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Equality

Edward Bellamy

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EQUALITY

by

Edward Bellamy

Author of Looking Backward, Dr. Heidenhoff's Process, Miss
Ludington's Sister, etc.

Second Edition

Preface.

Looking Backward was a small book, and I was not able to get into it all I wished to say on the subject. Since it was published what was left out of it has loomed up as so much more important than what it contained that I have been constrained to write another book. I have taken the date of Looking Backward, the year 2000, as that of Equality, and have utilized the framework of the former story as a starting point for this which I now offer. In order that those who have not read Looking Backward may be at no disadvantage, an outline of the essential features of that story is subjoined:

In the year 1887 Julian West was a rich young man living in Boston. He was soon to be married to a young lady of wealthy family named Edith Bartlett, and meanwhile lived alone with his manservant Sawyer in the family mansion. Being a sufferer from insomnia, he had caused a chamber to be built of stone beneath the foundation of the house, which he used for a sleeping room. When even the silence and seclusion of this retreat failed to bring slumber, he sometimes called in a professional mesmerizer to put him into a hypnotic sleep, from which Sawyer knew how to arouse him at a fixed time. This habit, as well as the existence of the underground chamber, were secrets known only to Sawyer and the hypnotist who rendered his services. On the night of May 30, 1887, West sent for the latter, and was put to sleep as usual. The hypnotist had previously informed his patron that he was intending to leave the city permanently the same evening, and referred him to other practitioners. That night the house of Julian West took fire and was wholly destroyed. Remains identified as those of Sawyer were found and, though no vestige of West appeared, it was assumed that he of course had also perished.

One hundred and thirteen years later, in September, A. D. 2000, Dr. Leete, a physician of Boston, on the retired list, was conducting excavations in his garden for the foundations of a private laboratory, when the workers came on a mass of masonry covered with ashes and charcoal. On opening it, a vault, luxuriously fitted up in the style of a nineteenth-century bedchamber, was found, and on

the bed the body of a young man looking as if he had just lain down to sleep. Although great trees had been growing above the vault, the unaccountable preservation of the youth's body tempted Dr. Leete to attempt resuscitation, and to his own astonishment his efforts proved successful. The sleeper returned to life, and after a short time to the full vigor of youth which his appearance had indicated. His shock on learning what had befallen him was so great as to have endangered his sanity but for the medical skill of Dr. Leete, and the not less sympathetic ministrations of the other members of the household, the doctor's wife, and Edith the beautiful daughter. Presently, however, the young man forgot to wonder at what had happened to himself in his astonishment on learning of the social transformation through which the world had passed while he lay sleeping. Step by step, almost as to a child, his hosts explained to him, who had known no other way of living except the struggle for existence, what were the simple principles of national co-operation for the promotion of the general welfare on which the new civilization rested. He learned that there were no longer any who were or could be richer or poorer than others, but that all were economic equals. He learned that no one any longer worked for another, either by compulsion or for hire, but that all alike were in the service of the nation working for the common fund, which all equally shared, and that even necessary personal attendance, as of the physician, was rendered as to the state like that of the military surgeon. All these wonders, it was explained, had very simply come about as the results of replacing private capitalism by public capitalism, and organizing the machinery of production and distribution, like the political government, as business of general concern to be carried on for the public benefit instead of private gain.

But, though it was not long before the young stranger's first astonishment at the institutions of the new world had passed into enthusiastic admiration and he was ready to admit that the race had for the first time learned how to live, he presently began to repine at a fate which had introduced him to the new world, only to leave him oppressed by a sense of hopeless loneliness which all the kindness of his new friends could not relieve, feeling, as he must, that it was dictated by pity only. Then it was that he first learned that his experience had been a yet more marvelous one than he had sup-

posed. Edith Leete was no other than the great-granddaughter of Edith Bartlett, his betrothed, who, after long mourning her lost lover, had at last allowed herself to be consoled. The story of the tragical bereavement which had shadowed her early life was a family tradition, and among the family heirlooms were letters from Julian West, together with a photograph which represented so handsome a youth that Edith was illogically inclined to quarrel with her great-grandmother for ever marrying anybody else. As for the young man's picture, she kept it on her dressing table. Of course, it followed that the identity of the tenant of the subterranean chamber had been fully known to his rescuers from the moment of the discovery; but Edith, for reasons of her own, had insisted that he should not know who she was till she saw fit to tell him. When, at the proper time, she had seen fit to do this, there was no further question of loneliness for the young man, for how could destiny more unmistakably have indicated that two persons were meant for each other?

His cup of happiness now being full, he had an experience in which it seemed to be dashed from his lips. As he lay on his bed in Dr. Leete's house he was oppressed by a hideous nightmare. It seemed to him that he opened his eyes to find himself on his bed in the underground chamber where the mesmerizer had put him to sleep. Sawyer was just completing the passes used to break the hypnotic influence. He called for the morning paper, and read on the date line May 31, 1887. Then he knew that all this wonderful matter about the year 2000, its happy, care-free world of brothers and the fair girl he had met there were but fragments of a dream. His brain in a whirl, he went forth into the city. He saw everything with new eyes, contrasting it with what he had seen in the Boston of the year 2000. The frenzied folly of the competitive industrial system, the inhuman contrasts of luxury and woe--pride and abjectness--the boundless squalor, wretchedness, and madness of the whole scheme of things which met his eye at every turn, outraged his reason and made his heart sick. He felt like a sane man shut up by accident in a madhouse. After a day of this wandering he found himself at nightfall in a company of his former companions, who rallied him on his distraught appearance. He told them of his dream and what it had taught him of the possibilities of a juster, nobler,

wiser social system. He reasoned with them, showing how easy it would be, laying aside the suicidal folly of competition, by means of fraternal co-operation, to make the actual world as blessed as that he had dreamed of. At first they derided him, but, seeing his earnestness, grew angry, and denounced him as a pestilent fellow, an anarchist, an enemy of society, and drove him from them. Then it was that, in an agony of weeping, he awoke, this time awaking really, not falsely, and found himself in his bed in Dr. Leete's house, with the morning sun of the twentieth century shining in his eyes. Looking from the window of his room, he saw Edith in the garden gathering flowers for the breakfast table, and hastened to descend to her and relate his experience. At this point we will leave him to continue the narrative for himself.

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EQUALITY.

CHAPTER I.

A Sharp Cross-Examiner.

With many expressions of sympathy and interest Edith listened to the story of my dream. When, finally, I had made an end, she remained musing.

"What are you thinking about?" I said.

"I was thinking," she answered, "how it would have been if your dream had been true."

"True!" I exclaimed. "How could it have been true?"

"I mean," she said, "if it had all been a dream, as you supposed it was in your nightmare, and you had never really seen our Republic of the Golden Rule or me, but had only slept a night and dreamed the whole thing about us. And suppose you had gone forth just as you did in your dream, and had passed up and down telling men of the terrible folly and wickedness of their way of life and how much nobler and happier a way there was. Just think what good you might have done, how you might have helped people in those days when they needed help so much. It seems to me you must be almost sorry you came back to us."

"You look as if you were almost sorry yourself," I said, for her wistful expression seemed susceptible of that interpretation.

"Oh, no," she answered, smiling. "It was only on your own account. As for me, I have very good reasons for being glad that you came back."

"I should say so, indeed. Have you reflected that if I had dreamed it all you would have had no existence save as a figment in the brain of a sleeping man a hundred years ago?"

"I had not thought of that part of it," she said smiling and still half serious; "yet if I could have been more useful to humanity as a fic-

tion than as a reality, I ought not to have minded the--the inconvenience."

But I replied that I greatly feared no amount of opportunity to help mankind in general would have reconciled me to life anywhere or under any conditions after leaving her behind in a dream--a confession of shameless selfishness which she was pleased to pass over without special rebuke, in consideration, no doubt, of my unfortunate bringing up.

"Besides," I resumed, being willing a little further to vindicate myself, "it would not have done any good. I have just told you how in my nightmare last night, when I tried to tell my contemporaries and even my best friends about the nobler way men might live together, they derided me as a fool and madman. That is exactly what they would have done in reality had the dream been true and I had gone about preaching as in the case you supposed."

"Perhaps a few might at first have acted as you dreamed they did," she replied. "Perhaps they would not at once have liked the idea of economic equality, fearing that it might mean a leveling down for them, and not understanding that it would presently mean a leveling up of all together to a vastly higher plane of life and happiness, of material welfare and moral dignity than the most fortunate had ever enjoyed. But even if the rich had at first mistaken you for an enemy to their class, the poor, the great masses of the poor, the real nation, they surely from the first would have listened as for their lives, for to them your story would have meant glad tidings of great joy."

"I do not wonder that you think so," I answered, "but, though I am still learning the A B C of this new world, I knew my contemporaries, and I know that it would not have been as you fancy. The poor would have listened no better than the rich, for, though poor and rich in my day were at bitter odds in everything else, they were agreed in believing that there must always be rich and poor, and that a condition of material equality was impossible. It used to be commonly said, and it often seemed true, that the social reformer who tried to better the condition of the people found a more discouraging obstacle in the hopelessness of the masses he would raise than in the active resistance of the few, whose superiority was

threatened. And indeed, Edith, to be fair to my own class, I am bound to say that with the best of the rich it was often as much this same hopelessness as deliberate selfishness that made them what we used to call conservative. So you see, it would have done no good even if I had gone to preaching as you fancied. The poor would have regarded my talk about the possibility of an equality of wealth as a fairy tale, not worth a laboring man's time to listen to. Of the rich, the baser sort would have mocked and the better sort would have sighed, but none would have given ear seriously."

But Edith smiled serenely.

"It seems very audacious for me to try to correct your impressions of your own contemporaries and of what they might be expected to think and do, but you see the peculiar circumstances give me a rather unfair advantage. Your knowledge of your times necessarily stops short with 1887, when you became oblivious of the course of events. I, on the other hand, having gone to school in the twentieth century, and been obliged, much against my will, to study nineteenth-century history, naturally know what happened after the date at which your knowledge ceased. I know, impossible as it may seem to you, that you had scarcely fallen into that long sleep before the American people began to be deeply and widely stirred with aspirations for an equal order such as we enjoy, and that very soon the political movement arose which, after various mutations, resulted early in the twentieth century in overthrowing the old system and setting up the present one."

This was indeed interesting information to me, but when I began to question Edith further, she sighed and shook her head.

"Having tried to show my superior knowledge, I must now confess my ignorance. All I know is the bare fact that the revolutionary movement began, as I said, very soon after you fell asleep. Father must tell you the rest. I might as well admit while I am about it, for you would soon find it out, that I know almost nothing either as to the Revolution or nineteenth-century matters generally. You have no idea how hard I have been trying to post myself on the subject so as to be able to talk intelligently with you, but I fear it is of no use. I could not understand it in school and can not seem to understand it any better now. More than ever this morning I am sure that I never

shall. Since you have been telling me how the old world appeared to you in that dream, your talk has brought those days so terribly near that I can almost see them, and yet I can not say that they seem a bit more intelligible than before."

"Things were bad enough and black enough certainly," I said; "but I don't see what there was particularly unintelligible about them. What is the difficulty?"

"The main difficulty comes from the complete lack of agreement between the pretensions of your contemporaries about the way their society was organized and the actual facts as given in the histories."

"For example?" I queried.

"I don't suppose there is much use in trying to explain my trouble," she said. "You will only think me stupid for my pains, but I'll try to make you see what I mean. You ought to be able to clear up the matter if anybody can. You have just been telling me about the shockingly unequal conditions of the people, the contrasts of waste and want, the pride and power of the rich, the abjectness and servitude of the poor, and all the rest of the dreadful story."

"Yes."

"It appears that these contrasts were almost as great as at any previous period of history."

"It is doubtful," I replied, "if there was ever a greater disparity between the conditions of different classes than you would find in a half hour's walk in Boston, New York, Chicago, or any other great city of America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century."

"And yet," said Edith, "it appears from all the books that meanwhile the Americans' great boast was that they differed from all other and former nations in that they were free and equal. One is constantly coming upon this phrase in the literature of the day. Now, you have made it clear that they were neither free nor equal in any ordinary sense of the word, but were divided as mankind had always been before into rich and poor, masters and servants. Won't you please tell me, then, what they meant by calling themselves free and equal?"

"It was meant, I suppose, that they were all equal before the law."

"That means in the courts. And were the rich and poor equal in the courts? Did they receive the same treatment?"

"I am bound to say," I replied, "that they were nowhere else more unequal. The law applied in terms to all alike, but not in fact. There was more difference in the position of the rich and the poor man before the law than in any other respect. The rich were practically above the law, the poor under its wheels."

"In what respect, then, were the rich and poor equal?"

"They were said to be equal in opportunities."

"Opportunities for what?"

"For bettering themselves, for getting rich, for getting ahead of others in the struggle for wealth."

"It seems to me that only meant, if it were true, not that all were equal, but that all had an equal chance to make themselves unequal. But was it true that all had equal opportunities for getting rich and bettering themselves?"

"It may have been so to some extent at one time when the country was new," I replied, "but it was no more so in my day. Capital had practically monopolized all economic opportunities by that time; there was no opening in business enterprise for those without large capital save by some extraordinary fortune."

"But surely," said Edith, "there must have been, in order to give at least a color to all this boasting about equality, some one respect in which the people were really equal?"

"Yes, there was. They were political equals. They all had one vote alike, and the majority was the supreme lawgiver."

"So the books say, but that only makes the actual condition of things more absolutely unaccountable."

"Why so?"

"Why, because if these people all had an equal voice in the government--these toiling, starving, freezing, wretched masses of the

poor--why did they not without a moment's delay put an end to the inequalities from which they suffered?"

"Very likely," she added, as I did not at once reply, "I am only showing how stupid I am by saying this. Doubtless I am overlooking some important fact, but did you not say that all the people, at least all the men, had a voice in the government?"

"Certainly; by the latter part of the nineteenth century manhood suffrage had become practically universal in America."

"That is to say, the people through their chosen agents made all the laws. Is that what you mean?"

"Certainly."

"But I remember you had Constitutions of the nation and of the States. Perhaps they prevented the people from doing quite what they wished."

"No; the Constitutions were only a little more fundamental sort of laws. The majority made and altered them at will. The people were the sole and supreme final power, and their will was absolute."

"If, then, the majority did not like any existing arrangement, or think it to their advantage, they could change it as radically as they wished?"

"Certainly; the popular majority could do anything if it was large and determined enough."

"And the majority, I understand, were the poor, not the rich--the ones who had the wrong side of the inequalities that prevailed?"

"Emphatically so; the rich were but a handful comparatively."

"Then there was nothing whatever to prevent the people at any time, if they just willed it, from making an end of their sufferings and organizing a system like ours which would guarantee their equality and prosperity?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Then once more I ask you to kindly tell me why, in the name of common sense, they didn't do it at once and be happy instead of

making a spectacle of themselves so woeful that even a hundred years after it makes us cry?"

"Because," I replied, "they were taught and believed that the regulation of industry and commerce and the production and distribution of wealth was something wholly outside of the proper province of government."

"But, dear me, Julian, life itself and everything that meanwhile makes life worth living, from the satisfaction of the most primary physical needs to the gratification of the most refined tastes, all that belongs to the development of mind as well as body, depend first, last, and always on the manner in which the production and distribution of wealth is regulated. Surely that must have been as true in your day as ours."

"Of course."

"And yet you tell me, Julian, that the people, after having abolished the rule of kings and taken the supreme power of regulating their affairs into their own hands, deliberately consented to exclude from their jurisdiction the control of the most important, and indeed the only really important, class of their interests."

"Do not the histories say so?"

"They do say so, and that is precisely why I could never believe them. The thing seemed so incomprehensible I thought there must be some way of explaining it. But tell me, Julian, seeing the people did not think that they could trust themselves to regulate their own industry and the distribution of the product, to whom did they leave the responsibility?"

"To the capitalists."

"And did the people elect the capitalists?"

"Nobody elected them."

"By whom, then, were they appointed?"

"Nobody appointed them."

"What a singular system! Well, if nobody elected or appointed them, yet surely they must have been accountable to somebody for

the manner in which they exercised powers on which the welfare and very existence of everybody depended."

"On the contrary, they were accountable to nobody and nothing but their own consciences."

"Their consciences! Ah, I see! You mean that they were so benevolent, so unselfish, so devoted to the public good, that people tolerated their usurpation out of gratitude. The people nowadays would not endure the irresponsible rule even of demigods, but probably it was different in your day."

"As an ex-capitalist myself, I should be pleased to confirm your surmise, but nothing could really be further from the fact. As to any benevolent interest in the conduct of industry and commerce, the capitalists expressly disavowed it. Their only object was to secure the greatest possible gain for themselves without any regard whatever to the welfare of the public."

"Dear me! Dear me! Why you make out these capitalists to have been even worse than the kings, for the kings at least professed to govern for the welfare of their people, as fathers acting for children, and the good ones did try to. But the capitalists, you say, did not even pretend to feel any responsibility for the welfare of their subjects?"

"None whatever."

"And, if I understand," pursued Edith, "this government of the capitalists was not only without moral sanction of any sort or plea of benevolent intentions, but was practically an economic failure--that is, it did not secure the prosperity of the people."

"What I saw in my dream last night," I replied, "and have tried to tell you this morning, gives but a faint suggestion of the misery of the world under capitalist rule."

Edith meditated in silence for some moments. Finally she said: "Your contemporaries were not madmen nor fools; surely there is something you have not told me; there must be some explanation or at least color of excuse why the people not only abdicated the power of controlling their most vital and important interests, but turned