

## CHAPTER VII.

### IS IT THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS?

**T**H**ERE** are worlds and worlds—even within the bounds of the same horizon. The man who comes into New York with plenty of money, who puts up at the Windsor or Brunswick, and is received by hospitable hosts in Fifth Avenue mansions, sees one New York. The man who comes with a dollar and a half, and goes to a twenty-five-cent lodging-house, sees another. There are also fifteen-cent lodging-houses, and people too poor to go even to them.

Into the pleasant avenues of the Park, in the bright May sunshine, dashes the railroad-wrecker's daughter, her tasty riding-habit floating free from the side of her glistening bay, and her belted groom, in fresh top-boots and smart new livery, clattering after, at a respectful distance, on another blooded horse, that chafes at the bit. The stock-gambler's son, rising from his trotter at every stride, in English fashion, his English riding-stick grasped by the middle, raises his hat to her nod. And as he whirls past in his London-made dog-cart, a liveried servant sitting with folded arms behind him, she exchanges salutations with the high-born descendant of the Dutch gardener, whose cabbage-patch, now covered with brick and mortar, has become an "estate" of lordly income. While in the soft, warm air rings a musical note, and drawn by mettled steeds, the four-in-hands of the coaching club rush by,

with liveried guards and coach-tops filled with chattering people, to whom life, with its round of balls, parties, theaters, flirtations and excursions, is a holiday, in which, but for the invention of new pleasures, satiety would make time drag.

How different this bright world from that of the old woman who, in the dingy lower street, sits from morning to night beside her little stock of apples and candy; from that of the girls who stand all day behind counters and before looms, who bend over sewing-machines for weary, weary hours, or who come out at night to prowl the streets!

One railroad king puts the great provinces of his realm in charge of satraps and goes to Europe; the new steel yacht of another is being fitted, regardless of expense, for a voyage around the world, if it pleases him to take it; a third will not go abroad—he is too busy buying in his “little old railroad” every day. Other human beings are gathered into line every Sunday afternoon by the Rev. Coffee-and-rolls-man, and listen to his preaching for the dole they are to get. And upon the benches in the squares sit men from whose sullen, deadened faces the fire of energy and the light of hope have gone—“tramps” and “bums,” the broken, rotted, human driftwood, the pariahs of our society.

I stroll along Broadway in the evening, and by the magnificent saloon of the man who killed Jim Fisk, I meet a good fellow whom I knew years ago in California, when he could not jingle more than one dollar on another. It is different now, and he takes a wad of bills from his pocket to pay for the thirty-five-cent cigars we light. He has rooms in the most costly of Broadway hotels, his clothes are cut by Blissert, and he thinks Delmonico's about the only place to get a decent meal. He tells me about some “big things” he has got into, and talks about

millions as though they were marbles. If a man has any speed in him at all, he says, it is just as easy to deal in big things as in little things, and the men who play such large hands in the great game are no smarter than other men, when you get alongside of them and take their measure. As to politics, he says, it is only a question who hold the offices. The corporations rule the country, and are going to rule it, and the man is a fool who doesn't get on their side. As for the people, what do they know or care! The press rules the people, and capital rules the press. Better hunt with the dogs than be hunted with the hare.

We part, and as I turn down the street another acquaintance greets me, and, as his conversation grows interesting, I go out of my way, for to delay him were sin, as he must be at work by two in the morning. He has been trying to read "Progress and Poverty," he says: but he has to take it in such little snatches, and the children make such a noise in his two small rooms—for his wife is afraid to let them out on the street to learn so much bad—that it is hard work to understand some parts of it. He is a journeyman baker, but he has a good situation as journeyman bakers go. He works in a restaurant, and only twelve hours a day. Most bakers, he tells me, have to work fourteen and sixteen hours. Some of the places they work in would sicken a man not used to it, and even those used to it are forced to lie off every now and again, and to drink, or they could not stand it. In some bakeries they use good stock, he says, but they have to charge high prices, which only the richer people will pay. In most of them you often have to sift the maggots out of the flour, and the butter is always rancid. He belongs to a Union, and they are trying to get in all the journeyman bakers; but those that work longest, and have most need of it, are the hardest to get. Their long hours make them stupid;

and take all the spirit out of them. He has tried to get into business for himself, and he and his wife once pinched and saved till they got a few hundred dollars, and then set up a little shop. But he had not money enough to buy a share in the Flour Association—a coöperative association of boss bakers, by which the members get stock at lowest rates—and he could not compete, lost his money, and had to go to work again as a journeyman. He can see no chance at all of getting out of it, he says; he sometimes thinks he might as well be a slave. His family grows larger and it costs more to keep them. His rent was raised two dollars on the 1st of May. His wife remonstrated with the agent, said they were making no more, and it cost them more to live. The agent said he could not help that; the property had increased in value, and the rents must be raised. The reason people complained of rents was that they lived too extravagantly, and thought they must have everything anybody else had. People could live, and keep strong and fat, on nothing but oatmeal. If they would do that they would find it easy enough to pay their rent.

There is such a rush across the Atlantic that it is difficult to engage a passage for months ahead. The doors of the fine, roomy houses in the fashionable streets will soon be boarded up, as their owners leave for Europe, for the sea-shore, or the mountains. "Everybody is out of town," they will say. Not quite everybody, though. Some twelve or thirteen hundred thousand people, without counting Brooklyn, will be left to swelter through the hot summer. The swarming tenement-houses will not be boarded up; every window and door will be open to catch the least breath of air. The dirty streets will be crawling with squalid life, and noisy with the play of unkempt children, who never saw a green field or watched the curl of a breaker, save perhaps, when charity gave them a treat.

Dragged women will be striving to quiet pining babies, sobbing and wailing away their little lives for the want of wholesome nourishment and fresh air; and degradation and misery that hide during the winter will be seen on every hand.

In such a city as this, the world of some is as different from the world in which others live as Jupiter may be from Mars. There are worlds we shut our eyes to, and do not bear to think of, still less to look at, but in which human beings yet live—worlds in which vice takes the place of virtue, and from which hope here and hope hereafter seem utterly banished—brutal, discordant, torturing hells of wickedness and suffering.

“Why do they cry for bread?” asked the innocent French princess, as the roar of the fierce, hungry mob resounded through the courtyard of Versailles. “If they have no bread, why don’t they eat cake?”

Yet, not a fool above other fools was the pretty princess, who never in her whole life had known that cake was not to be had for the asking. “Why are not the poor thrifty and virtuous and wise and temperate?” one hears whenever in luxurious parlors such subjects are mentioned. What is this but the question of the French princess? Thrift and virtue and wisdom and temperance are not the fruits of poverty.

But it is not this of which I intended here to speak so much as of that complacent assumption which runs through current thought and speech, that this world in which we, nineteenth-century, Christian, American men and women live, is, in its social adjustments, at least, about such a world as the Almighty intended it to be.

Some say this in terms, others say it by implication, but in one form or another it is constantly taught. Even the wonders of modern invention have, with a most influential part of society, scarcely shaken the belief that social

improvement is impossible. Men of the sort who, a little while ago, derided the idea that steam-carriages might be driven over the land and steam-vessels across the sea, would not now refuse to believe in the most startling mechanical invention. But he who thinks society may be improved, he who thinks that poverty and greed may be driven from the world, is still looked upon in circles that pride themselves on their culture and rationalism as a dreamer, if not as a dangerous lunatic.

The old idea that everything in the social world is ordered by the Divine Will—that it is the mysterious dispensations of Providence that give wealth to the few and order poverty as the lot of the many, make some rulers and the others serfs—is losing power; but another idea that serves the same purpose is taking its place, and we are told, in the name of science, that the only social improvement that is possible is by a slow race-evolution, of which the fierce struggle for existence is the impelling force; that, as I have recently read in “a journal of civilization” from the pen of a man who has turned from the preaching of what he called Christianity to the teaching of what he calls political economy, “only the *elite* of the race has been raised to the point where reason and conscience can even curb the lower motive forces,” and “that for all but a few of us the limit of attainment in life, in the best case, is to live out our term, to pay our debts, to place three or four children in a position as good as the father’s was, and there make the account balance.” As for “friends of humanity,” and those who would “help the poor,” they get from him the same scorn which the Scribes and Pharisees eighteen hundred years ago visited on a pestilent social reformer whom they finally crucified.

Lying beneath all such theories is the selfishness that would resist any inquiry into the titles to the wealth which greed has gathered, and the difficulty and indisposition on

the part of the comfortable classes of realizing the existence of any other world than that seen through their own eyes.

That "one-half of the world does not know how the other half live," is much more true of the upper than of the lower half. We look upon that which is pleasant rather than that which is disagreeable. The shop-girl delights in the loves of the Lord de Maltravers and the Lady Blanche, just as children without a penny will gaze in confectioners' windows, as hungry men dream of feasts, and poor men relish tales of sudden wealth. And social suffering is for the most part mute. The well-dressed take the main street, but the ragged slink into the byways. The man in a good coat will be listened to where the same man in tatters would be hustled off. It is that part of society that has the best reason to be satisfied with things as they are that is heard in the press, in the church, and in the school, and that forms the conventional opinion that this world in which we American Christians, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, live is about as good a world as the Creator (if there is a Creator) intended it should be.

But look around. All over the world the beauty and the glory and the grace of civilization rest on human lives crushed into misery and distortion.

I will not speak of Germany, of France, of England. Look even here, where European civilization flowers in the free field of a new continent; where there are no kings, no great standing armies, no relics of feudal servitude; where national existence began with the solemn declaration of the equal and inalienable rights of men. I clip, almost at random, from a daily paper, for I am not seeking the blackest shadows:

Margaret Hickey, aged 30 years, came to this city a few days ago from Boston with a seven-weeks-old baby. She tried to get work, but

was not successful. Saturday night she placed the child in a cellar at No. 226 West Forty-second Street. At midnight she called at Police Headquarters and said she had lost her baby in Forty-third Street. In the meantime an officer found the child. The mother was held until yesterday morning, when she was taken to Yorkville Court and sent to the Island for six months.

Morning and evening, day after day, in these times of peace and prosperity, one may read in our daily papers such items as this, and worse than this. We are so used to them that they excite no attention and no comment. We know what the fate of Margaret Hickey, aged thirty years, and of her baby, aged seven weeks, sent to the Island for six months, will be. Better for them and better for society were they drowned outright, as we would drown a useless cat and mangy kitten; but so common are such items that we glance at them as we glance at the number of birds wounded at a pigeon-match, and turn to read "what is going on in society;" of the last new opera or play; of the cottages taken for the season at Newport or Long Branch; of the millionaire's divorce or the latest great defalcation; how Heber Newton is to be driven out of the Episcopal Church for declaring the Song of Solomon a love-drama, and the story of Jonah and the whale a poetical embellishment; or how the great issue which the American people are to convulse themselves about next year is the turning of the Republican party out of power.

I read the other day in a Brooklyn paper of a coroner's jury summoned to inquire, as the law directs, into the cause of death of a two days' infant. The unwholesome room was destitute of everything save a broken chair, a miserable bed and an empty whisky-bottle. On the bed lay, uncared for, a young girl, mother of the dead infant; over the chair, in drunken stupor, sprawled a man—her father. "The horror-stricken jury," said the report



“rendered a verdict in accordance with the facts, and left the place as fast as they could.” So do we turn from these horrors. Are there not policemen and station-houses, almshouses and charitable societies?

Nevertheless, we send missionaries to the heathen; and I read the other day how the missionaries, sent to preach to the Hindus the Baptist version of Christ's gospel, had been financed out of the difference between American currency and Indian rupees by the godly men who stay at home and boss the job. Yet, from Arctic to Antarctic Circle, where are the heathen among whom such degraded and distorted human beings are to be found as in our centers of so-called Christian civilization, where we have such a respect for the all-seeing eye of God that if you want a drink on Sunday you must go into the saloon by the back door? Among what tribe of savages, who never saw a missionary, can the cold-blooded horrors testified to in the Tewksbury Almshouse investigation be matched? “Babies don't generally live long here,” they told the farmer's wife who brought them a little waif. And neither did they—seventy-three out of seventy-four dying in a few weeks, their little bodies sold off at a round rate per dozen to the dissecting-table, and a six months' infant left there two days losing three pounds in weight. Nor did adults—the broken men and women who there sought shelter—fare better. They were robbed, starved, beaten, turned into marketable corpses as fast as possible, while the highly respectable managers waxed fat and rich, and set before legislative committees the best of dinners and the choicest of wines. It were slander to dumb brutes to speak of the bestial cruelty disclosed by the opening of this whited sepulcher. Yet, not only do the representatives of the wealth and culture and “high moral ideas” of Massachusetts receive coldly these revelations, they fight bitterly the man who has made them, as though the drag-

ging of such horrors to light, not the doing of them, were the unpardonable sin. They were only paupers! And I read in the journal founded by Horace Greeley, that "the woes of the Tewksbury paupers are no worse than the common lot of all inmates of pauper refuges the country over."

Or take the revelations made this winter before a legislative committee of the barbarities practised in New York state prisons. The system remains unaltered; not an official has been even dismissed. The belief that dominates our society is evidently that which I find expressed in "a journal of civilization" by a reverend professor at Yale, that "the criminal has no claims against society at all. What shall be done with him is a question of expediency"! I wonder if our missionaries to the heathen ever read the American papers? I am certain they don't read them to the heathen.

Behind all this is social disease. Criminals, paupers, prostitutes, women who abandon their children, men who kill themselves in despair of making a living, the existence of great armies of beggars and thieves, prove that there are large classes who find it difficult with the hardest toil to make an honest and sufficient livelihood. So it is, "There is," incidentally said to me, recently, a New York Supreme Judge, "a large class—I was about to say a majority—of the population of New York and Brooklyn, who just live, and to whom the rearing of two more children means inevitably a boy for the penitentiary and a girl for the brothel." A partial report of charitable work in New York city, not embracing the operations of a number of important societies, shows 36,000 families obtaining relief, while it is estimated that were the houses in New York city containing criminals and the recipients of charity set side by side they would make a street twenty-two miles long. One charitable society in New

York city extended aid this winter to the families of three hundred tailors. Their wages are so small when they do work that when work gives out they must beg, steal or starve.

Nor is this state of things confined to the metropolis. In Massachusetts the statistician of the Labor Bureau declares that among wage laborers the earnings (exclusive of the earnings of minors) are less than the cost of living; that in the majority of cases working-men do not support their families on their individual earnings alone, and that fathers are forced to depend upon their children for from one-quarter to one-third of the family earnings, children under fifteen supplying from one-eighth to one-sixth of the total earnings. Miss Emma E. Brown has shown how parents are forced to evade the law prohibiting the employment of young children, and in Pennsylvania, where a similar law has been passed, I read how, forced by the same necessity, the operatives of a mill have resolved to boycott a storekeeper whose relative had informed that children under thirteen were employed. While in Canada last winter it was shown that children under thirteen were kept at work in the mills from six in the evening to six in the morning, a man on duty with a strap to keep them awake.

Illinois is one of the richest States of the Union. It is scarcely yet fairly settled, for the last census shows the male population in excess of the female, and wages are considerably higher than in more eastern States. In their last report the Illinois Commissioners of Labor Statistics say that their tables of wages and cost of living are representative only of intelligent working-men who make the most of their advantages, and do not reach "the confines of that world of helpless ignorance and destitution in which multitudes in all large cities continually live, and whose only statistics are those of epidemics, pauperism and

crime." Nevertheless, they go on to say, an examination of these tables will demonstrate that one-half of these intelligent working-men of Illinois "are not even able to earn enough for their daily bread, and have to depend upon the labor of women and children to eke out their miserable existence."

It is the fool who saith in his heart there is no God. But what shall we call the man who tells us that with this sort of a world God bids us be content?