

THE FIRST STEPS TOWARD A MILLENNIUM

[1888]

We are offered countless projects of social reform, the aim of which is to bring in the millennium. Let us see what the first condition of such projects must be, and whether we are prepared to fulfil it.

The student of social problems, who investigates them without preconceived or pet notions, finds again and again that he is brought, at the end of his analysis, face to face with this fact: it is a question of population. It is a question of marriage, of the reproduction of the species; of parental responsibility, competency, and duty; in short, of the family. In all the social speculations of the day, however, scarcely any attention is ever paid to this range of subjects. It is assumed that every one has a right to marry without responsibility to others, that society has no right to intervene, that children come into the world without any antecedents upon which reason and conscience could operate, that family life is sacred, even to the extent that parental folly, ignorance, and caprice must enjoy a prerogative of wasting or perverting the youth of children. Liberty, the rights of parents, and the whole non-interference theory, are here introduced when nothing has been heard of them before.

I maintain (1) that the part of our social code and social creed which wants re-examination and reconstruction is that which relates to marriage and the family; and (2) that, if there is to be any state regulation at all,

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the place where it ought to begin is with marriage and the family.

What is the existing code and creed about marriage and the family?

It is held that if a man and woman want to marry, and if they are of the minimum age fixed by law, no one is warranted in interfering with them. The novels have sedulously taught that marriage should be founded only on love; that love is some emotional state or experience that is not subject to reason and conscience; indeed, that there is some ethical error in resisting it; and that it is the one human experience that is not subject to law or regulation. To judge from the tone of the newspapers about an elopement, or a marriage in defiance of the advice of parents, this kind of marriage has some merits over any other kind. Nobody is supposed to have any right to see to it that the parties to the marriage have compatibility of temper, or sufficient acquaintance with each other; and, above all, it is considered sordid and mean to raise the question whether they can support themselves and their children.

Nothing in the educational system is planned to inculcate high ideas of the momentous decision involved in uniting two lives, much less to make young people understand that parenthood is the most awful responsibility human beings ever accept. A false, or perhaps I might more justly say, an ill-defined, modesty causes the whole subject to be set aside. It is not easy to deal with it within convenient limits, yet to do it justice. Occasionally a bold preacher devotes a sermon to some phase of it, or a school-teacher of extraordinary conscientiousness and good judgment will exert a happy and successful influence on a small number of persons; but this is nothing compared with the mis-education from mawkish

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novels, prurient newspaper stories, and current discussion of scandals, elopements, and divorces. Is it right that modesty should impose silence always on the right side only? Is it right that the current popular code should always go unchallenged?

We have broken to a considerable extent with the doctrine of the last century about the respective rights and duties of parents and children, which was based on the dictum that the parent is "the author of the child's being." The notion was that the parent had conferred such a blessing on the child as giving him existence that all the duties were on the side of the child, and all the rights on the side of the parent. Such a dictum with the deductions drawn from it cannot stand before a rationalizing generation. When once a child has reached an age to get a glimmering sense of what kind of a world this is, there are very few fathers who would dare to invoke this dictum as a ground of parental rights, and there are many who might find that the child would turn upon them with the most terrific accusation that could possibly be formulated: "You knew what kind of a world this is, and what kind of a man you were in it. You knew that you were a failure, or a drunkard, or a gambler, or a felon. How dared you beget me, and put me in the world to bear what you had entailed?"

I say that we have broken with this old-fashioned notion; but we have not yet, so far as I know, adopted any other consistent principle, and we shall not get the rights and duties on a sound basis until we accept the doctrine that the parents, having assumed the liberty and authority of marriage and parenthood, have all the responsibility, and all the duties, and that it is the child who has the rights. Parents, who have brought children into the world, are bound by all the deductions

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that flow from the relationship that they have brought about, to sacrifice themselves that the children may have success in the struggle for existence.

Both morally and socially the doctrine here laid down is the one that underlies human welfare. There is no such penalty for error and folly as to see one's children suffer for it. There is no such reward for a well-spent life as to see one's children well-started in life owing to their parents' good health, good principles, fixed character, good breeding — in general, the whole outfit that enables men to fight the battle of life with success. Furthermore, we are not called upon to plot and plan for "the great interests of society," and all the other vague whims that are presented to us in high-sounding phrases. The great social interests solve themselves if every one simply attends to family duties, keeping himself clean and honest, and bringing up his children in virtue and good discipline. The reformers who are constantly dinning their social nostrums and state interference in our ears suppose that they are charged and commissioned to organize all the rest of us into "great social movements." In any sound study of the facts it will appear that the derived, wider, and more abstract interests are not to be pursued directly, that they never can be satisfied by direct effort, that they flow of themselves as consequences from right living in the household and in the individual career.

Let us go back now to our young couple. Having married for love and taken their liberty, they find that they were mistaken, and that there is an incompatibility of temper; instead, however, of bearing their own burden, and abiding by the duties that they have undertaken to each other and to their children, they now invoke the interference of the rest of society, by its laws and

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civil institutions, to release them from the consequences of their own act. They find themselves constrained and dissatisfied. Liberty formerly meant that they must create relationships, if they wanted to do so, regardless of the interests of bystanders; liberty now means that they must be allowed to break the relationship, if they want to do so, regardless of the rights and interests that have grown out of their former act. If their children are in this way rendered homeless or parentless, then their neighbors, either through public or private charity, may assume the burden of caring for them.

If no such rupture of the marriage occurs, it may yet turn out that the parents are not capable of earning, or that they are extravagant and foolish in their expenditure, or that they are shiftless, idle, or vicious. Let us not here make the mistake of assuming that some of us are good and strong and others bad and weak, for that would be to misconceive the whole case. All of us are only more or less idle, vicious, and weak. We all have to fight the same temptations, and each one has enough to do to fight his own battle; that is just the reason why it is unjust and socially ruinous to reward one for having done his own duty, simply by making him go on to do other people's duty. If the idle and vicious stood by themselves as individuals, they could almost always be left to themselves. It is the children who make the problem great now, and who carry it into the future.

As we have seen above, the rights lie with the children and against the parents in the first instance. Now we see that the rights lie with the society against the parents, in the second instance, for it is society that will suffer from the failure of the parent to do the parent's duty, and it is society that will have to bear the burden that the parent has allowed to fall. Who, however, is

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“society”? It can be only those other parents who have done a parent’s duties, through unknown struggles and self-denial. It has very rarely been argued, so far as I know, that the state might fairly enforce against the parent his responsibility, or that it might separate his children from him, if it were obliged to assume his duties on account of his worthlessness. On the contrary, such a view of the matter is almost always met with an outcry against inhumanity. Perhaps such an outcry is just; but what I maintain is, that if we are not prepared to interfere in any way at all with freedom of marriage or the continuance of family life between two people who are not fit to be parents, then our plans of throwing all the consequences on the good parents is a policy by which society continually uses up its best members, while it preserves and stimulates the reproduction of its bad ones.

Let us go on with some details and see if this is not so.

The children, being here, must be educated. Plainly, it belongs to the parent to educate them. In contemplating marriage a man is just as much bound to look forward to the expense of educating as of feeding his children. If the state — that is, again, his neighbors — will have to educate his children for him, one important link in the chain of moral responsibility that is essential to the moral order of society is broken. I know of no provision at all for bringing home to parents the duty of educating their children, or the value of education to their children; on the contrary, all the existing arrangements offer education as a thing to be taken or left by those for whom it is intended. Compulsory attendance is making some advance; but here again, where liberty has no application, we are met with an outcry in favor of

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liberty so much contemned everywhere else. For how fares it with the liberty of the parents who have done their duty? They must pay for the school. They are told how essential schools are to make good citizens, how much better it is to pay for schools than for jails, and so on. But, if the tax-payer has any rights, why is it not one of the first of them, after he has provided schools, under the view of the matter just rehearsed, that he should know that those for whom the schools are provided are taking the good of them, and that the commonwealth will have the advantages for which he is paying?

Instead of being guaranteed of this fact, he is met by a new demand that he shall provide text-books and stationery. In order to make an argument for schools supported by taxation, it has been said that schools "support republican institutions," "save jails," etc., etc. If that is true, schools exist for the good of the community and not for the purpose of fitting the children to fulfil their careers on earth. Then the schools are not a good to be struggled for and paid for by those who get the good of them, but the children go to school in order to subject themselves to the discipline that the good of the community imposes upon them. In that view of the matter, it is consistent and reasonable, as well as quite in accord with human nature, that it should be constantly necessary to provide new inducements in order to secure attendance. It is said by those in a position to know that the children of Connecticut do not, on the average, take more than one-half of the schooling that the tax-payers provide for them all.

In the next stage, however, the tax-payer is called upon to pay inspectors and agents to seek out and force upon the children of his negligent neighbor the boon

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that he has paid for, but which the neighbor cannot even appreciate. The inspector reports that the parent has taken the children from school at an early age, in order to put them at work for gain, that the more children he has the more he gets out of their wages for his own benefit, and that the children are exploited by their parents without any of a parent's feeling.

Next comes the "working-man." He demands that the children shall be peremptorily and absolutely forbidden to work, not in order that they may go to school, but that they may not compete with the working-man in the labor market. The parent forces the child to work for the parent's benefit, and the non-parent forces the child not to work for the benefit of the non-parent. In this contest, who defends the rights of the children? If anybody needs state protection evidently it is they, for they are being sacrificed between two selfish interests. The politician, however, asks only: Who has the most votes? and, finding that these are the non-parents, he eagerly passes a law to forbid the children to work, leaving all consequences to care for themselves.¹ The tax-payer is called upon to pay for some more inspectors to enforce this law. If the children by happy accident find their way to school, well and good; if they escape school, or are abroad and idle during half the year when school is not in session, they take to vagabondage and idleness with all its vices; for they are forbidden to work at all, as if work were in its nature a vice and not simply in its excess a harm.

The children are thus rapidly preparing as candidates for the reform school and the industrial school, once more at the expense of the tax-payer; or he is called

¹ See the report of the State Board of Education of Connecticut, 1886, on the Child Labor Law of that state.

upon to subscribe to voluntary charitable organizations, which aim to reform abandoned children.¹

One of the latest novelties, now, in this same direction, is the complaint that the education which the burden-bearing part of the community has furnished for the whole is not of a good kind; that the gift is not a suitable one; that the beneficiaries of it are not much to blame for rejecting it, because it is not of the right kind. It is proposed that the tax-payer once more shall come forward and provide trade schools, or manual labor schools. This proposition is as yet so vague and multiform that it is impossible to discuss it. The most sensible persons who are interested in the plan agree that schools to teach handicrafts or trades as a means of livelihood would not be defensible; but may not the tax-payer think it rather hard that, after he has provided schools and libraries, and high schools with all the paraphernalia of science, he should be told that it is all a mistake, and that he has to begin all over again, on a new line of development, which the same guides now believe to be the correct one?

Now this generation of children, when they come to maturity, marry — the earlier the more dependent they are and the less serious their views of life — and begin the story of their own parents, and their own childhood, all over again. At middle life they find themselves overburdened, disappointed, unfit to cope with the difficulties of life, a discontented class that the respectable and burden-bearing part of society are once more told is a

¹ While writing, I find in a daily paper the report of a county home for abandoned children, in which it is said: "It will be noticed that one hundred and thirty-one of these [one hundred and forty-seven] children were taken from the degraded classes, even the homeless ones being homeless by reason of the viciousness of parents, one or both of whom, in all cases except eight of the one hundred and thirty-one, are living and are able-bodied."

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problem for them to solve. One of the great dogmas is that all men are equal, but a man who has earned a loaf of bread and one who has not earned a loaf of bread find themselves unequal. Let the tax-payer look to himself, if he cannot solve that! The man who has spent all his money and the one who has not find themselves very unequal. According to the current philosophy, the blame for this is not with the man who wasted his youth and rejected his chances of education, nor with his father who failed of all his family and social duties, but with the respectable and dutiful citizen who provided the educational facilities for others and profited by them for himself.

If any of the negligent persons become guilty of crime, then at last the patient tax-payer might believe that the experiment was over, that his responsibility was discharged, that he had done all that he could possibly be asked to do for that person, and that the criminal now in prison would be forced to earn his own living and spend his time in sober industry. Not so, however. It is now the turn of the penologist, who demands that the prisons shall be managed so as to reform the criminals, and "without regard to pecuniary considerations." The "working-man" also, not knowing what he wants nor why he wants it, and plainly uninformed or deluded as to the facts and relations in question, but possessed of new political power which he is eager to exercise and for which he is not yet held to any due responsibility, demands that the labor of the convicts shall be stopped or wasted. The latter seem to think that a criminal becomes harmful when he goes to work, and the former that a prison is a kind of mill for washing so many criminals as may be caught, and thus operating an arithmetical diminution of the criminal class.

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Here we have, then, a system in which the community is divided into responsible and irresponsible classes. Every duty discharged by the former serves only to lay the basis for a new duty to be imposed; every duty neglected by the latter serves only to lay the basis for a new privilege or exemption to be claimed. In this system nothing at all is done to prevent or lessen the propagation of the social disease, but, on the contrary, everything is done to nurse and develop it by cutting off such direct penalties as would, in the order of nature, be connected with the evil, and would react upon it to restrict it. All the palliatives are applied at the expense of those that have done as much as men ever do to crush and conquer the social disease in themselves and their children. Those, therefore, who would make good parents must delay marriage by as much as they must be prepared for all the extra burdens that the state will lay upon them as soon as they show that they mean to pay their way; and those who would make bad parents are set free to marry the earlier by as much as they are assured that the state will come to their assistance, in one way and another, so soon as they show that they do not mean to pay their way. We are therefore increasing evils and deteriorating our society.

If now we should reverse our policy, two courses would be open to us. We could either limit all our active measures to securing, as far as possible, those who will conform to the rules of right living, against any harm from those who refuse to learn how we must all conduct ourselves in order that we may all prosper, leaving the latter to the stern school of experience; or, we could bring restrictions to bear on marriage and family life. At least it is evident that, if we are going to bring interference to bear, in the hope of dealing with social evils, our

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interference will never be effective until it touches marriage and the family. The objective point can be defined. Measures which bear upon it will not be constructive,¹ but direct, if we are prepared to make them; if we are not prepared to make them, let us at least desist from those measures that only use up our best social elements. It is astonishing how invariably thorough study of social phenomena brings out the fact that social devices produce the very opposite results from those that were aimed at. The social reforms of the last fifty years have very largely consisted in converting other social ills into taxation; but taxation is a most potent cause of social ills; when, therefore, the circle shall have been completed, how much shall we have gained?

One of the favorite phrases of those who seek a formula under which to introduce their devices is that the state should take any measures that will "make better men." A state can never make men of any kind; a state consumes men. New-born children are not soldiers, or taxpayers, or laborers. Years of cost of production must be spent upon them before they can be any of these contributors to society. It is the work of

¹ The town of New Haven, being about to build a new alms-house, a petition is presented to the selectmen, in which the petitioners "do hereby protest against any parties or firms being allowed to compete for the contract to erect said buildings, who refuse to accede to the request for shorter hours of labor and just compensation, but who do insist on more hours and less wages, which we claim is injurious and detrimental to the best interests of every community, and as it cannot be denied that low wages, and long hours of toil tend to discouragement, which leads to idleness, and which is one of the great causes of poverty and crime, and produces in every community that class that becomes a tax and a burden, and necessitates, as in the present case, the erection of buildings for their care and support at the public expense, etc." This tortuous and involved series of dogmatic generalizations is hardly a caricature of the kind of argumentation which is brought forward in educated circles whenever a measure of social policy is under discussion.

the family, the church, the school, and other educational institutions to bring them up and make them as good men as possible, and then turn them over to the state as citizens. The state, therefore, does not make them; it uses them up; it does not produce, it costs. The lives of generations are spent to maintain it, and carry it on. The utmost that the state can do is to satisfy the purposes of its existence for these generations in return for what they have spent on it. The soldiers whom the state uses up never come to life again. The taxes which are paid to it never come back again. If the home institutions produce better men, and they put better efforts into the state (as they doubtless will), then they can get out of the state a better fulfilment of state functions; but every device for trying to get out of the state anything more than is put into it has no other effect than to make the state cost more.