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THE RISING GENERATION:

A DISCOURSE

BEFORE THE

SOUTH PLACE SOCIETY,

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BY

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THE RISING GENERATION.



SOME of us can remember the time when the heart of England was stirred by Elizabeth Barrett's poem, "The Cry of the Children." A revelation had come from the dark mines of the country telling how little children were held all their lives in gloomy imprisonment, knowing nothing but work. In the mines were subterranean villages gloomy as the chambers of Dante's Hell; some children were born there, lived, laboured, and died there, and only when dead did they come into the upper world—for burial. Little children were found who did not know what a flower was—they had never seen a flower. Then the "Cry of the Children" was heard. They uttered none for themselves; down in the pit they silently worked through their miserable lives, while the children of the world danced and were gay; yet their voices were heard in the poet's lamentation, in the statesman's eloquence, in the people's sympathy, and the wrong was swept away.

It seems to us now almost incredible that such an

evil should have existed within our own memories. So clear to our eyes are the evils of other times than our own. But, alas, the need is always for eyes that can see the evils of their own time, and how few are they ! In Dante's *Inferno* one of the saddest places was the abode of those who moved about in a spiritual fog which obscured everything that was near to them. They could clearly see events in the far past, they could see into the future, but they could not see the present. These, during life, had given no effect to the experience of the past, exerted no influence on the future, because they did not study to discern the facts at hand, the conditions around them. They could not see time's flowing stream at the point where it passed them, where must be dropped what is to reach the future. It is but a too faithful picture of multitudes who do not seem to themselves to be in any *Inferno* at all. There are many who can hear the cry of the children in the last generation, but can hear no cry in the present. Yet there is a cry. It comes no longer from subterranean mines, but it comes from unhappy homes ; from the gloomy realms of pauperism, ignorance, and disease ; and it comes from the sunless dungeons of dogma, where millions of children live and die, never seeing any flower of life, of beauty, or of joy.

In speaking to you this morning of the rising

generation I do not propose to enter upon ideal speculations about the future, nor to propose quixotic schemes for abolishing all the evils of the world. I wish rather to limit your attention to facts near at hand, and conditions more or less within our reach.

And, first of all, to impress upon you, as practical people, the fact that the visible conditions of the world have invisible foundations. Things are founded on thoughts. The world that man has built up,—the world of society, politics, nationality, religion,—is a phenomenal world, supported by causes always causing it ; having for its beams and rafters moral and mental sustainers ; and every change of thought or belief in the human mind is followed by a change in the visible conditions of the world. For example, were the Sabbatarian superstition removed from the mind of this country, the bars and bolts which close the refining institutions of the country would also be removed. If the christian superstition were to die out of the English mind, the wealth and power it freezes up in an iceberg would melt, and streams would flow through the deserts where hearts and brains are famishing. Beware therefore of undervaluing thought, knowledge, beliefs, principles, because they are invisible. There are many thousands of christian people who industriously battle with visible sufferings and vices. They do a little good here and a little good

there, in particular cases ; but the evils invariably return. Like the fabled daughters of Danaus they fill their sieves with water, but it always runs out again, because they do not stop the holes in the sieve's bottom : they do not stop them because they are invisible ; they are the unconscious falsities of their creeds, diverting human minds and efforts away from the work of practically saving themselves from actual evils, to the fruitless work of saving themselves from unreal evils.

The only way to help men permanently is to enable them to help themselves. To give them resources is to shield them from want and sorrow ; to educate their mental and physical strength is to make them rich ; to surround them with social interests is to make them good citizens ; and all these, and other conditions of human welfare, depend upon the prevailing doctrine of what is the chief end and aim of human life. He who lifts that aim even a little, lifts the lives of millions with it ; and a man is never so charitable, never so practical, as when he is destroying an error and affirming a truth. If benevolence wishes to bestow or bequeathe real benefit, let it not give too largely to the institutions which deal with the annual crop of evils that ignorance sows, let it attack the ignorance ; let it not build temperance coffee-houses to be closed on the only day they are much needed,

but attack the superstition which locks the people out of the splendid art-houses already existing, and leaves them no resource but debauchery. I do not disparage the disposition to relieve suffering whenever met with ; but let it not be supposed that such is the highest or the most practical charity to mankind. A single pound given for human culture, for spiritual liberty, for advancement of a high cause or principle, is worth a thousand bestowed to salve over wounds which only knowledge and justice can heal. And I will add that as the pound given for the transient mitigation of an evil is but a drop of oil on an ocean of misery, that which is bestowed in freeing a mind from error is strictly economised, and has a fair prospect of being multiplied through generations.

This high charity must not only be thus practical and economical in its object, but also in its method. The regeneration of the world must be through its successive generations. You cannot change the habits of an old man. What troubles grow from those habits you may assuage, but they can only be eradicated with the constitution around which they have formed. The best thing a matured generation can do is to run to seed—the seed of experience—to select from these seeds those that are largest and soundest, and sow them in the quick soil of youth and vigour. It is the principles so entrusted to the rising generation which

grow with its growth, transmute decays into life, failures into success, and transmit an ever-increasing volume of wisdom and happiness.

What then is the present cry of the children? their perhaps inarticulate, but all the profounder cry? What are their needs? How are they being taught? It is not our business to boast that much has been done, that the children have been taken from the streets and put to school. That was the work of a generation now closed. What work the next is to add to that, is a question more important than what has been already done; we can rightly rejoice only if we feel that the best is now being done.

It is to be feared we have little reason to felicitate ourselves upon our dealings with the rising generation. To a large extent the young are being taught over again what their elders have painfully unlearned; they are solemnly and deliberately crammed with that which the best thought of our time has proved to be untrue.

A young man recently emancipated from Roman Catholicism gave me an account of how he was brought up. When the poor little papist is born, his inborn demon is exorcised. Water is thrown on his head, also salt and oil; the cross signed on its forehead; a candle is held beside it, a Latin formula muttered, and a half-crown demanded. The mother

is also subjected to an exorcism for having borne a demon into the world, and another half-crown is demanded for the churcing. Both of these ceremonies remain in the Church of England. The water exorcism remains in all denominations. Even some Unitarians are not ashamed to practice a form which is either a mockery, or a proclamation of the diabolical nature of the child.

Fortunately the little papist is unconscious of these proceedings ; but unfortunately, his training is on the belief that the exorcised demon is always trying to get back into the form from which he was expelled. He is taught to regard this as the chief danger of his life ; he must continually make the sign of the cross, and pray to Jesus, Joseph, Mary, and other saints. He must bow to holy pictures and crucifixes, wear holy medals and charms, and is taught that these are the things which alone protect him from danger every moment. When he enters church or school he sprinkles himself with holy water, bends his knee before an altar, and understands that he inhales mysterious good things with incense. At school he utters " Hail Mary " every time the hour strikes. He is fed on miraculous stories of the marvels wrought by saints and holy objects. The Catechism is the only thing taught him with any real industry : the three principal ideas with which he is impressed are

his utter depravity, his utter inability to help himself without the priest, and the diabolical iniquity of presuming to ask any question about the "sacred mysteries." At the age of seven or nine he is prepared for confession by what is called 'examining the conscience' which consists in making him read over a list of all the abominations ever committed by man. The purity of the child's mind being thus poisoned, he is made to confess all the evil thoughts so awakened. He is then taught the sacredness of penance; worship of the Eucharist as God himself; and so he is given to society. But if all that should succeed in really moulding him he would be hardly better off mentally than were those children of the mines who never saw a flower.

This is the pit from which the christian child of this country was dug by the Reformation, but was very soon plunged into others where much of its little life is still passed. Puritanism was even a darker pit than Catholicism, and most of the sects were mere variants of Puritanism. The English Church being the church of royalty and wealth, had to accommodate its dogmas to the indulgencies, tastes and sports of the upper classes. The aristocracy preserved many traditions from its barbaric origin, and has steadily refused to be captured by asceticism, or tamed by Puritanism. But unfortunately it did

not refuse to submit to hypocrisy ; and it goes on still with the supplications of terror on its lips and indifference in its heart. Its catechism indoctrinates in asceticism, its life in worldliness. It cries for mercy on Sunday, and hunts foxes on Monday. It calls itself a miserable sinner at church, and resents the slightest aspersion of its character elsewhere. It were hard to conceive a more continuous drill in hypocrisy than that child undergoes who is taught the church catechism in the intervals of a life practically absorbed in worldly schemes. It is to the credit of human nature that there are so many excellent characters which survive the training of Catholicism, and the repressions of Puritanism ; but, still more to its credit that so many frank and earnest men survive the teachings of a church which so baldly separates theory from practice.

But statistics show a vast population never going to any church at all.

A large number of these are working men, who feel that the church is their enemy, and to whom the sects are unattractive. The labouring masses find in sleep, drink, and public-house gossip, the best compensation for six days' toil. And there are many literary men, men of science, and gentlemen, who stay away from church and sect out of sheer disbelief and disgust. Yet the families of these generally go to

church, their children are baptised, catechised, and generally taught the dogmas which their parents despise. With the exception of the comparatively few Liberals who have formed Societies of their own, the rising generation is thus instructed in the same catechisms, creeds, confessions in which their predecessors were instructed. Even the learning of the country abnegates its paramount duty to see that the women and children of the nation are taught truth, and consecrated in every way possible to the diffusion of truth.

Thus the Catholic procedure, rejected in theory, characterises the actual treatment of the Protestant child, too often of the disbeliever's child. He is not dealt with as one possessed, but as a moral invalid who must go to the holy doctor every week, and be dosed with piety and texts.

It is a terrible misdirection of that child's mind, and many are mentally hunch-backed for life by it. It is by children being committed to the parsons as to dress-makers. Through this indifferentism, which may almost be called hardened, society goes on repeating the old routine from generation to generation. Every year rolls up its steady average of abuses unreformed, evils unchanged, falsities laughed at and maintained. Some progress is made but it is mainly through the slow working of natural necessity,

the accompaniment of physical changes incident to the pursuit of wealth.

It is as nothing compared with the progress that would be made if all the thinkers and educated people of the community were to seriously set themselves to the work of securing to their families, especially their children, the full benefits of their best knowledge and experience, treating every attempt to teach them fashionable falsities as they would attempts to indoctrinate them in sorcery. It is the abstract verdict of science that christian dogmas are false. That is equally the verdict of moral and mental philosophy. But their verdict remains unexecuted. Until they feel also that these dogmas are so many poisons, the Creeds and Catechisms so many bottles of poison steadily infused into the springs that feed society ; until they besiege those sects which so poison spiritual springs as they would water-companies sending corruption through the community, or adulterators of the public food ; until then, we need not hope that the best knowledge of this age will enter upon its duty of bringing social institutions out of their barbarous constitution into conformity with reason and right.

What is the Creed taught to the millions of children around us? That they are born totally depraved ; that they are in danger of eternal damnation ; that they have incurred this danger by no act of their own, and can be saved by no act of their own ; that they were

corrupted by a man and woman who lived six thousand years ago, and must be saved by the murder of a man who lived over eighteen hundred years ago. This is what is taught every child, with few exceptions.

What does human culture believe? That such teaching is utterly preposterous. It believes every child is born innocent, liable to actual dangers, to be saved from them by others' care in early life, ultimately by its own intelligence and activities, quite irrespective of any apple eaten in Paradise or murder committed in Palestine.

The dogmas are just the reverse of the knowledge, and yet there is no serious combined effort among the intelligent people to substitute knowledge for proven falsities in the training of children.

It is too obvious to be insisted on that such a phenomenon is immoral, not to say criminal. Yet many who see the evil are unable to see or suggest the remedy. The impediment that seems to lie in the way is the principle of patriarchal liberty under which the various sects have been able to combine in a political community. We cannot step in between parent and child and interfere with any teaching which professes to be religious. Were such a principle adopted it would be the Liberals who would suffer most. Liberalism cannot afford to advocate any interference by law, not even to protect a child from

having its eyes put out—its intellectual eyes—or its moral back broken by the weight of false dogmas parentally imposed.

We are not, indeed, responsible for not doing what we cannot do, but we *are* responsible for doing our very best with what ways and means are at our disposal. There is no call to quarrel with our tools until we have made the most of them. Have we done that? Are we aiming to do that! Consider this, for instance: suppose it were no longer for the interest of any social institution, such as a Church, that these dogmas should be taught to any. Suppose, if your imagination is equal to it, that the endowments of the Church were all transferred to institutions which teach no creeds; all national property going to endow that which all agree to be real knowledge; all sectarian property being taxed because it is private property. That would be the simplest political justice. Because that is not the state of the law, you and I are made to pay every year to support dogmas we abhor. Sâdi said that if there were a tax upon reading the Koran in public many holy men would be dumb. Though I would not say that of the Bible, it may safely be said of the Athanasian Creed: if every time those anathemas are uttered from the pulpit the curser of his opponents were taxed instead of bribed, that solemn blasphemy would cease. And many other

things would cease if law, fashion, and respectability did not throw around them a glamour which hides their monstrosity.

Without disestablishment of the Church, the disestablishment of dogmas generally,—removal of the immunities of the dissenting sects,—cannot take place; and without disendowment, and the taxation of church property, a vast power would be given up to the unchecked control of superstition. It is, therefore, a plain, legitimate, and not intolerant aim for Liberalism to labour for the total disendowment of all creeds. Parents would then have no inducement, no bribe to submit their children to a catechetical tuition which they did not approve; and it is very doubtful if many parents, were the matter thus thrown absolutely upon themselves, would summon the catechist to their families. If we could only compel common sense to act upon what is now left to sacerdotal self-interest, many a child would be shielded from inoculation in error.

You may smile at the idea of our succeeding in disendowing all creeds. But we may succeed in disendowing them in many minds. Every clear agitation for a rational cause is a process of education; it commands the attention, and if it be right and reasonable it must make its way with the process of of the suns.

Besides this political direction of our influence, we may turn our social advantages, whatever they may be, to the side of what we believe true. The great power of error lies in the social advantages it can bestow upon the young, who can feel such advantages long before they can realise the falsities gilded by them. The desire for polite and attractive society is not only natural but worthy, and liberal thinkers owe it as a duty both to truth and to society that they should contribute all they can to associate their views with the standards of good taste, refinement, beauty, and innocent gaieties. It must be remembered that in the world the decorations and enjoyments of life represent its unorthodoxy. The Church has come to patronise them through compulsion of long experience. It began with nunneries and convents, dust and ashes, cowls and hair-garments; ugly anti-social habits and habiliments were the natural insignia of creeds that taught man's depravity and despair. Every earthly beauty and joy is a protest against orthodoxy, and they legitimately belong to the religion of Liberalism and Humanity. Social enjoyments, mirth and beauty, are heresies which appeal far more to the young generation than scientific statements. The liberal movement in this country was historically evolved out of the Puritan movement, and some of those sombre traditions still adhere to it; but these should be

outgrown. Carefulness in dress, observance of fashion so far as it is healthy, dancing, interchanges of hospitality, should not be regarded as frivolous, but as related to the progressive civility of the world, the true accompaniments of its liberation from sacrificial ideas of religion. Liberalism will be largely benefitted by more generous outlays in this direction, and by each thinker taking care to do his and her part that the tastes shall not be starved while the intellect and moral nature are fed. It is of the utmost importance that in the steady effort of the young to improve the style and position of their families, they should less and less have to seek their society chiefly outside of liberal circles at cost of their religious and intellectual principles.

It is equally incumbent upon all liberal thinkers to do something towards raising the moral tone of society from its theological depravation into harmony with the standard of personal veracity and honour. It is not veracity and it is not honour that men should submit without an effort to having their children taught pious falsehoods and placed under the influence of priests whose creeds they despise. We need a severer standard of veracity and honesty than that. It is a poor subterfuge to say that the rising generation should be left free to form its own opinions. As well say a garden should be left free to produce what it pleases.

It will produce weeds, and so will the mind not carefully cultured. We owe to all we can influence our very best thought, our maturest experience, and we cannot escape that responsibility. We must tell our children just what we believe true, and let them know that it is a basis for them to build on. They are to think for themselves.

Occasions are not wanting to realise for ourselves, and to impress upon the young, the steadily corrupting influence of proven errors established by law. We have just witnessed in the legislative assembly of this great nation how easily, when a constitutional superstition is touched, men, who in worldly affairs are gentlemen, relapse into coarseness, calumny, and lawlessness. In the name of what they call God, but which is no more a God than Mumbo-Jumbo,—a fetish made up of the aggregate ignorance of churchmen who find it a paying stock, recreant Jews courting christian favour, Catholics sniffing again the burning flesh of Smithfield once mingled with their incense,—in the name of that God who cursed nature, kindled Tophet for man, and founded in the world as under it a government of fire and faggot, they have not hesitated at any meanness, falsehood, or injustice to inflict a blow upon intellectual liberty, and even national liberty which dares disregard dogma. We have seen one bearing the title of Knight,

which used to mean defender of woman, dragging up the name of a lady of spotless character amid brutal laughter, trying to rob of reputation one whom an unjust judge had already robbed of her child. All this we have seen done in the name of an established phantasm called God. The outbreak of fanaticism in some deputies from wild districts is far less base than the partizan fury, which, in its eagerness to strike their conqueror, led a party to vote like one herd upon a question of fact and law. By a remarkable coincidence the law is just what will most annoy their opponents and most delay public business, so punishing the country for taking its business out of their hands. There's truth and honour for you! These are the followers of Jesus and protectors of Omnipotence! These be thy gods, O people of England, who demand that woman should be insulted, law defied, and the sanctuary of law turned into a bear-garden, rather than that a man holding the opinions of the majority of scientific men in Europe shall be admitted to sit beside sanctified sporting squires, priest-ridden papists, and capacious city-men, making gold out of his blood who had not where to lay his head! The Member for Northampton no doubt has his faults; but now when he suffers not for his faults but for his virtues, and when in his person are assailed the rights of every independent thinker in this nation, I will undertake to affirm that he is nearer to that man whom the Sanhedrim scourged than the best

of his assailants, and that the spirit which pursues him because of his testimony against priestcraft and his fidelity to the people, is the self-same spirit that crowned Christ with thorns and pressed poison to the lips of Socrates.

We need not much regret this revolutionary outbreak of superstition allied with the class-interests preserved by superstition. A more salient illustration of the wolfish hunger for power underlying the unholy alliance of pious and political tyranny was never given to a people. If the Member for Northampton had lived to Methuselah's age, and made a daily speech in Parliament, he could not have done so much as his enemies have done in a few days to advance the cause of atheism, so far as that means disbelief in the God of his oppressors. The Bishop of Peterborough says the French Revolutionary Assembly decreed the suppression of God; but the revolutionary House of Commons has decreed his disgrace. Their deity is unmasked and turns out to be only a party whip. If John Milton were living he might see in this disgrace of the political deity the hand of the real God overthrowing the usurper of his place. In his time also imperialism made God into a prop of its despotism, and Milton then wrote, "Sure it was the hand of God to let them fall, and be taken in such a foolish trap as hath exposed them to all derision ;

. thereby testifying how little he accepted (prayers) from those who thought no better of the living God than of a blind buzzard idol, fit to be so served and worshipped."

This nation is more hopelessly sunk in superstition than I believe it to be, if it be not now awakened to the politically destructive tendencies of dogmas imported from barbarous tribes. It is, however, of importance that we should see to it that the lesson is not lost upon the rising generation. We have in this country a great literature in which the highest principles of morality and honour are reflected. On the other hand, we have a so-called religion in which all the massacres of Judaism and Christianity, their treasons to humanity, are sanctified. We have simply to let every unsophisticated mind look on this picture and on that. We have only to point to theological morality in Parliament putting a premium on hypocrisy, by declaring that it is ready to receive an atheist if he conceals his opinions; to theological morality trampling law for party ends; to theological morality foul-mouthed, insolent, treating honesty of mind and honesty of speech as crimes. We have only to ask the conscience of the mother, whether she would be glad to have her child grow up to so encourage concealment of thought, so brow-beat honesty, so over-ride

law, slander man and insult woman, all for the sake of God? We have only to ask the heart of youth whether it is prepared to worship a God so upheld, or for any success or ambition to pretend to believe in a religion so built on baseness?

I believe that these questions are stirring millions of hearts this day, and that the rising generation will show it when fully risen. I believe that it is largely because lessons like this have been impressed upon past generations that the present struggle of freedom against sacerdotalism has come.

It is also because our wise fathers taught those now grown gray that their trusty weapons were to be free and honest thought, fact, argument, lawful, that we now see Oppression taking to violence, to revolution, and Progress standing by the law. Let us better their instruction. Let us impress upon the rising generation that in calmness and justice is their strength. Let us teach them the gentle, irresistible force that goes with intellectual power, with study, mastery of their cause, and above all the might that ever gathers to the higher standard of morality and humanity.

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