

EQUALITY AS THE BASIS OF GOOD SOCIETY.



SOME years ago I knew an elder of the Shakers who differed from many of his brethren in having thought much about the social structure of his sect, though their communal life was rather favorable to thinking in all of them. We were talking one day of the life of the world, which I defended; and he said in concession of my ground at one point, «If good society were what it appears to be on the surface, I could not find fault with it. If people in society behaved toward one another from motives of real kindness, as they behave now from motives of politeness, society would be an image of heaven: for in society you see people defer to one another, the strong give way to the weak, the brilliant and the gifted will not put the rest at a disadvantage, and they all seem to meet on an equality. The trouble is that their behavior is merely a convention and not a principle; they behave beautifully from politeness and not from kindness.»

I was struck by this philosophy of the fact at the time; I still think it interesting, and I believe that it is essentially true. If not quite an image of heaven, good society appears to me an image of a righteous state on earth; and I find that though it is the stronghold of the prejudices which foster inequality, yet it is the very home of equality.

I.

PEOPLE often wish to get into good society because they hope to be the superiors of those who remain out of it; but when they are once in it, the ideal of their behavior is equality. In ideal, at least, society is the purely voluntary association of kindred minds and tastes in a region of absolute altruism. If you are asked to a house, the theory is that you are the equal of every person you meet there, and if you behave otherwise, you are vulgar. You are as dear to your host and hostess as any others whom they entreat in the same terms to give them the pleasure of their company. The understanding is that no distinction will be made between you and them: no one will seek his own advantage, but each will seek the advantage of the rest;

nothing shall be suffered to remind you of the selfish world outside. Deference and attention shall be your portion from all, which you will render again. If you are intellectually the inferior of the rest, society will carry its complaisance still farther, and, as Goethe noticed long ago, will adapt its conversation and diversion to your capacity. Even the servitude which tacitly operates your entertainment will be delicately used, and addressed in courteous terms. In its finest and gentlest moments society will get rid of the inferiors altogether, and the equals will serve one another.

We know very well what sometimes happens instead of this. There are some hosts and hostesses who neglect one guest and cumber another with favor; snubs and slights are exchanged between the guests, who seize petty occasions to gratify their greed and pride; the servants are coldly and thanklessly used. But we all think these things indecent when we witness them; when we do them ourselves we are ashamed of them, and we feel that we have violated an ideal which should have been sacred.

The ideal of society is equality, because to the more enlightened, and to all in their more enlightened moments, inequality is irksome and offensive. You can have no pleasure of the man you look up to, or the man you look down on; the thing is impossible. Your soul is always seeking the level of your companion's, and society formulates and expresses this instinctive desire for equality. The prince, the distinguished person, if he is a gentleman, will do his best to efface your difference when he meets you in society, and it will be your fault or your misfortune if you cannot let him do so; he will not ask you to be a snob or a toady. Inequality bores him; he is glad to get rid of it; and this is the mood of all good society. The better society is the more it shuns formality and seeks ease and freedom. The aristocrats, the highest equals, call each other by their first names, their nicknames, when they are by themselves, as the plebeians do.

II.

EQUALITY is such a beautiful thing that I wonder people can ever have any other ideal. It is the only social joy, the only comfort. If

you meet an inferior or a superior, you are at once wretched. Do you have any pleasure of the man who stands behind your chair at dinner? No more than of the man across the table who, because he is richer or of better family, or of greater distinction, treats you *de haut en bas*. You spoil the joy of life for your inferior, just as your superior spoils the joy of life for you. The sense of inferiority infuriates; the sense of superiority intoxicates. The madness is more or less violent, as temperament varies; but in some form it is felt wherever inequality is seen: and good society, which always hates a scene, instinctively does its best to ignore inequality. Of course it can do this only on a very partial and restricted scale, and of course the result is an effect of equality, and not equality itself, or equality merely for the moment.

Perhaps it is because we know society to be merely a make-believe in its equality that so many society people regard a real equality as impossible, and are content to remain in the make-believe. But even the pretense of equality is precious, and it has more honesty in it than the pretense of inequality. There is nothing so essentially false as that; and the superior, when he takes thought, is as distinctly aware of the fact as the inferior. Humanity is always seeking equality. The patrician wishes to be with his equals because his inferiors make him uneasy; the plebeian wishes to be with his equals because his superiors make him unhappy. This fact accounts for inequality itself, for classes. Inferiority and superiority were intolerable to men, and so they formed themselves into classes, that inside of these classes they might have the peace, the comfort, of equality; and each kept himself to his own class for that reason.

Human life, which is fluid and not fixed, is like other fluids in seeking a level. It has always done this in times past, and has not rested till it has found the level of equality in some place or other. It once found this in classes; and these became confluent with the gradual effect of time on their borders, and flowed into orders, larger and vaster. At last the larger expanses have begun to burst their bounds and to meet in the immeasurable level of equality, of society.

When we grow impatient of the inequality that still remains, we are apt to say that there is more inequality in the world than ever; but this is not so. There is more and ever more equality, because there is more good society, and good society is immensely better than it was. Once it contained only persons of noble or gentle birth; then per-

sons of genteel or sacred callings were admitted; now it welcomes to its level every one of agreeable manners and cultivated mind. This sort are not the less in it because it abounds in offensive and unworthy persons; and it is the spirit of the liberal and friendly people which characterizes it. All that society now asks of people is that they shall behave civilly, and join the rest in doing and saying pleasant things to one another. It asks of them what Christianity asks of sinners: that they shall cease to do evil, at least for the time being, for that afternoon or that evening.

Social equality is the expression of an instinct implanted in us from the first, as we see in children, who, until they are deprived by their elders, have no conception of social differences. It is true that we often see younger children straining up to the level of their elders, and apparently very happy if they are accepted there; but this is not a real happiness or comfort; it is the gratification of precocious ambition, inherited or instilled. So we see people of lower station basking in the notice of those they think above them; but they are not happy, and they are very far from comfortable in it. They are flattered, but to be flattered is not to be blessed; it is something as far from that feeling of peace which we associate with the idea of happiness as misery itself. It is misery, for it is false.

Whenever men are remanded to a situation where personal worth has sway, social equality reappears among them. In danger of any kind, in times of great hardship, in periods of struggle or suspense, in moments of patriotic emotion, equality again characterizes life, and one man is as good as another. In new countries, where people live in the need of neighborhood and kindness, equality is the rule; they laugh at the notion of anything else. That is the reason why equality was so long the ideal of America, for here we were everywhere emancipated from the old classifications by the necessity which knows no etiquette. We were forced to simplify ourselves; the New World, while it was new, had no use for the distinctions and differences of an older civility; and the Easterner, even now, when he goes West, finds a whole section incredulous of claims which his own sophistication has admitted.

It was the return of the race to simple conditions, and its long sojourn in these during the pioneer period of the middle West, which enabled it to give us Lincoln, «the first American,» as Lowell called him in the deepest inspiration of his own life. It can,

of course, justly be said that the conditions in which the race gave us Lincoln were rude, but I think that it is not from rudeness that the love of equality comes. Otherwise I cannot understand how the politest society should always strive for equality among its members, and that within its limits it should offer us the truest image of equality now recognizable among men.

III.

It is strange that while everybody acknowledges good society to be the highest expression of civilization, the purest joy and sweetest pleasure of it, many people, especially society people, should fear to have its greatest blessing, its most delicate beauty and subtlest charm, imparted to the whole of life.

If you speak of social equality before some women, they imagine that you want to take their pretty clothes away, and put them in the kitchen along with the cook, or at best expect them to dust their own parlors. Some men conceive of it with like force and intelligence, and ask you if you believe they ought to get no more money for toiling all day in a bank parlor, or managing a large business, than the fellow that works on the roads, or tends a machine in a mill. In either case they stand in abhorrence of what they call the dead level of equality.

I do not suppose there was ever a human being who got any good from inequality, and I think one may safely defy those who abhor equality to say what harm there would be in it. I, for my part, should like to have some one say why its level would be dead. Do those people live most who are the most deeply and hopelessly sundered into castes? Were those ages the happiest or the usefulest when there were masters and slaves, lords and villeins, and every man knew his place; or were they more animated than this, when we have pretty well rid ourselves of such differences, and no man thinks any other man's place rightfully beyond him? Is the arrest of development greater on the plains of society than on its summits or in its abysses? Is a king particularly alive? Is an aristocrat? Is a peasant? Have the inventions, the good books, the beautiful pictures and statues, the just laws, the animal comforts, even, come from the uppermost or the lowermost classes? They have mostly come from the middle classes, from the community lifted above want, but not above work, from the inexhaustible and generous vitality of the widest level of life.

If it is from equality, not from inequality, that we have anything to hope, we certainly have nothing to fear from it. I know we are told the inferiors would be very rude and bad if there were no superiors to set them a good example. But hitherto the superiors have only very exceptionally behaved as if this were their office in the world; they have mainly tried to get all the pleasure, and mainly the gross pleasure, they could out of life, at the expense of the inferiors. I do not believe one lovely or amiable thing would be lost if equality were to become the rule and fashion of the whole race, as it is now the rule and fashion of the best and wisest of the race in society. Men have believed that there was something to be gained by setting themselves apart from other men; and they have actually at times believed that those whom they excluded and depressed believed this, too, because they suffered it. But the inferior never believed, even in the depths of slavery, that inequality was a gain to him, whatever it might be to the superior, and he suffered it because he must. It never was a gain to the superior except in some advantages of food, clothing, and shelter. It never made him in any wise a finer, purer, juster man; and it very often made him arrogant, luxurious, bestial.

Certain sentimentalists, however, for want of a better grievance, complain of equality as unpicturesque. They are not able, apparently, to say why it is unpicturesque, and I never could find that they wished to contribute to the picturesqueness of inequality through any discomfort of their own. I never met a single person, of all those who praise inequality, willing to take the lower place, not to speak of the lowest. What is perhaps stranger still is that none of those who are down seem to like it, although they are used to being down, and have not the excuse of unfamiliarity with their position, which their superiors might urge if they were asked to descend in the scale. The underlings are not satisfied when the overlings tell them that it is not only fit that they should be where they are, but that it is very picturesque, and that it promotes sympathy in the overlings. Without troubling themselves to deny that it is picturesque, they invite the overlings to try it awhile themselves, and then they will be better able to say whether it is fit or not. As for sympathy, they would like to be in a position to do a little sympathizing too.

I doubt, in fine, if anybody really wants inequality. None but the superiors ever pretend to want it; the inferiors openly or

secretly detest it. I doubt whether the superiors have any comfort in it; the body of a man, especially the face of a man, with his more or less squirming, is not an agreeable footing, and I think no one truly enjoys the bad eminence it gives him.

What we truly enjoy in each other is likeness, not unlikeness. That is what makes the pleasure of good society. There is no rest save on the common ground. If I meet a man of different tradition, different religion, different race, different language, I am pleased with him for a moment, as I should be with a fairy or an amiable goblin; but he presently bores me, when the surprise of him is over. I find that we have no common ground. The perpetual yearning of our hearts is for intelligent response, and this can come only from our equals, from equality.

Many people do not understand this yet, and in my more uncharitable moments I have sometimes suspected that those who talk of the dead level of equality, and who dread or affect to dread equality, are dreaming of pleasure to their pride or vanity from inequality. They do not propose to be inferiors in the inequality they profess to like; they are greedily promising themselves to be princes and princesses in it, or at least dukes and duchesses, with or without the titles. They are either doing this, or else they are feeling some weakness in themselves which will not bear the test of equality. These are the kind of people who snub or truckle in good society, and cannot conceive that the good and beauty of society are imperiled whenever its spirit of equality is violated. Still less can they conceive of a whole civility, a universal condition, which shall be governed by the spirit of good society. For the sake of having the man behind their chairs, they are willing to be treated *de haut en bas* by the man across the table.

Such people will try to face you down from the facts that are and that always have been. There is, and there always has been, inequality in the world, in spite of the striving of generous hearts and enlightened minds for equality. Although equality has never ceased to show itself, and effect itself, within the different orders, and in modern times to characterize at least superficially that large composite order which we call good society, civilization is still embruted and endangered by inequality. One need not allege instances; they are abundant in every one's experience and observation; and those who dread or affect to dread the dead level of equality are quite right in saying that even in a political

democracy there is as much inequality as anywhere. But this does not prove that they are right in admiring it, that it is not offensive and stupid. Inequality still persists, but so does theft, so does murder, so does unchastity, so do almost all the sins and shames that ever were. Inequality is, in fact, the sum of them; in the body of this death they fester and corrupt forever. As long as we have inequality we shall have these sins and shames, which spring from it, and which live on from inferior to superior. Few vices live from equal to equal; but the virtues flourish.

IV.

MUST we have inequality always? I do not think so. The disparity between the different sorts and conditions of men is not without its supposed remedy even in our conditions. The well-known American theory is that all having the same chance to get on top, all will get on top. If this really happened we should have the dead level of equality indeed; but a great many do not get on top—so many of the gentle, the kind, the good, that it may be questioned whether the summit would not have its displeasures for people of taste, whether one would altogether like to be seen there. It appears that this specific no longer cures, then; and if inequality is a malady, an evil, we must seek some other medicine for it. What that will be many will be ready to say, but few to prove. Perhaps we shall be changed by the slow process of the years, and by a process no more visible in the present than the movement of the hand upon the clock, but destined to a greater and greater swiftness in the future.

Any change is a long look ahead, and it is no part of my present purpose to offer the reader a telescopic view of the remote time when

The common sense of most shall hold a fretful
realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapped in
universal law.

I say the remote time, but if I supposed it to be very near, I should still try to put off the Golden Age, at least till I had reasoned my reader out of his fears of it; for there is nothing that seems to alarm people so much as the notion of a Golden Age to come. Nothing is really so offensive to the average good man or woman as the notion of human brotherhood. But I think this is not from any innate hatred of one's kind, or a natural disposition to obey the law and the prophets rather than

the new commandment they hang upon; for I am a great friend of human nature, and I like it all the better because it has had to suffer so much unjust reproach. It seems to me that we are always mistaking our conditions for our natures, and saying that human nature is greedy and mean and false and cruel, when only its conditions are so. We say you must change human nature if you wish to have human brotherhood, but we really mean that you must change human conditions, and this is quite feasible. It has always been better than its conditions, and ready for new and fitter conditions, although many sages have tried to rivet the old ones upon it, out of some such mistaken kindness as would forbid the crustacean a change of shell. The state of the crustacean after this change takes place is perilous, but with all its dangers it is not so perilous as the effort to keep its old shell on forever would be.

V.

As nearly as we can conceive it or forecast it, the new condition, the equality of the future, will be the enlargement of good society to the whole of humanity. This seems to me so not only because, so far as we have social equality, it has grown out of human nature, but because we have already more of that equality than any other.

Social inequality wounds most the most vocal, if not the most sensitive, of our kind, and from their outcry we are apt to think there is more of it than there is of other sorts of inequality; but there is really more social equality. The different sorts of equality are finally inseparable, but up to a certain point they are sufficiently distinguishable, and one may speak of political equality, equality before the laws, and economic equality. Without the last, the first and second exist only measurably, and they tend to disappear as it shrinks. In fact, economic equality is the mother of all other equalities; but money has less power in society than anywhere else. It is true that money can give more sumptuous entertainments than merit can, and that if merit comes to a dinner which it cannot return, it takes a stamp of inferiority from

money. But this only proves that economic inequality invades social equality as it invades political equality. In spite of it, however, good society is, upon the whole, so nobly imagined, and so handsomely realized, that one longs to have it perfect, and then to impart its perfection to all human society.

Its perfection would be perfect equality. I do not mean equality of wits, bulks, statures, looks; the differences in these come from so far behind us that we cannot control them; though, of course, economic equality would tend to efface them by giving good food, clothing, shelter, and education to all; as it is, such differences do not afflict us much. By perfect equality I mean equal consideration, the absence of any and all man-made distinctions between men.

We have had inequality so long in the world that it is the convention to justify it, as it once was the convention to justify slavery, and I dare say cannibalism more remotely. It is supposed to be human nature, and it was undoubtedly human nature once, as those other things were in their time. But I do not believe that any enlightened person thinks it just; and the other sort of persons are no longer the majority in good society, or at least they do not dominate the ideals of good society. There is some prospect that they will not always dominate the ideals of society in the sense of humanity, but will presently be so powerless that this sort of society can be safely included in good society; and as people are apt to become finally what they have long seemed to be, professed to be, goodness of manner will end in goodness of heart, and we shall have an equality which is at once polite and sincere.

None other is worth having. There must be no rudeness, no unkindness; that must be left to the savage world which will still admire force, violence, the expressions of inequality. The level, when we have it, will be the highest yet attained by the exceptional few. The purest ideals of the philosophers and the saints are not too fine to be realized in the civility which shall be the life of the whole people, and shall come home to their business and bosoms.

W. D. Howells.

