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CHAMBERS'S EDINBURGH JOURNAL, NO. 424

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 424

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 424 / Various — «Public Domain»,

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Various
Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 424 / Volume 17, New Series, February 14, 1852

THE PATTERN NATION

It seems to be the destiny of France to work out all sorts of problems in state and social policy. It may be said to volunteer experiments in government for the benefit of mankind. All kinds of forms it tries, one after the other: each, in turn, is supposed to be the right thing; and when found to be wrong, an effort, fair or unfair, is made to try something else. It would surely be the height of ingratitude not to thank our versatile neighbour for this apparently endless series of experiments.

Unfortunately, the novel projects extemporised by the French are not on all occasions easily laid aside. What they have laid hold on, they cannot get rid of. We have a striking instance of this in the practice of subdividing lands. Forms of state administration may be altered, and after all not much harm done; it is only changing one variety of power at the Tuileries for another. A very different thing is a revolution in the method of holding landed property. Few things are more dangerous than to meddle with laws of inheritance: if care be not taken, the whole fabric of society may be overthrown. The unpleasant predicament which the French have got into on this account is most alarming—far more terrible than the wildest of their revolutions. How they are to get out of it, no man can tell.

Latterly, the world has heard much of Socialism. This is the term applied to certain new and untried schemes of social organisation, by which, among other things, it is proposed to supersede the ordinary rights of property and laws of inheritance—the latter, as is observed, having, after due experience, failed to realise that happiness of condition which was anticipated sixty years ago at their institution. As it is always instructive to look back on the first departure from rectitude, let us say a few words as to how the French fell into their present unhappy position.

At the Revolution of 1789-93, it will be recollected that the laws of primogeniture were overthrown, and it was ordained that in future every man's property should be divided equally among his children at his death: there can be no doubt that considerations of justice and humanity were at the foundation of this new law of inheritance. Hitherto, there had been a great disparity in the condition of high and low: certain properties, descending from eldest son to eldest son, had become enormously large, and were generally ill managed; while prodigious numbers of people had no property at all, and were dependents on feudal superiors. The country was undoubtedly in a bad condition, and some modification of the law was desirable. Reckless of consequences, the system as it stood was utterly swept away, and that of equal partition took its place. About the same period, vast domains belonging to the crown, the clergy, and the nobility, were sequestrated and sold in small parcels; so that there sprang up almost at once a proprietary of quite a new description. Had the law of equal partition been extended only to cases in which there was no testamentary provision, it could not have inflicted serious damage, and would at all events have been consistent with reason and expediency: but it went the length of depriving a parent of the right to distribute his property in the manner he judged best, and handed over every tittle of his earnings in equal shares to his children. One child might be worthless, and another the reverse; no matter—all were to be treated alike. No preference could be shewn, no posthumous reward could be given for general good-conduct or filial respect. In all this, there was something so revolting to common sense, that one feels a degree of wonder that so acute a people as the French should have failed to observe the error into which they were plunging.

For every law, however bad, there is always some justification or plea of necessity. Besides tending to level the position of individuals, the plan of equal distribution of property was said to

be justifiable on the ground that there are more than two parties concerned. Society, it was alleged, comes in as a third, and says to the parent: 'You must provide for this son, however worthless; you must not throw him destitute on our hands; for that is to shift the responsibility from yourself, who brought him into the world, to us, who have nothing to do with him.' This plea, more plausible than sound, had its effect. That an occasional wrong might not be inflicted, a great national error, practically injurious, was committed.

A compulsory law of equal division of lands among the children of a deceased proprietor, may be long in revealing its horrors in a country where the redundant population sheds habitually off. In Switzerland, for example, the evil of a subdivision of lands is marked but in a moderate degree—though bad enough in the main—because a certain proportion of each generation emigrates in quest of a livelihood—the young men going off to be mercenary soldiers in Italy, waiters at hotels, and so forth; and the young women to be governesses and domestic servants. France, on the contrary, is the last nation in the world to try the subdivision principle. Its people, with some trifling exceptions, go nowhere, as if affecting to despise all the rest of the world. Contented with moderate fortunes, inclined to make amusement their occupation, unwilling or unable to learn foreign languages, or to care for anything abroad, and having so intense a love of France, that they will not emigrate, they necessarily settle down in a gradually aggregating mass, and are driven to the very last shifts for existence. Only two things have saved the nation from anarchy: the remarkable circumstance of few families consisting of more than two, or at most three children, any more being deemed a culpable monstrosity; and the draughting of young men for the army. In other words, the war-demon is an engine to keep the population in check; for if it does not at once kill off men, it occupies them in military affairs at the public expense. The prodigious number of civil posts under government—said to be upwards of half a million—acts also as a means for absorbing the overplus rural population.

Circumstances of the nature here pointed out have modified the evil effects of the law of subdivision; but after making every allowance on this and every other score that can be suggested, it is undeniable that the partition of property has gone down and down, till at length, in some situations, it can go no further. The morsels of land have become so small, that they are not worth occupying, and will barely realise the expense of legal transfer. In certain quarters, we are informed, the individual properties are not larger than a single furrow, or a patch the size of a cabbage-garden. A good number of these landed estates—one authority says a million and a quarter—are about five acres in extent, which is considered quite a respectable property; but as, at the death of each proprietor, there is a further partition, the probability would seem to be that, ultimately, the surface of France will resemble the worst parts of Ireland, with a population sunk to the lowest grade of humanity. Perhaps, however, the evils inflicted on society through the agency of subdivision, are mainly incidental. General injury goes on at a more rapid rate than the actual partition of property. From the causes above mentioned, the population in France is long in doubling itself; and the slower the increase, the slower the subdivision. Already, however, the properties are so small, that they do not admit of that profitable culture enjoined by principles of improved husbandry and correct social policy. In the proper cultivation of the soil, other parties besides agriculturists are concerned; for whatever limits production, affects the national wealth. The meagre husbandry of the small properties in France is thus a serious loss to the country, and tends to general impoverishment. But there is another and equally calamitous consequence of excessive subdivision. The small proprietors in France are for the greater part owners only in name: practically, they are tenants. Desperate in their circumstances, they have borrowed money on their wretched holdings; and so poor is the security, and so limited is the capital at disposal on loan, that the interest paid on mortgage runs from 8 to 10 per cent.—often is as high as 20 per cent. After paying taxes, interest on loans, and other necessary expenses, such is the exhaustion of resources, that thousands of these French peasant proprietors may be said to live in a continual battle with famine. According to official returns, there are in France upwards of 348,000 dwellings with no other aperture than the door; and nearly 2,000,000 with only one window. And to

this the 'pattern nation' has brought itself by its headlong haste to upset, not simply improve, a bad institution. The living in these windowless and single-windowed abodes is not living, in the proper sense of the word: it is existence without comfort, without hope. The next step is to burrow in holes like rabbits.

It will thus be observed, that the subdivision of real estate has brought France pretty much back to the point where it started—a small wealthy class, and a very numerous poor class. The computation is, that in a population of 36,000,000, only 800,000 are in easy circumstances. A considerable proportion of this moneyed class are usurers, living in Paris and other large towns. They are the lenders of cash on bonds, which squeeze out the very vitals of the nation—the gay flutterers and loungers of the streets, theatres, and cafés, drawing the means of luxurious indulgence from the myriads who toil out their lives in the fields.

Obtaining a glimpse of these facts, we can no longer wonder at the submission of the French peasantry to a thinning of their families by military conscription; at the eager thirst for office which afflicts the whole nation; or at the morbid desire to overturn society, and strike out a better organisation. As matters grow worse, this passion for wholesale change becomes more fervidly manifested. The *jacqueries* of the middle ages are renewed. Various districts of country, in which poverty has reached its climax, break into universal insurrection. It is a war levied by those who have nothing against those who have something. To have coin in the pocket, is to be the enemy. The cry is: Down with the rich; take all they have got, and divide the plunder amongst us. Such are the avowed principles of the Socialists. According to them, all property is theft, and taking by violence is only recovering stolen goods! When a nation has come to this deplorable pass, what, it may be asked, can cure it? The malady is not political; it is social. Perhaps, under a right development of industry, France has not too great a population; but, subject to the present misdirection of its energies, the position of the country is assuming a gravity of aspect which may well engage the most earnest consideration. The least that could be recommended is an immediate change in the law which so unscrupulously subdivides and ruins landed property.

The history of the Revolution of 1789-93, must have made a feeble impression, if it has failed to print a deep and indelible conviction on the mind, that the acts of that great and wicked drama would some day be bitterly expiated. To expect anything else would be to impeach the principles of everlasting justice. Bearing in remembrance the horrid excesses of almost an entire nation, nothing that now occurs in France affords us the least surprise. The anarchical revolts of 1851, are only a sequence of crimes committed upwards of half a century ago. Philosophically, the beginning and the end are one thing. Blind with rage against all that was noble, holy, and simply respectable, the innocent were dragged in crowds to the scaffold, and their property confiscated and disposed of. See the consequence after a lapse of sixty years, 'My sin hath found me out.' The ill-gotten wealth has been the very instrument to punish and prostrate. A robbery followed by divisions among the spoilers. Waste succeeded by clamorous destitution. What a lesson!

It is needless to say, that Socialism, which proposes a universal re-distribution of property, with some unintelligible organisation of labour—all on an equality, no rich and no poor, no masters and no servants, everybody sharing his dinner with his neighbour—is a fancy as baseless as any crotchet which even the 'pattern nation' has ever concocted. Yet, it is not the less likely to be carried into execution, perhaps only the more likely from its practical absurdity. Of course, the more educated and wealthy portion of the nation view the doctrines of Socialism, as far as they can comprehend them, with serious apprehension; but unhappily for France, these classes uniformly submit to any folly or crime, which comes with the emphasis of authority, valid or usurped. At present, they may be said to have made a compromise, bartering civil liberty for bare safety—permission to live! But how long this will last, and what form the tenure of property is to assume, are questions not easy to answer. It would not surprise us to see the nation, in its corporate capacity, assume the position of

universal lender of money on, or proprietor of, embarrassed estates; in which case the 'ryot system' of India will, strangely enough, have found domestication in Europe! Is this to be the next experiment?

A curious and saddening problem is the future of this great country. 'France,' said Robespierre in one of his moments of studied inspiration, 'has astonished all Europe with her prodigies of reason!' We are now witnessing the development of several of these astonishing prodigies; and the spectacle, to say the least of it, is instructive.

MY TRAVELLING COMPANION

My picture was a failure. Partial friends had guaranteed its success; but the Hanging Committee and the press are not composed of one's partial friends. The Hanging Committee thrust me into the darkest corner of the octagon-room, and the press ignored my existence—excepting in one instance, when my critic dismissed me in a quarter of a line as a 'presumptuous dauber.' I was stunned with the blow, for I had counted so securely on the L.200 at which my grand historical painting was dog-cheap—not to speak of the deathless fame which it was to create for me—that I felt like a mere wreck when my hopes were flung to the ground, and the untasted cup dashed from my lips. I took to my bed, and was seriously ill. The doctor bled me till I fainted, and then said, that he had saved me from a brain-fever. That might be, but he very nearly threw me into a consumption, only that I had a deep chest and a good digestion. Pneumonic expansion and active chyle saved me from an early tomb, yet I was too unhappy to be grateful.

But why did my picture fail? Surely it possessed all the elements of success! It was grandly historical in subject, original in treatment, pure in colouring; what, then, was wanting? This old warrior's head, of true Saxon type, had all the majesty of Michael Angelo; that young figure, all the radiant grace of Correggio; no Rembrandt shewed more severe dignity than yon burnt umber monk in the corner; and Titian never excelled the loveliness of this cobalt virgin in the foreground. Why did it not succeed? The subject, too—the 'Finding of the Body of Harold by Torch-light'—was sacred to all English hearts; and being conceived in an entirely new and original manner, it was redeemed from the charge of triteness and wearisomeness. The composition was pyramidal, the apex being a torch borne aloft for the 'high light,' and the base shewing some very novel effects of herbage and armour. But it failed. All my skill, all my hope, my ceaseless endeavour, my burning visions, all—all had failed; and I was only a poor, half-starved painter, in Great Howland Street, whose landlady was daily abating in her respect, and the butcher daily abating in his punctuality; whose garments were getting threadbare, and his dinners hypothetical, and whose day-dreams of fame and fortune had faded into the dull-gray of penury and disappointment. I was broken-hearted, ill, hungry; so I accepted an invitation from a friend, a rich manufacturer in Birmingham, to go down to his house for the Christmas holidays. He had a pleasant place in the midst of some ironworks, the blazing chimneys of which, he assured me, would afford me some exquisite studies of 'light' effects.

By mistake, I went by the Express train, and so was thrown into the society of a lady whose position would have rendered any acquaintance with her impossible, excepting under such chance-conditions as the present; and whose history, as I learned it afterwards, led me to reflect much on the difference between the reality and the seeming of life.

She moved my envy. Yes—base, mean, low, unartistic, degrading as is this passion, I felt it rise up like a snake in my breast when I saw that feeble woman. She was splendidly dressed—wrapped in furs of the most costly kind, trailing behind; her velvets and lace worth a countess's dowry. She was attended by obsequious menials; surrounded by luxuries; her compartment of the carriage was a perfect palace in all the accessories which it was possible to collect in so small a space; and it seemed as though 'Cleopatra's cup' would have been no impracticable draught for her. She gave me more fully the impression of luxury, than any person I had ever met with before; and I thought I had reason when I envied her.

She was lifted into the carriage carefully; carefully swathed in her splendid furs and lustrous velvets; and placed gently, like a wounded bird, in her warm nest of down. But she moved languidly, and fretfully thrust aside her servants' busy hands, indifferent to her comforts, and annoyed by her very blessings. I looked into her face: it was a strange face, which had once been beautiful; but ill-health, and care, and grief, had marked it now with deep lines, and coloured it with unnatural tints. Tears had washed out the roses from her cheeks, and set large purple rings about her eyes; the mouth

was hard and pinched, but the eyelids swollen; while the crossed wrinkles on her brow told the same tale of grief grown petulant, and of pain grown soured, as the thin lip, quivering and querulous, and the nervous hand, never still and never strong.

The train-bell rang, the whistle sounded, the lady's servitors stood bareheaded and courtesying to the ground, and the rapid rush of the iron giant bore off the high-born dame and the starveling painter in strange companionship. Unquiet and unresting—now shifting her place—now letting down the glass for the cold air to blow full upon her withered face—then drawing it up, and chafing her hands and feet by the warm-water apparatus concealed in her *chauffe-pied*, while shivering as if in an ague-fit—sighing deeply—lost in thought—wildly looking out and around for distraction—she soon made me ask myself whether my envy of her was as true as deep sympathy and pity would have been.

'But her wealth—her wealth!' I thought. 'True she may suffer, but how gloriously she is solaced! She may weep, but the angels of social life wipe off her tears with perfumed linen, gold embroidered; she may grieve, but her grief makes her joys so much the more blissful. Ah! she is to be envied after all!—envied, while I, a very beggar, might well scorn my place now!'

Something of this might have been in my face, as I offered my sick companion some small attention—I forget what—gathering up one of her luxurious trifles, or arranging her cushions. She seemed almost to read my thoughts as her eyes rested on my melancholy face; and saying abruptly: 'I fear you are unhappy, young man?' she settled herself in her place like a person prepared to listen to a pleasant tale.

'I am unfortunate, madam,' I answered.

'Unfortunate?' she said impatiently. 'What! with youth and health, can you call yourself unfortunate? When the whole world lies untried before you, and you still live in the golden atmosphere of hope, can you pamper yourself with sentimental sorrows? Fie upon you!—fie upon you! What are your sorrows compared with mine?'

'I am ignorant of yours, madam,' I said respectfully; 'but I know my own; and, knowing them, I can speak of their weight and bitterness. By your very position, you cannot undergo the same kind of distress as that overwhelming me at this moment: you may have evils in your path of life, but they cannot equal mine.'

'Can anything equal the evils of ruined health and a desolated hearth?' she cried, still in the same impatient manner. 'Can the worst griefs of wayward youth equal the bitterness of that cup which you drink at such a time of life as forbids all hope of after-assuagement? Can the first disappointment of a strong heart rank with the terrible desolation of a wrecked old age? You think because you see about me the evidences of wealth, that I must be happy. Young man, I tell you truly, I would gladly give up every farthing of my princely fortune, and be reduced to the extreme of want, to bring back from the grave the dear ones lying there, or pour into my veins one drop of the bounding blood of health and energy which used to make life a long play-hour of delight. Once, no child in the fields, no bird in the sky, was more blessed than I; and what am I now?—a sickly, lonely old woman, whose nerves are shattered and whose heart is broken, without hope or happiness on the earth! Even death has passed me by in forgetfulness and scorn!'

Her voice betrayed the truth of her emotion. Still, with an accent of bitterness and complaint, rather than of simple sorrow, it was the voice of one fighting against her fate, more than of one suffering acutely and in despair: it was petulant rather than melancholy; angry rather than grieving; shewing that her trials had hardened, not softened her heart.

'Listen to me,' she then said, laying her hand on my arm, 'and perhaps my history may reconcile you to the childish depression, from what cause soever it may be, under which you are labouring. You are young and strong, and can bear any amount of pain as yet: wait until you reach my age, and then you will know the true meaning of the word despair! I am rich, as you may see,' she continued, pointing to her surroundings—'in truth, so rich that I take no account either of my income or my expenditure. I have never known life under any other form; I have never known what it was to be

denied the gratification of one desire which wealth could purchase, or obliged to calculate the cost of a single undertaking. I can scarcely realise the idea of poverty. I see that all people do not live in the same style as myself, but I cannot understand that it is from inability: it always seems to me to be from their own disinclination. I tell you, I cannot fully realise the idea of poverty; and you think this must make me happy, perhaps?' she added sharply, looking full in my face.

'I should be happy, madam, if I were rich,' I replied. 'Suffering now from the strain of poverty, it is no marvel if I place an undue value on plenty.'

'Yet see what it does for me!' continued my companion. 'Does it give me back my husband, my brave boys, my beautiful girl? Does it give rest to this weary heart, or relief to this aching head? Does it soothe my mind or heal my body? No! It but oppresses me, like a heavy robe thrown round weakened limbs: it is even an additional misfortune, for if I were poor, I should be obliged to think of other things beside myself and my woes; sand the very mental exertion necessary to sustain my position would lighten my miseries. I have seen my daughter wasting year by year and day by day, under the warm sky of the south—under the warm care of love! Neither climate nor affection could save her: every effort was made—the best advice procured—the latest panacea adopted; but to no effect. Her life was prolonged, certainly; but this simply means, that she was three years in dying, instead of three months. She was a gloriously lovely creature, like a fair young saint for beauty and purity—quite an ideal thing, with her golden hair and large blue eyes! She was my only girl—my youngest, my darling, my best treasure! My first real sorrow—now fifteen years ago—was when I saw her laid, on her twenty-first birthday, in the English burial-ground at Madeira. It is on the gravestone, that she died of consumption: would that it had been added—and her mother of grief! From the day of her death, my happiness left me!'

Here the poor lady paused, and buried her face in her hands. The first sorrow was evidently also the keenest; and I felt my own eyelids moist as I watched this outpouring of the mother's anguish. After all, here was grief beyond the power of wealth to assuage: here was sorrow deeper than any mere worldly disappointment.

'I had two sons,' she went on to say after a short time—'only two. They were fine young men, gifted and handsome. In fact, all my children were allowed to be very models of beauty. One entered the army, the other the navy. The eldest went with his regiment to the Cape, where he married a woman of low family—an infamous creature of no blood; though she was decently conducted for a low-born thing as she was. She was well-spoken of by those who knew her; but what *could* she be with a butcher for a grandfather! However, my poor infatuated son loved her to the last. She was very pretty, I have heard—young, and timid; but being of such fearfully low origin, of course she could not be recognised by my husband or myself! We forbade my son all intercourse with us, unless he would separate himself from her; but the poor boy was perfectly mad, and he preferred this low-born wife to his father and mother. They had a little baby, who was sent over to me when the wife died—for, thank God! she did die in a few years' time. My son was restored to our love, and he received our forgiveness; but we never saw him again. He took a fever of the country, and was a corpse in a few hours. My second boy was in the navy—a fine high-spirited fellow, who seemed to set all the accidents of life at defiance. I could not believe in any harm coming to *him*. He was so strong, so healthy, so beautiful, so bright: he might have been immortal, for all the elements of decay that shewed themselves in him. Yet this glorious young hero was drowned—wrecked off a coral-reef, and flung like a weed on the waters. He lost his own life in trying to save that of a common sailor—a piece of pure gold bartered for the foulest clay! Two years after this, my husband died of typhus fever, and I had a nervous attack, from which I have never recovered. And now, what do you say to this history of mine? For fifteen years, I have never been free from sorrow. No sooner did one grow so familiar to me, that I ceased to tremble at its hideousness, than another, still more terrible, came to overwhelm me in fresh misery. For fifteen years, my heart has never known an hour's peace; and to the end of my life, I shall be a desolate, miserable, broken-hearted woman. Can you understand,

now, the valuelessness of my riches, and how desolate my splendid house must seem to me? They have been given me for no useful purpose here or hereafter; they encumber me, and do no good to others. Who is to have them when I die? Hospitals and schools? I hate the medical profession, and I am against the education of the poor. I think it the great evil of the day, and I would not leave a penny of mine to such a radical wrong. What is to become of my wealth?'—

'Your grandson,' I interrupted hastily: 'the child of the officer.'

The old woman's face gradually softened. 'Ah! he is a lovely boy,' she said; 'but I don't love him—no, I don't,' she repeated vehemently. 'If I set my heart on him, he will die or turn out ill: take to the low ways of his wretched mother, or die some horrible death. I steel my heart against him, and shut him out from my calculations of the future. He is a sweet boy: interesting, affectionate, lovely; but I will not allow myself to love him, and I don't allow him to love me! But you ought to see him. His hair is like my own daughter's—long, glossy, golden hair; and his eyes are large and blue, and the lashes curl on his cheek like heavy fringes. He is too pale and too thin: he looks sadly delicate; but his wretched mother was a delicate little creature, and he has doubtless inherited a world of disease and poor blood from her. I wish he was here though, for you to see; but I keep him at school, for when he is much with me, I feel myself beginning to be interested in him; and I do not wish to love him—I do not wish to remember him at all! With that delicate frame and nervous temperament, he *must*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.