

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup
Mommsen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier
Garschin Defoe Hebbel Hegel Kussmaul Herder
Damaschke Descartes Schopenhauer Bebel Proust
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Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot
Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy
Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius
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Brentano Strachwitz Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Gibbon Tschchow
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius
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Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Mörike Musil
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Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus Moltke
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By the Christmas Fire

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I

The Bayonet-Poker

[Pg 3]



As I sit by my Christmas fire I now and then give it a poke with a bayonet. It is an old-fashioned British bayonet which has seen worse days. I picked it up in a little shop in Birmingham for two shillings. I was attracted to it as I am to all reformed characters. The hardened old sinner, having had enough of war, was a candidate for a peaceful position. I [Pg 4] was glad to have a hand in his reformation.

To transform a sword into a pruning hook is a matter for a skilled smith, but to change a bayonet into a poker is within the capacity of the least mechanical. All that is needed is to cause the bayonet to forsake the murderous rifle barrel and cleave to a short wooden handle. Henceforth its function is not to thrust itself into the vitals of men, but to encourage combustion on winter nights.

The bayonet-poker fits into the philosophy of Christmas, at least into the way I find it easy to philosophize. It seems a better symbol of what is happening than the harps of gold and the other beautiful things of which the hymn-writers sing, but which [Pg 5] ordinary

people have never seen. The golden harps were made for no other purpose than to produce celestial harmony. They suggest a scene in which peace and good-will come magically and reign undisturbed. Everything is exquisitely fitted for high uses. It is not so with the bayonet that was, and the poker that is. For it peace and good-will are afterthoughts. They are not even remotely suggested in its original constitution. And yet, for all that, it serves excellently as an instrument of domestic felicity.

The difficulty with the Christmas message is not in getting itself proclaimed, but in getting itself believed; that is, in any practicable fashion. Every one recognizes the eminent [Pg 6]desirability of establishing more amicable relations between the members of the human family. But is this amiable desire likely to be fulfilled in this inherently bellicose world?

The argument against Christmas has taken a menacingly scientific form. A deluge of cold water in the form of unwelcome facts has been thrown upon our enthusiasm for humanity.

"Peace on earth," it is said, "is against Nature. It flies in the face of the processes of evolution. You have only to look about you to see that everything has been made for a quite different purpose. For ages Mother Nature has been keeping house in her own free-and-easy fashion, gradually improving her family by killing off[Pg 7] the weaker members, and giving them as food to the strong. It is a plan that has worked well—for the strong. When we interrogate Nature as to the 'reason why' of her most marvelous contrivances, her answer has a grim simplicity. We are like Red Riding-Hood when she drew back the bed-curtains and saw the wolfish countenance.—'What is your great mouth made for, grandmother?'—'To eat you with, my dear.'

"To eat, while avoiding the unpleasant alternative of being eaten, is a motive that goes far and explains much. The haps and mishaps of the hungry make up natural history. The eye of the eagle is developed that it may see its prey from afar, its wings are strong that it may pounce upon[Pg 8] it, its beak and talons are sharpened that it may tear it in pieces. By right of these superiorities, the eagle reigns as king among birds.

"The wings of the eagle, the sinews of the tiger, the brain of the man, are primarily weapons. Each creature seizes the one that it finds at hand, and uses it for offense and defense. The weapon is improved by use. The brain of the man has proved a better weapon than beak or talons, and so it has come to pass that man is lord of creation. He is able to devour at will creatures who once were his rivals.

"By using his brain, he has sought out many inventions. The sum total of these inventions we call by the imposing name Civilization. It is a [Pg 9]marvelously tempered weapon, in the hands of the strong races. Alas, for the backward peoples who fall beneath it. One device after another has been added for the extermination of the slow-witted.

"Even religion itself assumes to the anthropologist a sinister aspect. The strong nations have always been religious. Their religion has helped them in their struggle for the mastery. There are many unpleasant episodes in history. Spiritual wealth, like material wealth, is often predatory.

"In the Book of Judges there is a curious glimpse into a certain kind of religiousness. A man of Mt. Ephraim named Micah had engaged a young Levite from Bethlehem-Judah as his spiritual adviser. He promised him [Pg 10] a modest salary, ten shekels of silver annually, and a suit of clothes, and his board. 'And the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man was unto him as one of his sons. And Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then said Micah, Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest.'

"This pleasant relation continued till a freebooting party of Danites appeared. They had discovered a bit of country where the inhabitants 'dwelt in security, after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure; for there was none in the land, possessing authority, that might put *them* to shame in any thing, and they were far from [Pg 11] the Zidonians.' It was just the opportunity for expansion which the children of Dan had been waiting for, so they marched merrily against the unprotected valley. On the way they seized Micah's priest. 'And they said unto him, Hold thy peace, lay

thine hand upon thy mouth, and go with us, and be to us a father and a priest: is it better for thee to be priest unto the house of one man, or to be priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel? And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven image, and went in the midst of the people.'

"Of course, Micah didn't like it, and called out, 'Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and are gone away, and what[Pg 12] have I more?' The Danites answered after the manner of the strong, 'Let not thy voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and thou lose thy life, with the lives of thy household. And the children of Dan went their way: and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back unto his house.'

"Is not that the way of the world? The strong get what they want and the weak have to make the best of it. Micah, when he turned back from a hopeless conflict, was a philosopher, and the young Levite when he went forward was a pietist. Both the philosophy and the piety were by-products of the activity of the children of Dan. They sadly needed the priest[Pg 13] to sanctify the deeds of the morrow when 'they took that which Micah had made, and the priest which he had, and came unto Laish, unto a people quiet and secure, and smote them with the edge of the sword; and they burnt the city with fire. And there was no deliverer, because it was far from Zidoh, and they had no dealings with any man; and it was in the valley that lieth by Beth-rehob.'

"The wild doings in the little valley that lieth by Beth-rehob have been repeated endlessly. Whittier describes the traditional alliance between Religion and sanguinary Power: —

Feet red from war fields trod the church aisles holy,
With trembling reverence, and the oppressor there
[Pg 14]
Kneeling before his priest, abased and lowly,
Crushed human hearts beneath the knee of prayer.

"When we inquire too curiously about the origin of the things which we hold most precious, we come to suspect that we are little

better than the receivers of stolen goods. How could it be otherwise with the descendants of a long line of freebooters? How are we to uphold the family fortunes if we forsake the means by which they were obtained? Are we not fated by our very constitutions to continue a predatory life?"

There are lovers of peace and of justice to whom such considerations appeal with tragic force. They feel that moral ideals have arisen only to mock us, and to put us into hopeless [Pg 15] antagonism to the world in which we live. In the rude play of force, many things have been developed that are useful in our struggle for existence. But one faculty has developed that is destined to be our undoing, — it is Conscience. Natural history does not give any satisfactory account of it. It runs counter to our other tendencies. It makes us miserable just when we are getting the advantage of others. Now, getting the advantage of others we had understood was the whole of the exciting game of life. To plot for this has marvelously sharpened human wit. But Conscience, just at the critical moment, cries "For shame!" It is an awkward situation. Not only the rules of the game, but the game itself, is called in question.

[Pg 16]

As a consequence, many conscientious persons lose all the zest of living. The existing world seems to them brutal, its order, tyranny; its morality, organized selfishness; its accepted religion, a shallow conventionality. In such a world as this, the good man stands like a gladiator who has suddenly become a Christian. He is overwhelmed with horror at the bloody sports, yet he is forced into the arena and must fight. That is his business, and he cannot rise above it.

I cannot, myself, take such a gloomy view of the interesting little planet on which I happen to find myself. I take great comfort in the thought that the world is still unfinished, and that what we see lying around us is not the completed [Pg 17] product, but only the raw material. And this consolation rises into positive cheer when I learn that there is a chance for us to take a hand in the creative work. It matters very little at this stage of the proceedings whether things are good or bad. The question for us is, What is the best use to which we can put them? We are not to be bullied by facts. If we

don't like them as they are, we may remould them nearer to our heart's desire. At least we may try.

Here is my bayonet. A scientific gentleman, seeing it lying on my hearth, might construct a very pretty theory about its owner. A bayonet is made to stab with. It evidently implies a stabber. To this I could only answer, "My dear sir, do not[Pg 18] look at the bayonet, look at me. Do I strike you as a person who would be likely to run you through, just because I happen to have the conveniences to do it with? Sit down by the fire and we will talk it over, and you will see that you have nothing to fear. What the Birmingham manufacturer designed this bit of steel for was his affair, not mine. When it comes to design, two can play at that game. What I use this for, you shall presently see."

Now, here we have the gist of the matter. Most of the gloomy prognostications which distress us arise from the habit of attributing to the thing a power for good or evil which belongs only to the person. It is one of the earliest forms of superstition. The[Pg 19] anthropologist calls it "fetichism" when he finds it among primitive peoples. When the same notion is propounded by advanced thinkers, we call it "advanced thought." We attribute to the Thing a malignant purpose and an irresistible potency, and we crouch before it as if it were our master. When the Thing is set going, we observe its direction with awe-struck resignation, just as people once drew omens from the flight of birds. What are we that we should interfere with the Tendencies of Things?

The author of "The Wisdom of Solomon" gives a vivid picture of the terror of the Egyptians when they were "shut up in their houses, the prisoners of darkness, and fettered with the bonds of a long night, they[Pg 20] lay there exiled from eternal providence." Everything seemed to them to have a malign purpose. "Whether it were a whistling wind, or a melodious noise of birds among the spreading branches, or a pleasing fall of water running violently, or a terrible sound of stones cast down, or a running that could not be seen of skipping beasts, or a roaring voice of most savage wild beasts, or a rebounding echo from the hollow mountains; these things made them swoon for fear." For, says the author, "fear is nothing else than a betraying of the succours that reason offers."

We have pretty generally risen above the primitive forms of this superstition. We do not fear that a rock or tree will go out of its way to harm[Pg 21] us. We are not troubled by the suspicion that some busybody of a planet is only waiting its chance to do us an ill turn. We are inclined to take the dark of the moon with equanimity.

But when it comes to moral questions we are still dominated by the idea of the fatalistic power of inanimate things. We cannot think it possible to be just or good, not to speak of being cheerful, without looking at some physical fact and saying humbly "By your leave." We personify our tools and machines, and the occult symbols of trade, and then as abject idolaters we bow down before the work of our own hands. We are awe-struck at their power, and magnify the mystery of their existence. We only pray that they may not turn[Pg 22] us out of house and home, because of some blunder in our ritual observance. That they will make it very uncomfortable for us, we take for granted. We have resigned ourselves to that long ago. They are so very complicated that they will make no allowance for us, and will not permit us to live simply as we would like. We are really very plain people, and easily flurried and worried by superfluities. We could get along very nicely and, we are sure, quite healthfully, if it were not for our Things. They set the pace for us, and we have to keep up.

We long for peace on earth, but of course we can't have it. Look at our warships and our forts and our great guns. They are getting bigger every[Pg 23] year. No sooner do we begin to have an amiable feeling toward our neighbors than some one invents a more ingenious way by which we may slaughter them. The march of invention is irresistible, and we are being swept along toward a great catastrophe.

We should like very much to do business according to the Golden Rule. It strikes us as being the only decent method of procedure. We have no ill feeling toward our competitors. We should be pleased to see them prosper. We have a strong preference for fair play. But of course we can't have it, because the corporations, those impersonal products of modern civilization, won't allow it. We must not meddle with them, for if we do we might break some of the[Pg 24] laws

of political economy, and in that case nobody knows what might happen.

We have a great desire for good government. We should be gratified if we could believe that the men who pave our streets, and build our school-houses, and administer our public funds, are well qualified for their several positions. But we cannot, in a democracy, expect to have expert service. The tendency of politics is to develop a Machine. The Machine is not constructed to serve us. Its purpose is simply to keep itself going. When it once begins to move, it is only prudent in us to keep out of the way. It would be tragical to have it run over us.

So, in certain moods, we sit and [Pg 25] grumble over our formidable fetiches. Like all idolaters, we sometimes turn iconoclasts. In a short-lived fit of anger we smash the Machine. Having accomplished this feat, we feel a little foolish, for we don't know what to do next.

Fortunately for the world there are those who are neither idolaters nor iconoclasts. They do not worship Things, nor fear them, nor despise them,—they simply use them.

In the Book of Baruch there is inserted a letter purporting to be from Jeremiah to the Hebrew captives in Babylon. The prophet discourses on the absurdity of the worship of inanimate things, and incidentally draws on his experience in gardening. [Pg 26] An idol, he says, is "like to a white thorn in an orchard, that every bird sitteth upon." It is as powerless, he says, to take the initiative "as a scarecrow in a garden of cucumbers that keepeth nothing." In his opinion, one wide-awake man in the cucumber patch is worth all the scarecrows that were ever constructed. "Better therefore is the just man that hath none idols."

What brave air we breathe when we join the company of the just men who have freed themselves from idolatry! Listen to Governor Bradford as he enumerates the threatening facts which the Pilgrims to New England faced. He mentions all the difficulties which they foresaw, and then adds, "It was answered that all great and [Pg 27]

honorable actions were accompanied with great difficulties, and must be enterprised with answerable courages."

What fine spiritual audacity! Not courage, if you please, but courages. There is much virtue in the plural. It was as much as to say, "All our eggs are not in one basket. We are likely to meet more than one kind of danger. What of it? We have more than one kind of courage. It is well to be prepared for emergencies."

It was the same spirit which made William Penn speak of his colony on the banks of the Delaware as the "Holy Experiment." In his testimony to George Fox, he says, "He was an original and no man's copy. He had not learned what he said by study. Nor were they notional nor[Pg 28] speculative, but sensible and practical, the setting up of the Kingdom of God in men's hearts, and the way of it was his work. His authority was inward and not outward, and he got it and kept it by the love of God. He was a divine and a naturalist, and all of God Almighty's making."

In the presence of men of such moral originality, ethical problems take on a new and exciting aspect. What is to happen next? You cannot find out by noting the trend of events. A peep into a resourceful mind would be more to the purpose. That mind perceives possibilities beyond the ken of a duller intelligence.

I should like to have some competent person give us a History of Moral Progress as a part of the History of[Pg 29] Invention. I know there is a distrust of Invention on the part of many good people who are so enamored of the ideal of a simple life that they are suspicious of civilization. The text from Ecclesiastes, "God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions," has been used to discourage any budding Edisons of the spiritual realm. Dear old Alexander Cruden inserted in his Concordance a delicious definition of invention as here used: "Inventions: New ways of making one's self more wise and happy than God made us."

It is astonishing how many people share this fear that, if they exert their minds too much, they may become better than the Lord intended them to be. A new way of being good, or[Pg 30] of doing good, terrifies them. Nevertheless moral progress follows the same lines as all other progress. First there is a conscious need. Necessity is the mother of invention. Then comes the patient search for the

ways and means through which the want may be satisfied. Ages may elapse before an ideal may be realized. Numberless attempts must be made, the lessons of the successive failures must be learned. It is in the ability to draw the right inference from failure that inventive genius is seen.

"It would be madness and inconsistency," said Lord Bacon, "to suppose that things which have never yet been performed can be performed without using some hitherto untried means." The inventor is not [Pg 31]discouraged by past failures, but he is careful not to repeat them slavishly. He may be compelled to use the same elements, but he is always trying some new combination. If he must fail once more, he sees to it that it shall be in a slightly different way. He has learned in twenty ways how the thing cannot be done. This information is very useful to him, and he does not begrudge the labor by which it has been obtained. All this is an excellent preparation for the twenty-first attempt, which may possibly reveal the way it *can* be done. When thousands of good heads are working upon a problem in this fashion, something happens.

For several generations the physical sciences have offered the most [Pg 32]inviting field for inventive genius. Here have been seen the triumphs of the experimental method. There are, however, evidences that many of the best intellects are turning to the fascinating field of morals. Indeed, the very success of physical research makes this inevitable.

When in 1783 the brothers Montgolfier ascended a mile above the earth in a balloon there was a thrill of excitement, as the spectators felt that the story of Dædalus had been taken from the world of romance into the world of fact. But, after all, the invention went only a little way in the direction of the navigation of the air. It is one thing to float, and another thing to steer a craft toward a desired haven. The balloon having been [Pg 33]invented, the next and more difficult task was to make it dirigible. It was the same problem that had puzzled the inventors of primitive times who had discovered that, by making use of a proper log, they could be carried from place to place on the water. What the landing place should be was, however, a matter beyond their control. They had to trust to the current, which was occasionally favorable to them. In the first exhib-

aration over their discovery they were doubtless thankful enough to go down stream, even when their business called them up stream. At least they had the pleasant sensation of getting on. They were obeying the law of progress. The uneasy radical who wanted to progress in a [Pg 34]predetermined direction must have seemed like a visionary. But the desire to go up stream and across stream and beyond sea persisted, and the log became a boat, and paddles and oars and rudder and sail and screw propeller were invented in answer to the ever increasing demand.

But the problem of the dirigibility of a boat, or of a balloon, is simplicity itself compared with the amazing complexity of the problems involved in producing a dirigible civilization. It falls under Bacon's category of "things which never yet have been performed." Heretofore civilizations have floated on the cosmic atmosphere. They have been carried about by mysterious currents till they could float no longer. Then their [Pg 35]wreckage has furnished materials for history.

But all the time human ingenuity has been at work attacking the great problem. Thousands of little inventions have been made, by which we gain temporary control of some of the processes. We are coming to have a consciousness of human society as a whole, and of the possibility of directing its progress. It is not enough to satisfy the modern intellect to devise plans by which we may become more rich or more powerful. We must also tax our ingenuity to find ways for the equitable division of the wealth and the just use of power. We are no longer satisfied with increase in the vast unwieldy bulk of our possessions, we eagerly seek to direct them to [Pg 36]definite ends. Even here in America we are beginning to feel that "progress" is not an end in itself. Whether it is desirable or not, depends on the direction of it. Our glee over the census reports is chastened. We are not so certain that it is a clear gain to have a million people live where a few thousand lived before. We insist on asking, How do they live? Are they happier, healthier, wiser? As a city becomes bigger, does it become a better place in which to rear children? If it does not, must not civic ambition seek to remedy the defect?

The author of Ecclesiastes made the gloomy comment upon the civilization of his own day: "I returned, and saw under the sun, that

the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,[Pg 37] neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill." In so far as that is true to-day, things are working badly. It must be within our power to remedy such an absurd situation. We have to devise more efficient means for securing fair play, and for enforcing the rules of the game. We want to develop a better breed of men. In order to do so, we must make this the first consideration. In proportion as the end is clearly conceived and ardently desired, will the effective means be discovered and employed.

Why has the reign of peace and good-will upon the earth been so long delayed? We grow impatient to hear the bells

[Pg 38]

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.
Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand.

The answer must be that "the valiant man and free" must, like every one else, learn his business before he can expect to have any measure of success. The kindlier hand must be skilled by long practice before it can direct the vast social mechanism.

The Fury in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" described the predicament in which the world has long found itself:—

The good want power but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want; worse need for them.

[Pg 39]

The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.

This is discouraging to the unimaginative mind, but the very confusion is a challenge to human intelligence. Here are all the materi-

als for a more beautiful world. All that is needed is to find the proper combination. Goodness alone will not do the work. Goodness grown strong and wise by much experience is, as the man on the street would say, "quite a different proposition." Why not try it?

We may not live to see any dramatic entrance of the world upon "the thousand years of peace," but we are living in a time when men are rapidly learning the art of doing [Pg 40] peacefully many things which once were done with infinite strife and confusion. We live in a time when intelligence is applied to the work of love. The children of light are less content than they once were to be outranked in sagacity by the children of this world. The result is that many things which once were the dreams of saints and sages have come within the field of practical business and practical politics. They are a part of the day's work. A person of active temperament may prefer to live in this stirring period, rather than to have his birth postponed to the millennium.

It is only the incorrigible doctrinaire who refuses to sympathize with the illogical processes by which the world is gradually being made better. [Pg 41] With him it is the millennium or nothing. He will tolerate no indirect approach. He will give no credit for partial approximations. He insists on holding every one strictly to his first fault. There shall be no wriggling out of a false position, no gradual change in function, no adaptations of old tools to new uses.

In the next essay I shall have something to say about this way of looking at things. It would do no harm to stir up the doctrinaire assumptions with the bayonet-poker.

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