significance. Ever since the revival of natural science the signs of the times have yearly become more legible, as legible almost as in the middle of the fourth century, when even the optimistic Romans could no longer ignore the omens of the approaching eclipse. A few years after the death of the Emperor Valens, the son of the prophetess Sospitira was one day praying in the temple of Serapis, when the spirit of his mother came over him and the veil of the future was withdrawn. “Woe be to our children,” he exclaimed, on awakening from his trance, “I see a cloud approaching ; a great darkness is going to spread over the face of the earth !” And, but too soon, even less prophetic eyes might have discerned the gathering mists of superstition, the rising smoke-clouds of the Auto da Fé and the sand-whirls of the desert destined to overspread the fields of once fertile empires.

“The night ends with storms ; yet rejoice ; they herald the morning,” were the last words of Erasmus, and in the brightening light of the new day the horizon of the future now plainly reveals the verdure of wide forests, temples of health and science, the fruit plantations of reclaimed fields, and the garden-homes of

renaturalized men. The progress of our latter-day civilization has not yet reached its ultimate goal, but we can no longer doubt that the principle of that progress is a reaction against the doctrine of Anti-naturalism. All the leading nations of the Caucasian race are retracing their steps from ghostland to earth. From the Caucasus to the foot of the Cordilleras, science is busy reclaiming the blighted gardens of our earthly paradise. All our successful reformers are preaching a gospel of physical regeneration.

The two most important reform projects of the present age are undoubtedly those of the Temperance League and the Forestry Association, and it would be blasphemy against the spirit of human reason to doubt that the triumph of both is now fully insured. The cities of the future may have underground distilleries and remnants of overground drunkards, but a licensed rumseller will come to seem as ludicrous an anomaly as a licensed pick-pocket, or a diplomaed well-poisoner. A "witch-hunter's warrant," dated Cologne, 1387, was recently offered for sale by a Leipzig bibliopole, who, in spite of his honorable reputation, had to secure the signatures of three learned antiquarians to clear himself from the suspicion of having forged the preposterous document. A. D. 1987 a similar indorsement may be needed to establish the authenticity of a Government certificate to the effect that, "in consideration of a prepaid percentage of his probable profits, the holder of this license is hereby authorized to poison his fellow-men."

Nor can we doubt that our children will, in time, recognize the significance of a mistake which has, in the literal sense, evolved a hell on earth by turning 6,500,000 square miles of once fertile lands into a Gehenna of arid sandwastes. Since the beginning of our chronological era the area of an artificial desert, produced by the unspeakable folly of forest destruction, has increased at an average yearly rate of 3,200 square miles, and another thousand years of equal improvidence would seal the fate of the human race by exhausting the vegetable productiveness of this planet. The discovery of two new continents has respiteed the doomed nations of the Old World, but the rapid settlement of those land-grants will soon reduce our children to the alternative of tree culture or emigration to the almshouse of the New Jerusalem. Tree culture is clearly destined to redeem the barren uplands of our Western territories, and in a hundred years from now even the present ex-

tent of our treeless prairies will have become a tradition. For, by that time, the logic of necessity will not have failed to reveal another secret of agricultural economy : the fact, namely, that the chief peril of overpopulation can be almost infinitely postponed by the *substitution of perennial for annual food-plants*. Thus a plantation of bread-fruit trees will support twelve times as many families as the same area planted in wheat or potatoes ; banana orchards, according to Humboldt's estimate, exceed the food value of wheat-fields more than twenty times, and improved varieties of the Italian chestnut—as hardy a forest tree as the birch or maple—could undoubtedly furnish an available substitute for the bread-stuffs of our Northern cereals. . Oily beechnuts, olives, bananas, chestnuts, sugar pears, maples, and the sugar pine of the Pacific slope could furnish, in almost unlimited abundance, the three chief elements of man-food, viz., the oleaginous, farinaceous and saccharine ingredients. Moreover, tree plantations improve from year to year, while deciduous plants exhaust the fertility of the soil, and the time saved from weeding and plowing could be devoted to experiments with new varieties of fruit trees, which, besides, would bless their cultivator with shade in summer and wind-falls of fuel in winter, and temper the rigor of climatic extremes as effectually as the other tree plantations.

Till the gospel of tree culture shall teach us to “work the world over again,” the history of progress will remain almost identified with the history of the North American continent, especially within the present territory of our States, united or otherwise ; and several interesting *auguria* may be safely implied from the premises of Old World analogies. Even a superficial study of those precedents can, for instance, leave no doubt that Mormonism has passed the repressible stage, and that the Ethiopian alloy of our population will melt away before the influx of Caucasian elements. The Women's Right Plan, Secular Education, and Free Trade will be accommodated with the opportunity of a practical test. The increase of wealth will not fail to foster art, as well as oligarchy and luxury. The progress of chemistry will develop industries undreamed of in the philosophy of our political economists. Its application to the improvement of homicidal machinery will greatly modify our present methods of warfare, though trial by battle, in some form or other, will, too probably, continue to the end of time, the most virtuous resolutions of the Millennium

Congress being apt to get wrecked against the argument of Ibrahim Pasha. "War is a curse," admitted that ingenuous Mussulman, "and it is quite conceivable that a large number of princes could be induced to agree on some plan for settling international disputes by arbitration. But suppose that any member of the syndicate should take it in his head to break his contract and reassemble his troops—the only visible way to coerce him would be to re-prime our old muskets and go to war again."

There is no danger that the revived Nature worshipers of the coming generation will abuse their sacred groves after the manner of the Canaanitish idolaters; but they will probably adopt the plan of the Grecian *gymnasiarchs*, who utilized the shade of their suburban parks for the training-ground of their young athletes. When the *Turn-Bund* established its first gymnasiums in Northern Germany, the government harassed their leaders with the suspicion of political intrigues, but the athletic unions of our free American cities, our wrestling matches and ubiquitous base-ball clubs, leave no doubt that the present generation is fast outgrowing the anti-physical bias of the mediæval bigots. We have rediscovered the truth that physical exercise profiteth a good deal, and the school trustees of the twentieth century will build a gymnasium near every township school. Athletic sports will be patronized as the best safeguard against the temptations of the alcohol habit, and the ever-growing enthusiasm which, even now, kindles about every paltry walking match or boat race, makes it evident that the age of the next generation will witness the revival of the Olympic Festivals.

The civilization of the future will, however, respectfully decline Mr. Ruskin's plan for regaining Arcadia by the substitution of moonshine and manual labor for gaslight and steam-engines. Labor-saving machinery has come to stay, and if steam shall not monopolize the rough work of the next century it is only because it will share its functions with its twin giant of electricity. We shall have steam quarries and steam digging machines, and the speed of travel is destined to surpass the achievements of the present age by just as much as a modern express train surpasses a mediæval mail coach. The coming American autocrat of the breakfast table will growl at the delay of the morning mail per night boat from Europe. Excursion trains leaving Boston after breakfast will avoid the night fogs of the Cordilleras by

reaching the City of Mexico in time for supper. The competition of rail and ocean routes with balloon bee lines will make travel cheap enough to familiarize our tourists with every zone of their continent; and climatic epicures will probably contrive to enjoy a perpetual summer by convening their July picnics in the Yellowstone Park, and their New Year's symposium in Valparaiso.

The Fresh Air Union, too, will become an international institution. Cities that can afford to promote the theological soundness of distant heathens will not much longer neglect the physical health of their own children. Summer camps, free parks, and Zoos, free kindergartens, athletic festivals, cottage suburbs, and free public baths will obviate many of the social evils which our Nihilists propose to cure by actual cautery. The tenement curse is a fruitful source of such ailments, and the propaganda of our land reformers proves that the existence, if not the remedy, of the evil is beginning to be recognized. The enthusiasm of that propaganda is, indeed, in more than one sense, a most significant sign of the times, and presages an age of thus far undreamt-of methods of co-operation. Like other social Messiahs, the apostles of the new gospel are haunted by panacea visions; but even the Anti-Poverty project does not deserve the cruel sarcasm of the British satirist who proposes an anti-misfortune league, and a society for the abolition of the origin of evil.

Our modern crusaders may have underrated the distance of their promised land and the strength of the hostile entrenchments, but their mistakes do evidently not extend to the direction of their march route. The fact also remains that they will enter the field with siege engines of tremendous efficiency; and there is no valid reason to doubt that, failing in their attack on the citadel of inevitable ills, they will turn their attention to the avoidable and decidedly unnecessary evils of social life. The workingmen of the future may waive their claims for the establishment of "government soup-houses for the mitigation of the natural penalties of shiftlessness," but they will most emphatically protest against mediæval methods of government interference with the legitimate rewards of industry—as, for instance, by the suppression of public recreations on the only day when about ninety-nine per cent. of our laborers find their only chance of leisure.

On the infatuation of an age that could perpetrate such outrages

in the name of religion, the ethic philosophers of the future will look back with a shudder, as upon the dream of a hideous nightmare—yet withal with more of pity than of hatred. For we shall never reconcile the religion of humanity to the traditions of the past till we recognize the fact that the inhuman asceticism of the Middle Age was anything but selfish. It was rather unselfishness gone mad—unworldliness carried to the extreme of insane unnaturalism. Hindostan, where the apostles of Renunciation preached the unalloyed gospel of Buddha Sakyamuni, their doctrine retained for centuries the form of an actual world-denial. Life was considered a disease, and death its only cure ;—death, not by suicide, but by the more conclusive method of crushing out the very instincts of life, to prevent their revival in new forms of re-birth. To tempt a life-weary fellow man with the sweets of physical enjoyment, and thus revive the waning love of earth, would have been deemed an act of extreme unkindness ; and without the slightest claim to future compensation, the saints of Buddhism renounced the hopes of life to avoid its disappointments.

Compared with such doctrines it seems certainly a symptom of progress, if the Rev. Hengstenberg vindicates the hope of immortality by assuring us that “the chief motive of rational self-denial is the hope of making death worth dying.” But, while recognizing the merit of that “step in the right direction,” the Religion of the Future will prefer to attempt a further amendment by trying to make life worth living.

FELIX L. OSWALD.