

Regeneration

Versus

Degeneration

BY

W. J. COLVILLE

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REGENERATION VS. DEGENERATION.

CHAPTER I.

AMONG the varied signs of the day may be noted a tendency on the part of some writers of ability to enlarge on the most depressing aspects of our *fin de siècle* civilization. Granting that it is perhaps too artificial to be really healthy, and that certain evils undoubtedly exist, still it is not thereby proved that we are actually retrograding.

Popular literature is frequently morbid, and many declare that, though sad indeed, even the darkest pictures are all too true. But are these views correct? To be true to life a picture must be many-sided, embracing features which frequently seem paradoxical. Do the pessimists and deteriorationists ever present other than the darkest side of life's picture? The expression, "a fool's paradise," is constantly on the derisive lips of those who seem determined to see nothing but the plague-spots of society; but may there not be "a fool's *inferno*" more foolish than any highly-colored *Paradiso*, which is at least a beautiful folly?

In this objective state, no observing person can truthfully say that all is fair, and sweet, and honorable; therefore no faithful artist can paint all things as they actually exist *couleur de rose*. But if art in all its forms be rightfully an incentive and aid to progress, then it is the duty of the true artist—painter, sculptor, musician, poet, *littérateur*, or dramatist—to select healthy and ennobling subjects in preference to those which tend to increase sorrow by turning hope into despair.

The chief object of this article is to counteract in some measure the baneful effects produced by a too vivid and incessant

contemplation of disfigurements and grievances, a practice which has unhappily become prevalent in many quarters. Some writers of decided talent (though probably of little *genius*) untiringly depict the woes and sins of humanity, as if the world were rapidly going to destruction and they were specially commissioned to advise us of the fact.

Plays, novels, and magazine articles teem with direful proofs of certain and rapid deterioration, and we seem to be regarded as participants in a mad race toward death, or as mere puppets of a fate designed by a blind and vague monstrosity known as the "Law of Necessity." Heredity and environment are the catchwords of this pessimistic cult. By means of a fatal heredity we are forced downward, it is said, and a diabolical environment only accelerates our fall. If science, instead of nescience and sciolism, were brought into court to testify to the true nature of heredity and environment, we should be told that both are largely under our own control, and that nothing is too strong for the all-powerful spirit of man when once he recognizes his innate potency and determines with all the energy of his essentially god-like nature to compel fate to serve him as he wills. Hereditary tendencies undoubtedly influence us at the outset of life, and no kindly person thinks reproachfully of those victims of an unhappy physical origin who, being as yet unaware of their own spiritual possessions and capabilities, are held in the vice of inherited proclivity to abnormality. But no fate is hopeless; no human existence is so fettered by infirmity or hedged in with error that it cannot extricate itself, though possibly not without assistance from more "fortunate" neighbors.

There are two kinds of optimism—one totally *laissez faire*, and the other practically stirring and vigorous. The doctrine of regeneration—the new and second birth of humanity—as understood by science, is by no means synonymous with the religious tenet that man at his birth is totally sinful and depraved, and can only become a child of God by a complete change of nature. There is doubtless a great esoteric verity underneath that dogma, but the truth is so obscured by assumptions that it

is difficult to find. The New Testament, however, is quite clear in its teachings, notably the third chapter of the Gospel of St. John. The new birth is but an introduction to a higher realm of consciousness. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The word *see* is highly suggestive here, as it unmistakably refers to spiritual vision, or interior apprehension of reality.

The true optimist, working for the regeneration of humanity, acknowledges that the present state of society is imperfect; but he denies that it is rotten at the core and is constantly drifting from bad to worse, as the opposite school asserts. It can surely never be otherwise than healthful and of use to search for the finest passages in literature, the grandest and sweetest strains in music, the most symmetrical figures in sculpture, and the most harmonious blending of form and color in the painter's art. The critical spirit of the times is responsible for many of the very tendencies which are brought so prominently to the front in the painful scenes depicted in the literature of to-day. Is it healthful to be forever contemplating empty skulls, while so many active minds await examination? Need we perpetually interrogate closet skeletons and force open private cupboards to prove the unwelcome ghosts of the dead, while the fields of the living are filled with summer blossoms and the air redolent with their sweetness?

The vice of criticism is the bane of modern civilization; and the sensational interviewers and reviewers of the period seem to close their ears against harmonies, so intent are they on listening to discords; and to shut their eyes to purity and honor, so eager are they to retail the latest scandal to the highest bidder. Newspapers certainly do good, but they might do more good and inflict less pain on their readers were they to devote paragraphs to vice and crime and double-leaded columns to virtue. "But," say the alarmists, "were you to make less of evil, people would soon indulge in it even more unblushingly than at present; and were you to lessen in any degree the condemnation meted out to the guilty offender you would loosen moral restraints already lax, and in consequence assist the wicked

world in its downward course!" In reply to these arguments, the thorough-going optimist may simply say: You are leaving completely out of account the immense force which proceeds from real virtue.

It is the growing conviction of workers in reformatory causes that there are two sets of foes to be encountered, and that the most difficult to cope with are those who consider themselves pre-eminently the friends and promoters of "righteousness." It may safely be said that the best minds—the soundest, cleanest, and healthiest, the world over—rejoice in manifest progress; but there are depressing features, discouraging to all save a few interpreters of the signs of the times who feel sure that the present days are mentioned and foretold in the Great Pyramid, and that we are now in a narrow passage leading into a King's Chamber, where all is light and liberty.

If we are at this moment in a specially transitional state, then many signs which would otherwise be depressing may be positively encouraging. Swedenborg has much to say of *vastation*, which is only purification by means of an outlet for whatever is distorted or inverted and has therefore become infernal. Swedenborg, with characteristic realism, teaches that the heavens and hells in the universe stand feet to feet—the heavens erect, the hells inverted heavens—so that the soles of the feet of the heavens meet those of the feet of the hells. This curious imagery, which is, however, quite in accordance with the Hermetic doctrine of the Great Man, serves as a vivid picture of what evil really is. When we recognize it as simply an inversion of good, we shall speedily learn how to cure the otherwise incurable. Were there in the universe a devil from the beginning—an eternal spirit of evil, co-equal of God, who is Goodness Absolute—then the everlasting reign of evil would be a certainty; but even Milton's tremendous Satan and Dante's legions of the *Inferno* lend no countenance to such a supposition. A fallen angel who was once upright, and therefore in the nature of things capable of recovering from the deepest fall, is the worst conception of either of the great dramatic poets who gave to Europe its Satanic Majesty.

A mediæval legend concerning the devil shows how keenly alive were the thinkers of even that darkened period, and how truly and practically metaphysical were their ideas concerning the regenerative influence of elevating suggestions and the deteriorative trend of pessimistic inculcations. The story runs that during the Middle Ages the devil frequently donned the habit of a preaching friar; and when officiating as a zealous monk in a church pulpit, the arch-enemy of souls (or one of his emissaries) had but one theme of discourse—the horrors of hell and the tortures of the damned. So fiery were the words and so declamatory the style of the intrepid exhorter that the listeners imagined they could see the flames and hear the shrieks and groans of their fellow-sinners; but tradition says most truly that by depicting such nameless horrors no one was led to live a worthier life. To adapt a phrase from a poet's version of St. Anthony's sermon to fishes, "Much *frightened* [not delighted] were they, but each went his own way."

But there is quite another side to these tales of the Middle Ages, for the same tradition says that sometimes a bright and glorious angel disguised himself as a preaching friar; but when he ascended the pulpit, his heart being full of the love of God and the raptures of saints in heaven, he could discourse upon no other theme, and as the sermon proceeded hard hearts melted, sinners were converted, and souls were saved from error and its consequences—all through the agency of an appeal from first to last to that pure love of godliness which, though it slumber profoundly or be deeply concealed, is never absent from a single member of the human race.

It is to be regretted that many gifted writers, some of them women of genius, should lessen their own glory and trail the garments of literary art in the mire in order to paint in glowing colors (and not with evil intent) the most flagrant short-comings and perversions of the least sanctified elements of society. The plea is often made, as was done in many stirring temperance lectures by John B. Gough, that the wretched spectacle of the inebriate served to deter youth from taking the first plunge into the sea of drunkenness; but would the effect upon

boys be good were their preceptors constantly to assail them with graphic portrayals of such degradation as the confirmed toper exhibits? Surely the constant companionship of high ideals, noble examples, and virtuous suggestions is worth infinitely more in building up stalwart, unimpeachable manhood than all the vice exhibits which could possibly be concocted.

Whatever is pure is purifying, and whatever is depraved is corrupting—so far as the influence of either can extend. It is on this declaration that metaphysical activity in a regenerative direction is based. The subsistent idea is that human nature is surely rising, even though its upward career be by way of a spiral pathway rather than up an inclined plane. We apparently retrograde, while actually advancing. We fall in rising, and rise after repeated falls to heights we could never have attained had it not been for the experiences gained while travelling from the primitive Eden of nude *innocence* to the sun-clothed state of knowledge which goes hand in hand with *purity*. It is but rarely that we find moralists discriminating as they should between innocence and purity. Virgin innocence may be likened to a pearl, white but lustreless, while purity is like the dazzling diamond, which flashes forth a thousand scintillations from its facets' radiating surface.

The two sons in that sweetest of all anecdotes, the parable of the "Prodigal Son," distinctly represent two conditions of humanity—the one remaining in its original, undisciplined, inexperienced self-complacency; the other displaying the ultimate result of conquest over every temptation. The battle of life is a struggle for higher existence. Mere perpetuation of race by multiplication of species could never fulfil the end of evolution. We are indeed potentially all that we ever shall become; but our gifts lie dormant, and we are satisfied to doze before awakening to the glorious realities of living, by the wand of all that trying experience which is only a testing and educating process.

CHAPTER II.

STUDENTS of Oriental philosophies state that a *Kali Yug*, or great year, covering about five thousand years of earthly time, will come to an end about the close of the present century, and every reader of the mystic Hindu books knows that abundant predictions have been made by Oriental sages that when this cycle shall end great disturbances will be followed by an era of peace and enlightenment—to the astonished delight of those who, unaware of the sure predictions, imagined the world was rushing to destruction at a constantly increasing rate of speed.

From this stand-point the phrase *fin de siècle* becomes intelligible as signifying but the end of an age. Objection is frequently made to the use of this phrase, it being contended that there is no warrant for dealing with the age of a century as with that of a man. Centuries, it is said, are not born in helpless infancy, to pass through an adolescent period before they reach maturity, at length to descend into the valley of dotting old age. Though there is apparently much reason in this contention, it can scarcely be forgotten by any student of history that the last twenty-five years of every century are invariably its most remarkable period. The results of seventy-five years seem to culminate in the concluding twenty-five. It was at the very close of the eighteenth century that the French Revolution occurred, and what was the spirit of that uprising but a violent protest against superstition and tyranny? Piously brought-up people, who from childhood have been taught to look upon Voltaire, Robespierre, and other heroes of the revolutionary

epoch as fiends in human disguise, are wonder-stricken when they discover accurate excerpts from their writings breathing the kindest and gentlest spirit of love to man, and even professing devout faith in a Supreme Intelligence which is essential virtue and goodness—the very opposite of the tyrant of Bourbon theology whom the people naturally sought to dethrone.

Revolutionists are doubtless mistaken in many of their methods, but their motives are not necessarily evil. Difficult though it doubtless is for the dispossessed nobility of Europe and the millionaires of England and America to see the hand of Divine Goodness in what denudes them of their earthly possessions, and equally hard though it may be for the rank and file of the law-abiding citizens of any republic to see aught but iniquity in anarchy, yet the true philosopher is he who looks deeper than the surface of events and studies their inherent and essential cause. All peace-loving people are agreed that anarchistic methods are false; but blind condemnation of actions, without seeking to know the source whence they proceed, is equally erroneous. Fruit ripens in due season, appearing as a completed product; tares grow slowly in the field, and as they reach maturity the wise student of agriculture seeks to know how they grow, and from what they spring, in order that orchard, field, and garden may henceforth be kept free from noxious products.

A period of revelation may appear like one of unmitigated calamity; natural results may seem almost like visitations of evil; and some are always quick to decide that every expulsion of disease from the body which is accompanied by frenzied symptoms is an unfailing sign that a new devil is entering, while in truth an old one is being cast out. The wealth of meaning contained in many biblical similitudes is so great that even should the "higher criticism" completely undermine the merely historic elements in the sacred canon, the Bible would be more useful than ever as a symbolic portrayal of the perpetual connections between causes and effects. We are living in a law-governed universe, not in a domain given over to the

caprice of chance ; therefore we must seek to become philosophers—*lovers of wisdom*, as the word signifies.

The puerilities of pessimism are due to its shallowness. On all sides it is utterly superficial, impatient, and circumscribed. Pretending to be scientific, it is nescient ; assuming to trace everything to the action of immutable law, it takes but a hurried glance at appearances and thereby ignores law. All the sciences symphonize. Astronomy, geology, botany, anthropology, etc., prove the leisurely processes of Nature, and all indicate that there is a place for seeming retrogression coincident with progress. Instead of looking upon the dark side and preparing for the worst, it behooves us to see the bright side and anticipate the best, for only thus are we capable of taking active part in the working of regenerative order.

What is regeneration, but a higher and better truth ? What is a birth, but an epiphany or manifestation ? If all blind eulogy and harsh condemnation were set aside, and the facts of nature laid bare before our vision, we should understand many things which now seem obscure. Society is a Prodigal who is fast nearing the limit of his resources ; but when he reaches poverty he will arise and return home a better, braver, wiser fellow than when at the earliest dawn of manhood he strayed from his Father's House.

Many people have been determined to see what they call "the world." "One world at a time," they say, is all they can pay attention to. And this may fully absorb our practical interest ; but if we are investigating *one* world we are surely entitled to see all there is to be seen from the stand-point of that world. Two men pass down a country lane arm-in-arm. They are not blind and their feet do not stumble. One says to the other : "How brilliant are the stars ; how beautiful the fleecy clouds hanging like soft drapery about the moon ! I wonder if we shall ever visit those distant orbs ?" His companion replies : "I was just thinking how many worms there are in this neighborhood. I have counted over two hundred during the last five minutes." The first speaker then remarks : "And while you, my friend, have been counting the worms which

crawl on the earth, I have been counting the stars which shine in the heavens, and during the same space of time I have counted more than five hundred." Verily there are worms and there are stars. If our glance is directed downward, our world is peopled with the former; but if our heads are erect and our eyes turned skyward, the same earth is an observatory for higher things.

Are we retrograding? Yes, from the point of view of the worm-hunter. Are we progressing? Yes, to the vision of the star-gazer. Everything depends upon the point of view and condition of the beholder. The cynic—whose painful attacks of indigestion aggravate the mental distemper which gave them birth—sees with jaundiced eyes, as through a thick black veil; to him, consequently, the earth is black. Pessimism is a disease. It is also the child as well as the parent of disease. Because it is fatalistic and hopeless it cannot be prophetic, for prophets are invariably exhorters to righteousness, and to exhort to impossible righteousness were a sheer waste of energy. Christ condemns and destroys iniquity; and there is in every one an *essential* Christ. Self-accusation traced to its origin is self-glorification. Contrition for sin—a painful sense of weakness and unworthiness—comes from a glimpse of the indwelling Divine Spirit, who seems to upbraid for lowness by telling of possible highness. As with individual, so with collective, human experience. The race is engulfed in error, and weighed down more or less with a sense of its shortcomings; yet this load of humiliation is not a crushing burden, but a removable incubus which no one would attempt to lift unless he realized the power within him. Hydraulic pressure in the moral world is supplied both from without and within. We cannot lift ourselves unaided, but all the beneficent agencies of the Infinite are at our call if we but make use of our prerogatives.

Now that the degenerationists have a literature and a propaganda, it is time that their philosophical opponents, the regenerationists, should assert themselves. Assertions are too often permitted to go unchallenged; gauntlets are thrown down and no one picks them up. A challenge is offered by the ne-

gationist school, and it behooves affirmationists to embrace the auspicious moment to demonstrate the fallacies of pessimism. There is work to be done ; divine science is demonstrable ; the power of thought exerted for good can be displayed. Despite the current fad for depressing plays and literature, the great heart of humanity hopes for the best. It would rather believe that all things are working together for good than for evil.

Heredity and environment are thrust forward as the all in all. Let us, then, accept the challenge, and show how the very action of hereditary transmission can be exerted solely and powerfully in the direction of a higher generation ; for if bad traits can be transmitted to offspring, so also may good ones. Moreover, if surroundings are of such importance, are we to understand that influence must be evil in order to be effective ? that environments must be vile if they are to produce results ? Through the avenues of the pessimistic school regenerative influences must show that good, not evil, is supreme in the universe. There is an exaggerated sentiment of kindness which causes much saddening error. Many kind-hearted people spend their lives in over-rating the misery in the world, and such perpetual harping upon woe only depresses the singers of lachrymose songs, and often increases callousness in the very people against whose cruelties the sentimentalists protest.

The very names of well-meaning institutions might be altered with exceeding profit. Instead of societies for the "prevention of cruelty," let us have organizations for the *promotion of kindness* to animals and children. There is much in a name, for it offers suggestion of no mean value. A "home for incurables" cannot be expected to cure any one, for the title seals the doom of the inmates as they enter. A "home for inebriates" cannot cure a drunkard, for he is labelled *inebriate*, and expected to remain below the reach of moral suasion. A school for ragged children forbids their appearance in decent clothing, for were they properly attired they would be trespassers upon the name ; and so, through an interminable list of misguided titles, the world's progress is often hindered by its would-be helpers.

The lesson for reformers of every sort is hard to learn, but if truly sincere they can soon compel themselves to learn it. Logic is relentless. If your neighbor is to control his *passions*, you must control your *feelings*; if your patient is to grow amiable, you must not see his irritability. To see the kingdom of God is to become regenerate. The good which lurks in all awaits the sunshine of a smile of recognition to call it forth. Away, then, with the self-righteous methods of those who wail over degenerate tendencies, and on with the new metaphysical methods of reform which shall render sin impossible through the establishment of righteousness!

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