

CHAPTER II.

THE LORD AND THE SERF.

“In Russia the nation is divided into two great classes,—the aristocracy, who enjoy all the privileges, and the people, who bear all the burdens.”—*Hommage de Hell, Steppes de la Mer Caspienne.*

Not only does the society of Great Britain, but to a far greater extent do the societies of the Continent suffer from systematic evils, caused and perpetuated by unjust laws. Millions of Russian slaves are degraded from their manhood, by the barbarous institutions maintained by the privileged classes of the country; and even in France, which boasts a liberty that it does not possess, twenty citizens cannot assemble to discuss their social welfare, without incurring pains and penalties from the *law*. In Great Britain, the unprivileged classes have almost achieved their personal liberty; and the Briton, although still denuded of his rightful *property*, can stand erect as a freeman, enjoying in his person the freedom that has been purchased by a struggle of five centuries,

during the whole of which period the unprivileged classes have been emerging from the domination of those who made the laws. This fact, which the interested attempt to misrepresent or explain away, stands out before the reader of history in far too palpable a guise to be easily concealed, and at the same time affords the surest ground for anticipating that the progress of change will continue in the same beneficial direction, and that pure principles of equal justice will ultimately regulate the form and condition of society. If we cast our eye back on the condition of Britain after the Norman conquest, we find at the extremes of society the two great types of *lord* and *serf*, who form the two classes of an infant State, just beginning to arrange itself into some definite and systematic form. If we consider for a moment, we shall find that the lord and the serf present the furthest *possible* remove from nature, and the furthest possible remove from justice. Nature has made each man's body obedient in its physical motions to the dictates of the indwelling mind. As each mind wills, so does its attendant body move, and labour, and execute its actions. This is the law or constant order of nature, that each man's mind has power over that man's body, *and over no other*. Now, the condition of lord and serf changes this order, and instead of two individuals, each of whom thinks, wills, and acts for himself, we have one individual thinking and willing for the other, coercing him to labour, directing his actions by force, and reaping the reward of his toil. The serf is without

will, without property, without rights, without even those natural rights of family, which the animals enjoy in almost undisturbed possession. He is a thing, not a man,—a thing that can be bought and sold, bartered against goods, or slain with the utmost impunity. The lord, on the other hand, has the advantages of two men. His own body obeys him, and so does that of the serf. Every thing that the serf has is the lord's—his body, his hands, his family, his all. The distinction is as great as it can possibly be—the serf has nothing, the lord has every thing. Let us now consider the possibility of a change, by which the serf shall acquire something of his own. In his present condition he is as low as he can be, and the lord as high as he can be. It is now evident that every thing the serf acquires must be at the expense of the lord, and as he rises progressively step by step in the acquisition of his *rights*, the lord comes down exactly according to the same scale in the loss of his *privileges*. Perhaps the first thing that the serf acquires is a right to his family, the next perhaps a right to his life. When these are withdrawn from the will of the lord, he has made some progress upwards, and the lord has made a corresponding progress downwards. The struggle has at all events commenced, and year after year rolls on, giving the serf new possessions, and depriving the lord of his exclusive privileges. This question, and this struggle, it will be observed, is one of personal freedom. The *land* has not yet been taken into consideration. All that, with its fruits, and trees, and game, and animals

of all kinds, is necessarily in the possession of the lord, who doles it out as it may suit his own particular purposes. The struggle continues for centuries, and what is its *natural termination*? In any other science there could not be the slightest difficulty in determining what the result will be, provided sufficient time be allowed for the completion of the process. The serf is continually rising, the lord is continually falling, exactly in the same ratio of progression. Where can such a process of change terminate, except at that point where the serf, no longer a serf, shall be a freeman, on an *equality* with the lord, and the lord, no longer a lord, shall be merely a freeman, on an equality with the emancipated serf? Every country of Europe is at one stage or other of this double process, in which the unprivileged classes are acquiring a legal title to their natural rights, and the privileged classes are losing the legal title to their unnatural privileges. In Britain the struggle has been a long but a successful one. The serf has triumphed, and, so far as personal liberty is concerned, the serf is a serf no longer. But there still remains the question of the *land*. Shall the lord still continue to possess it, or shall the same process of change that has continued so long in operation, still continue to operate, and at last place the emancipated serf, *as regards the land*, on the same footing of equality that he has attained as regards personal liberty? This question each one will answer prophetically, in the mode most suited to his hopes or his fears; in the mean time, we shall state a few propositions on the

process of the change that has yet to take place, before men can be said to be in their best political state.

As a means of hastening or advancing the necessary changes, I am not sanguine in my estimate of the power of any treatise on the science of politics.

1. If men be not in their best political state, to produce a change for the better ought to be the object of every political treatise. If men be in their best political state, any treatise on the subject would be superfluous, except inasmuch as it was a scientific exhibition of formal truth for the instruction of the intellect.

2. Men will be in their best political state when each shall possess *legally* exactly what he has a right to *justly*.

3. It is quite certain that men are not in their best political state; and such being the case, some men must possess *more* and others *less* than they are justly entitled to.

4. Those who possess more, may be termed the *privileged* classes; those who possess less, the *unprivileged* classes. The actual government or political power must always be vested in the privileged classes; for it is absurd to suppose that men should have the power and not possess their own. On the contrary, it is very easy to suppose that the men who have the power should possess more than their own.*

5. Change for the better, then, consists in reduc-

* What is intended by *less*, *more*, *own*, will be explained definitely hereafter.

ing the privileged classes to the legal possession of what is their own, and of elevating the unprivileged classes to the legal possession of what is theirs.

6. Change may be produced by the rulers or government directly and legally, and by the unprivileged classes by force, directly and *illegally*, or through what is termed moral influence, or public opinion, indirectly and *legally*.

7. Men are not in their best political state, because long ago their predecessors were so ignorant and so brutalised that the strong did as they pleased, took all they could get, and enacted laws to secure its possession to them and to their descendants, and because many of those laws are still in force. With the progress and dissemination of knowledge, political changes for the better have continually taken place; but the amount of change has not yet been equal to the amount of evil formerly established by law, consequently men have not yet arrived at their best political state.

8. To arrive at the best political state it is necessary that change should take place.

9. Change takes place slowly, because the privileged classes *will* not make it, and because the unprivileged classes have not legally the power to make it otherwise than slowly, nor the will to make it otherwise than legally.

10. Change may be made quickly by force or revolution *illegally*, but there are objections to revolution.

11. The privileged classes will not produce change

for the better, because they are either ignorant or corrupt. Either they *do not know* what changes ought to be made, and are consequently ignorant, or they do know, and *will not* make them, consequently are corrupt.

12. The unprivileged classes cannot produce change speedily, because their moral influence is not sufficient.

13. The diffusion of knowledge amongst the unprivileged classes tends to increase their moral influence. All knowledge does not in the same degree tend to increase the moral influence of the unprivileged with the privileged classes,—it is particularly the knowledge of political truth and of political economy.

I have said that I do not believe a treatise on politics capable of producing much political change for the better,—because,

1. The privileged classes, including rulers who have the power of making change directly, are little likely to peruse those books whose object is to show that they hold in possession what is not theirs, and less likely are they to act on the principles of that book.

2. It is, therefore, only as a treatise on politics can affect the unprivileged classes that it can be a means of working change, and that only as it tends to increase their knowledge of political truth, and consequently their moral influence. But the circulation of a book is necessarily limited, and however true its principles might be, considerable time must

elapse before they can have any notable effect, especially when the pecuniary interests of the powerful are leagued against them. Thus the utmost we can expect from any treatise on politics is, that if its principles be true, they should silently work their way amongst the thinking portion of the unprivileged classes, and by increasing the moral influence of those classes enable them to labour effectually for their rights; or if its principles be not true, that they should go, like their author, to the grave and be forgotten.

There is in nature, however, a means of change much more efficient than books can be,—because,

3. Nature is harmoniously constructed; that which is just is beneficial.

4. When that which is unjust is done, that which is prejudicial will arise as a necessary consequence. When that which is prejudicial arises, inconvenience will be experienced by those who suffer the injustice. When this inconvenience becomes excessive, it will produce clamour for change, and this is the mode which nature provides for the correction of the abuses of her laws. Thus, *right* should lead to possession. Power instead of right has led to possession. But that power instead of right should lead to possession is contrary to the laws and harmony of nature, and as the laws of nature cannot be infringed with impunity, guilt and suffering have necessarily ensued. Suffering is inconvenience, and inconvenience has produced clamour for change.

But when men are so grossly ignorant as not to

trace the suffering to its true cause, or when so enslaved and degraded as not to dream of change, the clamour is faint, has no direct object, or perhaps a mistaken object, and is for the most part ineffectual.

In this there is discovered another truth, that knowledge must show the true cause of the suffering before the clamour can become effectual to produce or to extort the change.

Thus the diffusion of knowledge will gradually lead towards the best political state. It is therefore important that the unprivileged classes should be informed of, and correctly understand, the causes of their systematic suffering. Suffering makes them feel their wrongs, and knowledge teaches them how these wrongs may be corrected.