

ART. III.—“THE STRENGTH OF THE PEOPLE.”¹

“There is a connection between a high state of character and a high state of economic comfort; but an important mistake is often made in the order of causation. It is often conceived that comfort is the cause and character is the effect. Now, I hold that character is the cause and that comfort is the effect.”

UPON these words of Dr. Chalmers this book may be said to be a commentary. By a most careful investigation into the present conditions of the so-called “very poor” and into the causes which have contributed to these conditions, the writer seeks to prove—and we believe she is entirely successful in proving—that Dr. Chalmers’ assertion is amply borne out by facts. The book is one to be read and studied by all who have at heart the improvement and well-being of the poorer part of the community. Especially will it be found useful by those whose official position places upon them the responsibility of doing all they can to solve the many painful social problems which at the present time are calling for solution.

For this reason the book seems to have a special claim upon the attention of the clergy, because Mrs. Bosanquet, like Dr. Chalmers, believes that the *causes* of our present economic difficulties and troubles are not primarily economic, but *moral*; and that the true method to be pursued in the solution of these difficulties lies not in attempting, in the first place, to improve the economic conditions, but the *characters* of the sufferers. This method of procedure is, of course, directly opposed to the methods fashionable at present—methods which, I fear, are growing in popularity. “Feed the people first, and then teach them”; “improve their circumstances, and you will find their characters will rise in proportion with better surroundings”; “it is the awful atmosphere, moral and physical, in which the very poor are compelled to live which prevents them from doing better.” Such are some of these principles which are commonly being put forth to-day. But readers of this book will, I believe, come to see that they are false. They will learn that the present painful economic conditions are the symptoms of a deep-seated social, or, rather, moral, disease, and it is this disease, or, more correctly, the *cause* of this disease, which must be attacked. Remove this cause, and the symptoms will gradually disappear.

To keep the body politic in health, a certain regimen, or course of self-treatment, is necessary. The laws of this

¹ “The Strength of the People: A Study in Social Economics.” By Helen Bosanquet. London, 1902.

regimen are the laws of social and economic science. The discovery of these laws has been the task of many thoughtful men and women in the past, and it continues to be so in the present. There are those who think that the truth of many of these laws is now so far proved by the experiences of the past that it is at our peril we neglect them, or attempt to act in opposition to them.

In the course of her argument Mrs. Bosanquet cites: (1) The old Poor Law; (2) the Report of the Commission of 1834; and (3) the immensely improved conditions which ensued when the recommendations of that Commission were adopted.

Space will not permit me to enter into details. It must suffice to say that the appalling conditions previous to 1834 seem almost incredible to us. And let us remember that it was not simply the poverty of the poor or the cost of their maintenance to the community, it was the immorality actually generated by the old Poor Law that was so terrible. The following extract from the report of the Commissioners contains part of the evidence of a Mr. Cowell, who went from union to union to make investigations:

"At the time of my journey, the acquaintance I had with the practical operation of the Poor Laws led me to suppose that the pressure of the sum annually raised upon the rate-payers and its progressive increase constituted the main inconvenience of the Poor Law system. The experience of a very few weeks served to convince me that this evil, however great, sinks into insignificance when compared with the dreadful effects which the system produces on the morals and happiness of the lower orders. It is as difficult to convey to the mind of the reader a true and faithful impression of the intensity and malignancy of the evil from this point of view, as it is by any description, however vivid, to give an adequate idea of the horrors of a shipwreck or a pestilence."

As Mrs. Bosanquet shows, under the old Poor Law false principles and wrong methods of administration had brought the country almost to a state of ruin.

Then came the change under the new Poor Law, whose beneficial effects—that is where, and so long as the recommendations of the Commissioners were carefully and strictly carried out—seemed to grow year by year. "It may be doubted whether it has ever before happened that a nation so far on the way to decay has checked its downward course and recovered itself so completely. That we in England did recover ourselves, and started straightforward on a path of steady progress, was mainly due to the wisdom and determination of a few men, who devoted their whole energies to understanding the position, and then persistently carried

through their policy of reform in face of popular prejudice and misunderstanding" (p. 155).

Let me revert to the condition which I stated just now—viz., "Where and so long as the recommendations of the Commissioners were carefully and strictly carried out." But as everyone who has had any experience of its working knows, the new Poor Law is just one of those laws whose good or evil depends almost entirely on the way in which it is administered. It leaves wide latitude to those who administer it. How beneficial it may be the following case, cited by Mrs. Bosanquet, shows: "In January, 1871, there were in Bradfield Union 259 indoor paupers and 999 outdoor—total, 1,258, or 1 in 13 of the population. The Guardians that year determined to begin to administer the Poor Law strictly, and that policy has now been carried on for thirty years. At the end of those thirty years the number of outdoor paupers has fallen from 999 to 18 (all survivors of the original list); the indoor paupers have fallen from 259 to 107; now only 1 person in 145 is a pauper." How, then, do the people get on without parish relief? "The membership of medical clubs has increased 148 per cent., and of friendly societies 150 per cent. Children and relations have accepted the natural responsibility of helping the old and weakly, and where those resources have proved inadequate, private charity has come to the rescue." But the claims upon private charity are far less now than thirty years ago.

The lessons which Mrs. Bosanquet gathers from the change from the old to the new Poor Law, and from the failure—we fear the growing failure—to administer this latter strictly, are these:

1. "The English people is strong, but only when it is not tempted into weakness. It easily succumbs to the suggestion of dependence, but it nobly responds when called upon to assert its manhood.

2. "If the lesson" (taught by the old Poor Law) "had been thoroughly carried into effect, pauperism should by this time have disappeared."

Nations, like individuals, are only too apt to forget the lessons of the past, and the interest in social and economic questions is apt to be strangely intermittent. A nation, like an individual, may by a careful course of treatment recover from a severe attack of some social disease; but, as time passes, the conditions by which health has been regained, and by obedience to which it can alone be maintained, are all too easily forgotten.

Unfortunately, during the last few years we seem either to have forgotten, or practically to have denied, the principles

and conclusions which worked such changes for good in 1834 and succeeding years. Lately, whatever be its cause, there has undoubtedly been almost all over the country a rapid increase of pauperism—an increase which cannot fail to cause anxiety to all who have at heart the welfare of the poor. This increase is no doubt greatest and most palpable in London. How great it is there, witness the last annual report¹ of "the Legal Poor of London"; but it is by no means confined to London. As a single instance take Lancashire, where in 1851 the inmates of workhouses numbered 1 in every 195 of the population; these rose in 1891 to 1 in every 175, and in 1901 to 1 in every 147.

Various explanations of this recent increase of pauperism have been offered, the cessation of the war and the consequent return of a large number of reservists being a very favourite one. But on careful examination this explanation will not hold good. In fact, there is only one cause which does seem adequate to account for the increase, and it is this: that very many Guardians have either forgotten, or are ignorant of, those principles which produced such good results nearly sixty years ago. It will be found that the increase of pauperism is greatest in those unions where these principles are disregarded. Where out-relief is easily obtained, and where the condition of life within the workhouse is raised above the lowest standard of life outside, there pauperism, with all its attendant evils, is increasing.

Now, the value of Mrs. Bosanquet's book lies in this: that in it we have our attention drawn not merely to these facts and processes—the book does not simply say, "Where the conditions upon which relief is obtainable have been relaxed, and where the workhouse has been made more attractive, pauperism has increased"—but it shows why in the nature of things—or, rather, why, *human nature being as it is*—this result must *inevitably* follow.

It is Mrs. Bosanquet's method of approaching the problem which seems to give the book its special value, and that method consists in commencing with a most careful inquiry into the nature of human nature itself. Only where we have formed a correct impression of human nature can we hope to understand the temptations to which it is liable, and the right means to employ in order to overcome those temptations. In a more true and more scientific knowledge of human nature we shall find the key which will open to us the secret of how best to attack the social disease of poverty.

¹ *Times* of December 26, 1902.

The teaching and the method of its application is, of course, that indicated in the New Testament, where we are constantly shown that evil is the result of a false philosophy of human nature—of a false conception of man—and that the banishment of evil will follow upon (1) our obtaining, and (2) our acting up to, a true philosophy—that is, a true view of man's nature and of his possibilities.

Mrs. Bosanquet's first postulate is “The Mind is the Man,” but she uses the word “mind” in a somewhat comprehensive sense, meaning by it “the higher powers of affection, thought, and reasonable action,” and she believes that where our appeals to men or our dealings with men have failed, the cause of the failure has usually been because we have either forgotten that our fellow-man “is a mind, or because we have been ignorant of all which is involved in admitting this.” As a rule it is the visible, tangible man alone which appeals to our sympathies. “We aim only at seeing him well fed, well housed, well clad, and we take it for granted that the shortest way to this is to put food in his hands, clothes on his back, and a roof over his head.” In other words, we appeal to the *lower* rather than the *higher* faculties of human nature. Here Mrs. Bosanquet believes is the reason why: “Great religious teachers, who have put their faith in spiritual conviction and conversion, who have refused to accept anything short of the whole man, have achieved results which seem miraculous to those who are willing to compromise for a share in the souls they undertake to guide” (p. 3). Hence, she is led to the following conviction: “The first belief of a social reformer must always be that an appeal to the minds of men can never fail; his first and last study must be how to make that appeal.”

Of course, this postulate, that “the Mind is the Man,” demands others—*e.g.*, that the mind has principles of development, growth, and action—*i.e.*, that it is not a mere caprice. Granting, then, that there are principles of development, we must seek to discover these principles.

The aim of social work is social progress—that is, the whole community and every member of the same must be progressive on the rising scale. Now, when we come to consider this desideratum, and then carefully consider things as they actually are—*viz.*, whole masses of men and women stagnant, uninterested, and brutalized, or, if not actually stagnant, yet their progress so slow as to be practically imperceptible—we ask, “Why do not these masses respond to the higher appeals which are so constantly being made to them?” They seem to be actually content to live an almost purely animal, if not a brutal, life.

This question leads to an extremely interesting discussion upon the reasons why, in some natures, we find what may be termed the characteristically *human* qualities, faculties, and interests—that is, in contrast to the merely animal faculties—much more fully developed. This contrast might be more briefly described as one between the progressive and unprogressive elements in human nature.

Mrs. Bosanquet turns for help to studies of animal and human psychology. Into these I must not enter, but her conclusion from them is that "animals have a definitely limited range of wants, and, consequently, of limitations . . . whereas the desires of the highest—that is, the true human nature—not the material wants, are as wide as the universe; they are practically infinite." The trend of this discussion, the truth to which it leads, may now be discerned; in short, we arrive at the paradox that we shall best assist in *supplying* the wants of human nature by studying how to *increase* them. It would hardly be going too far if we were to state that this is one of the chief pleas of Mrs. Bosanquet's whole book. Reflection will show that its truth is proved by both history and experience. And is it not directly in accordance with the teaching of Christ? Is not this the meaning of His words to the woman of Samaria about the unquenching power of the material water, and of His saying to the men who "eat of the loaves and were filled," and who still found no permanent satisfaction of their hunger?

Yet to-day, by increasing the ease with which out-door relief is obtained, by making the workhouses more attractive, by a thousand forms of material charities, gifts, and doles, what are we doing but sinning against this great principle, and putting various forms of temptation in the way of the poor, which all tend to weaken that self-effort and self-reliance upon which ultimately their welfare must depend? We are acting as if we were in entire ignorance of the teachings of History, Nature, and the Bible, which agree in condemning our action. There is a striking fact which Mrs. Bosanquet might have quoted in support of her argument. Is it not true that no strong and progressive nation has ever risen within the tropics—*i.e.*, in those regions where man's wants are few, and where those few wants are provided by Nature with the minimum of human ingenuity and exertion? On the contrary, the inhabitants of cold and barren and mountainous districts, where a sustenance has to be won by hard and continuous effort, have been renowned for their strength, their thrift, and progressiveness. Out of how many hardy Northern nations have not the rich plains of Italy seemed to suck the manhood?

Let us now consider who are the men and women who form what may be termed the *cruz* of our social problem. As Mrs. Bosanquet says, “They are the men and women, rich or poor, who have never fairly broken through the most elementary cycle of the appetites which we share with the brute creation, or, if they have been forced into some small advance, have only widened their tether slightly, and are circling round again instead of progressing.”

Here I would pause for a moment. Mrs. Bosanquet says these are the people, “rich or poor,” etc. What philanthropist in the widest sense of the term, what minister of religion who knows his people, has not felt that the best which could be said of some of the richer, or even richest, among them was that they were “circling round” some extremely narrow, material interest—*e.g.*, sport, or outward show, or pleasure—and were certainly not “progressing”? May it not be said of many of those who have grown rapidly rich—is it not even more true of the sons and daughters of these?—that with their increase of wealth they have obtained no wider range of higher interests? They do not progress, but, alas! they too often, under the influence of the wealth they have inherited, rapidly deteriorate, and so bear out the truth of a North Country saying—that often not more than three generations separate those who have discarded the clogs and those who are compelled again to wear them.

To return to Mrs. Bosanquet’s argument. The question we must seek to answer, and which she believes is the real social problem to be solved, is this: What are the causes which widen the lives of some, and which are absent or inoperative in the lives of others? That increase of wealth is not the cause, and that it is not poverty which confines a man’s life to the lower levels and precludes all advance, seems to be proved abundantly from everyday experience. To quote Mrs. Bosanquet’s own words: “The existence of people rich in material wealth, yet lacking the higher qualities, proves to us every day the insufficiency of material wealth alone to promote progress; while the speed with which wealth may be dissipated, when neither interests, affections, nor knowledge are there to maintain it, and the frequency of lives in which richness of character has been triumphant over material poverty, forbid us to admit for a moment that poverty is a sufficient cause to explain all the facts before us” (p. 10).

Mrs. Bosanquet sees that the real question at issue is the following: “How does a man’s life widen beyond the lower range which he shares with the animals?” This question raises another—*viz.*: How are we to define the contents of this wider life? Mrs. Bosanquet defines these contents as

"interests," the word implying "affection, knowledge, and ideals." How, then, "does a man get his interests"?

Following this question come two sections, which are entitled: (1) "The Tyranny of Instincts," and (2) "Interests." These sections should be most carefully studied, for they may be said to contain the facts upon which Mrs. Bosanquet's philosophy of life, and, consequently, her treatment of the social problem, is based. In the first section it is shown, from observation of the behaviour of animals, how early and how strongly their instincts are developed. As far as we can judge, they are able almost at once to do all that is necessary to preserve their lives—*e.g.*, waterfowl can dive and swim the first time they touch the water. Mrs. Bosanquet's conclusions under this first section are summed up in the three following sentences:

1. "The more completely the life is under the sway of definite instinct, the less room there is for the development of intelligent behaviour. . . . Under normal conditions, man is obliged to think about what he is doing, to have an idea in his mind before he carries it out into action; while in instinctive behaviour the action comes first, and the idea, if it comes at all, only later."

2. "Doing for ourselves what their instincts do for animals means, among other things, this: that every step of what we do (before the formation of habit) must be present in our minds, not only after we do it, as a sort of reflection, but before we do it, as a guide to our action. And this means a gradual but vast accumulation of ideas." [And are not "ideas" and "interests" very closely related?]

3. "To deprive any individual human being of the necessity—the stern necessity, if need be—of planning out his life for himself is to deprive him of his natural power of "progressive development."

Mrs. Bosanquet's treatment of "Interests" we must defer until next month.

M. EDWARD CHADWICK.

