

THE DISADVANTAGES OF CIVILISATION.

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complacency with which the Press and the Public of this country, and not only of this country but of Europe generally, plume themselves on superior civilisation leads one to wonder what this civilisation

is, and what are its advantages.

Since those who possess it, or think they possess it, are so proud of it, since all the great Western nations are engaged at so vast an expenditure of time, treasure and lives in spreading it, surely it must be a flawless something that justifies pride, an immense advantage to those who propagate and to those who embrace it. And yet—and yet one hears that savages brought into contact with it are not improved thereby, that they lose more than they gain, and have reason to cry *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*.

On the surface, to be sure, it makes a fair show, yet to me it seems that while all its advantages, or nearly all, have their drawbacks, it has many drawbacks that offer no counterbalancing advantages.

We are indebted to it for cheap literature, with the admixture of good and bad therefrom resulting; for German bands and the Underground railway, both blessings not unmitigated. Thanks to the facilities it offers, we may learn by telegraph of the death of our best friend in India, or the loss of our entire fortune, as if the slowest of ill news did not already travel too fast. To it



we owe the religion of Getting-on-at-any-price, and its temple the Stock Exchange, which, if they add to the nation's wealth, frequently add to its dishonour. It enables simple people to invest the savings of a life-time—with the chance, however, of doing so in a society like the Liberator—and assists a public benefactor like Mr. Jabez Balfour in finding a retreat in Argentina.

Far be it from me to underrate these blessings, in so far as they are blessings; but having put so much to the credit side of the account we come to examine the debit, which to my mind looms larger.

The question obtrudes itself, is mankind better or happier because of civilisation, apart from ethics? Is it not the tendency of civilisation to increase luxury, to increase mere physical comforts rather than to elevate and spiritualise our nature? Its advantages are mostly in things material, its disadvantages in things moral, and we seem content that it should be so.

In which of the essentials is civilised man, unguided by principle, superior to his uncivilised brother? He is not less ferocious, less cruel. He is only more careful of his neck. Deeds are done every day in the name of civilisation that make one pause and wonder in what this much-vaunted civilisation consists, and what, except its affectations, distinguishes it from savagery. The old corrupt nature is there under all the veneer, untamed, barbarous, unregenerate. Civilisation has but added to its other vices the crowning one of hypocrisy, and hedged us round with forms and conventions that make life complicated, monotonous, and wearisome.

Civilisation, my brothers, is largely a fraud. To it we owe not only ennuï, but the depressing forms of amusement we have invented to kill time. In civilisation we have "At homes," with songs and recitations; the suave and enlivening organ-grinder, who replies, "Me no speakee Inglis," when told to go away, and such gems of combined music and verse as "Sister Mary Jane's top note." To civilisation we owe the public-house—which is, I believe, considered an advantage by some people—

popular seaside resorts, problem plays and the professional philanthropist.

It has created for us an artificial environment and artificial wants. Things are good, bad or indifferent, not because they are so in themselves, but because in every place a certain set of people, whom nobody knows, have made a certain set of rules, which few know, that arbitrarily include this and exclude that.

Not to be conversant with the forms of the little *milieu* wherein one lives is unpardonable; but move just a few hundred miles from home and you find another set, just as arbitrary, and just as meaningless. In London you must not be seen in town in August under pain of forfeiting your self-respect. In Germany if you sit on a sofa without being asked, you proclaim yourself to be a bumptious person, ignorant of polite society.



Rules in themselves have their uses, so long as they are founded on common-sense. What I complain of is, that civilisation teaches us to set a higher value on the observance of a certain shibboleth than on personal worth. Our judgment of others is warped thereby, and things have come to

such a pass that St. Peter himself, if he appeared amongst us, would be treated with contempt if he drank his tea, as the simple fisherman probably would, from a saucer. Myself a product of civilisation, I humbly admit in many instances sharing the feeling, while I condemn and acknowledge its unworthiness.

We have in the progress of our civilisation lost our originality, become mere imitators



one of the other, and laid shackles on our limbs which we are now unable to loosen, or loosen only with an effort that drains our vital force, leaving us spent and exhausted.

A notable disadvantage of civilisation, besides the artificial needs it engenders and the artificial standards of right and wrong that it sets up, is the deceit that always follows in its train.

I do not claim that uncivilised man is, or ever was, truthful. Truth is a heroic virtue. David tells us "all men are liars," and the word is pretty comprehensive; but at anyrate we have to thank civilisation for the conventional lie.

The only plea that can possibly be urged for a lie is that it deceives. What are we to think of the lie that deceives no one, neither the utterer nor the hearer? In a ruder age the children of Gibeon came before Joshua and told him a tissue of falsehoods, but they had the satisfaction, such as it was, of hoodwinking him. Now when we write a line regretting that we are unable to accept someone's kind invitation, few of us have the courage to add "because of a subsequent engagement." Oh no, it is a "previous engagement," or "pressing business," or "indisposition."

The writer does not believe what he says, and neither do the host and hostess; but all of them apparently are satisfied, and the requirements of civilisation are fulfilled.

Again, in a primitive state, life was simplified after a delightful fashion. One's enemies were perfectly easy to recognise from one's friends. Happy age, when the people of one's own tribe, of one's own village, of one's own family, were all friends!

If any prowling stranger were discovered at suspicious hours looking over the fence, it was not only easy and natural, but laudable, to slay him on the spot with a battle-axe, chopper, flint arrowhead, or any other handy implement. There could be no doubt about it, he was an enemy, and if you did not kill him, he would most likely kill you.

Mais nous avons changé tout cela. Our foes are of our own household, and one of the disadvantages of civilisation is, that you may for years cherish your enemy as your best friend, and never find out the truth until it is too late, until, like a thunderbolt, it is hurled at you. In civilisation we have the Judas kiss, the smile that conceals a heart full of bitterness, the welcome of feigned cordiality, we have hints, insinuations, we "damn with faint praise, and hesitate dislike."

Amongst those whom we, in our fancied superiority, style barbarians, men attain to distinction and chieftaincy through

physical strength, remarkable dexterity, or a persuasive tongue.

For such primitive qualities we have substituted wealth and influence as means to advancement. If a man of commanding genius, lacking these advantages, makes his way to the front, his case is so exceptional that it is quoted as a marvel. Moreover, the effort necessary to "arrive" takes from him most of his freshness and energy, and occupies years of his life that might have been better employed than in endeavouring to surmount purely artificial barriers and get a fair field for his natural gifts.

If civilisation were worth the fuss that is made about it, it would afford equal opportunity to equal talent; but this it notably fails to do. Some attain, with the most mediocre abilities, to posts from which fitter men are for ever debarred by the accident of poverty or obscurity.

It seems to me that the untutored savage who picks out the man who best can hurl a spear or advise his nation, has nothing to learn from our methods. It is a finer thing to be strong than to be rich, to be wise than to be well connected, and only civilised nations fail to recognise it.

Civilisation, by increasing our wants, increases our respect for that by which alone they can be supplied, and so we have to thank it for our worship of anything so extrinsic as money. Not content to sacrifice time, health, and reputation in its pursuit, we have made the want of it a crime for which life-long punishment is inflicted.

To those born unto poverty, civilisation practically says, "Because you are wretchedly poor, and come of poor people, you shall all your life be dirty and ignorant, and employed on labour that no one would undertake unless spurred to it by lack of food. There are great and grand and noble possibilities in the world and in man, but unless knowledge of high truths comes to you through religion, it never will through our present-day civilisation."

On the other hand we have so nicely regulated matters that a millionaire may do with impunity what in a beggar would be intolerable. Whisper that a man—any sort of man—is a Cressus, and every eye is turned on him, every door flies open before him. That he be vulgar, ill-mannered and ill-conditioned, matters nothing, if he only be rich enough. Lack of education and breeding is overlooked or smiled at as "originality." For this, of course, he must really be very rich. Some people one cannot bring oneself

to know if they possess less than a million of money; others are so intolerable that it takes at least two millions to launch them; but civilised society has its price.

If one benefited in any way by these rich people the position would be easy to understand, but for the most part the people who set such store by riches derive little advantage from the riches of others. They are not needy hangers-on, or at least not always. They are entertained to be sure, but then they do not lack entertainments elsewhere, and their dinner at home is as abundant and often as choice as that which their millionaire friend offers. Riches in themselves apparently are attractive to the civilised, and they like the rich even when these are of no use to them.

To civilisation we are indebted for the snob. In a simple society, where strength and valour alone make a man powerful and respected, the snob has no scope for development. There, to know grand people is no advantage, unless these people are at the same time willing and able to protect the sycophant, which they seldom are. In civilisation our snobs take infinite trouble to cultivate the acquaintance of people who are of no earthly use to them, and who frequently despise them while accepting their hospitality.

They are willing to flatter, cajole, entertain, to bear with snubs and slights, to push and to crawl—for what? That they may be able to talk of their grand acquaintances to a number of persons who do not care a button one way or another as to whom they know or don't know, and who at most express unflattering surprise as to how on earth the So-and-sos came to be acquainted with the Somebody-elses.

The savage sycophant is at least a practical man, with definite ends in view, and his abasement is rewarded by tangible results.

Are our poor-laws a credit to our civilisation? In our workhouses the honest, respectable man or woman who has fought for years to keep the wolf from the door, and has in the end been worsted by ill-health or accident, is meted out the very same measure of comfort and liberty as is accorded to the off-scourings of our streets, brought low by vice. Husband and wife are separated from each other and from their children. These same children, brought up in a decent if humble home, are driven to consort with others young in years but old in wickedness. Our attitude towards mere money and our treatment of the poor are contemptible.

We have little reason to be proud of a civilisation that considers the word "pauper" a term of reproach.

Our system of dress is another disadvantage of civilisation that men and women alike feel. Someone—no one knows who—declares that a certain style is "the fashion." Immediately public opinion compels one to adopt it, and so weakened is our mental fibre that we none of us have the moral courage to resist. Only "cranks," who love opposition for its own sake, swim against the stream. Most of us would sooner be uncomfortable than singular. I do not profess to be any better than my neighbours. Though there are seasons when common-sense tells me the appropriate costume would be a single linen garment girded round the waist, and certain others when I long to array myself in sheep-skins, nothing would induce me to carry my convictions into effect. I fear the small boy too much, and the opinion of the small boy is the opinion of civilisation in his particular country.

Let no clever person pounce upon me with the remark that uncivilised peoples too have their fashions, their etiquette, and adhere to them slavishly. To be sure they have, but why, I pray you, crow over them and call them savages if we have not improved on their ideas? I grant that we have a different set of conventions, but most of them are every whit as absurd.

An offensive product of civilisation is the superior person. We all nowadays know and suffer from the superior person, and so, as brothers and sisters in misfortune, need dwell no more on his or her unpleasant characteristics.

And this leads me to still another disadvantage of civilisation. It has made us self-conscious. Self-consciousness is the bane of our age. We are profoundly aware of ourselves and of our own existence. We are introspective, analytical. We are apparently so proud of having any feelings at all that we tend and cherish them over much. This artificiality shows in our literature, and above all in our poetry. A young person who writes is elated at having an emotion, not because that emotion is creditable in itself—it is frequently the very reverse—but because an emotion gives the opportunity of writing and publishing something which deeper-feeling, more decent and more reticent people would prefer keeping to themselves. Stoic endurance, dignified silence, we leave to the Red Indian.

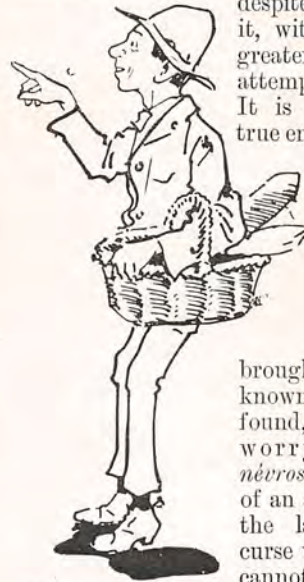
This eagerness to be moved, and to tell the world we are moved, shows the rarity of real, spontaneous feeling—feeling that comes unasked, unsought, and forces its way out,

despite efforts to repress it, with a vigour the greater for that very attempt at repression.

It is so easy to tell true emotion from false, heroics from heroism, if oneself be genuine. Truth in the soul is the touchstone of truth in literature.

Civilisation has brought us evils unknown out of it, profound, far-reaching; worry, brain-fag, *névrosité*, all products of an artificial life, and the last especially a curse whose magnitude cannot be exaggerated.

Why do we not cast aside some of the trammels wherewith we have bound ourselves? Why do we not have an organised effort to make life simpler, purer, with fewer wants and homelier joys. Contrast for a moment existence in Samoa, with existence in the East-End, ay, or even in the West-End of London. There are forests, mountains, bright lagoons, blue sky, and flower-decked people in their soft flowing robes. Amongst them there is no need for a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Compare the life of this simple people with



that of our poor, starving in sight of extravagant and tasteless luxury. Picture an East-End street on a wet Saturday night, its slippery, shiny pavements, its hoarse,



shouting costers, the flare of naphtha lamps, the weary, eager-eyed, hollow-cheeked, dirty purchasers. We pretend that civilisation has given us baths, if so, it has not taught nine-tenths of our citizens to use

them. If London stands for civilisation, give me Samoa.

Should all that I have hitherto said have failed to carry conviction with it, I have another terrible indictment to make against civilisation. It is to it we owe the bore, one of the greatest afflictions that mortals are called on to endure.

The bore, male or female—and to the credit of my sex, be it said, the latter is less numerous than the former—whether of the egotistical, the pompous, or the ubiquitous type, whether silent and heavy, or talkative and frothy, whether interested in politics, religion or social questions, given merely to the irritating habit of announcing facts known to everyone, or to conveying an endless stream of dull narrative, is essentially a disadvantage of civilisation. The bore could not exist in a savage society. No rude, untutored tribe, with the elemental passions of our race strong within them, would endure the bore for a moment. They would rise as one man and exterminate him, for they have

not been ground between the upper and the nether millstone of convention.

Uncivilised man has even devised a way for arresting, at least in one direction, the development of bores, who are an artificial product, evolved only in a suitable atmosphere. Working by the light of reason alone, a simple tribe of negroes, with few wants and fewer ambitions, has hit upon a plan our English Parliament might adopt with advantage to members, press reporters, and the progress of business. They decree that when a native council is being held, he who has anything worth saying may utter it during the space of time he can stand on one leg. When, through fatigue, the toe of the other foot touches the ground, the flood of oratory is abruptly arrested.



In this country we are compelled by civilisation to let people wander on as long as they feel inclined, and are permitted to relieve our pent-up feelings only by ironical cries of "hear, hear" and other ineffective protests. I have suffered too much myself from verbose speech-makers, writers, and lecturers to wish to inflict similar hardships on others. I feel as if I had already been standing too long on one foot, and can only hope my readers do not share the impression. At any rate their patience will be taxed no further, and having thanked them for their kind attention so far, I shall endeavour, by at once concluding this article, not to rank myself as a disadvantage of civilisation.

