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A POSSIBLE EVENT

Occupied as most of us are with our respective worldly concerns, and accustomed to see the routine of common events going on smoothly from age to age, we are little apt to reflect on natural events of a tremendous character, which modern science shews might possibly happen, and that on any day of any year. We think of the land as a firm and solid thing—as *terra firma*, in short—not recollecting that geology shews how it may rise or sink, so as to pass into new relations to the enveloping sea; how it may be raised, for instance, to such an extent as to throw every port inland, or so far lowered as to submerge the richest and most populous regions. No doubt, the relations of sea and land have been much as they are during historical time; but it is at the same time past all doubt, that the last great geological event, in respect of most countries known, was a submergence which produced the marine alluvial deposits; and when we find that Scandinavia is slowly but steadily rising in some parts at this moment, and that a thousand miles of the west coast of South America rose four feet in a single night only thirty years ago, we cannot feel quite assured, that the agencies which produced that submergence, and the subsequent re-emergence, are at an end. We likewise forgot, in these cool districts of the earth, that we are not quite beyond the hazard of subterranean fire. There are numberless extinct volcanoes in both Britain and France; there are some on the banks of the Rhine; indeed, they are thick-sown everywhere. Now, an extinct volcano is not quite so safe a neighbour as many may suppose. Vesuvius was an extinct volcano from time immemorial till the year 63, when it suddenly broke out again, and soon after destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum; since which time it has never again subsided into entire inactivity. Suppose Arthur's Seat, which is 'within a mile of Edinburgh town,' were to recommence business in like manner, we should like to know at how many years' purchase house property in that beautiful New Town would be selling next day. Yet what is there about an old volcano here more than an old volcano in Italy, to give assurance that its means of annoyance and destruction are absolutely extinguished?

There is, however, in the showings of science, a more serious danger than any of these. Comets were once regarded as most terrific objects, but only in a superstitious way, perplexing nations with fear of change, and shaking pestilence from their horrid hair. During an intermediate enlightened time, these notions passed away; and we have even come to think, that such a visitant of our skies may exercise a beneficial influence. We at least recollect when old gentlemen, after dinner, brightened up at the mention of 'claret 1811,' merrily attributing the extraordinary merits of the liquor to the comet of that year. But comets, in the cool eye of modern science, are not without their terrors. Crossing as they often do the paths of the planets in their progress to and from their perihelia, it cannot but be that they should now and then come in contact with one of these spheres. One, called Lexell's, did come athwart the satellites of Jupiter in 1769, and once again in 1779, so as to be deranged in its own course. It made, indeed, no observable change in the movements of the Jovian train, being of too light a consistence for that; but can we doubt, that it might nevertheless seriously affect the condition of their surfaces, and especially any animal life existing thereon? This very comet, on the 28th of June 1770, passed the earth at a distance only six times that of the moon. There is another called Biela's, which revisits the sun every six years, or a little more; and this busy traveller actually crossed our orbit in 1832, only a month before we passed through the same point in space! Another, which made a grand appearance in the western sky in March 1843, would have involved us in its tail,

if we had been only a *fortnight* earlier at a particular place! Rather fine shaving that in the celestial economics. Now, if we consider that as many as eight comets have been observed telescopically in a single year (1846), we must see that the chance of a collision of this kind is not quite so small as to be unworthy of regard. If it be true that there are thousands of comets, all of which make periodical visits to the near neighbourhood of the sun, it must be evident that the earth, being itself not far, comparatively speaking, from that luminary, must be rather liable as otherwise to a brush from one of these wanderers; and, indeed, the wonder is, that several thousand years should have passed without, so far as we know, any one such collision having taken place.

Seeing what a highly-organised system is formed by the physical and organic arrangements upon our planet, one is apt to think that the scheme of Providence must have been framed with a provision for the complete exclusion of such accidents. To allow of the sudden undoing of all this fair scene, which it has taken thousands of years to bring out in its full proportions, seems like a wanton destruction of valuable property, and we are not disposed to believe that such a thing could be permitted. But we must at the same time remember, that our sense of what is important and consequential has a regard to the earth alone, which is but a trifling atom in the universe. Who can tell what are the limits which the Master of worlds has set to mundane calamity? And assuredly, even though a whole solar system were here and there, now and then, to be remodelled in respect of all such arrangements as have been spoken of, it could not be supposed to be a very great event in the progress of the entire scheme, seeing that astronomy has taught us to regard such systems as no more than particles in the dust-cloud or grains of sand on the sea-shore. It must, then, in sober reasoning be admitted, that our mere abhorrence of so much destruction is no guidance to our judgment on this point; and that for anything we can see of the plans of Providence, an entanglement of our globe with a comet may take place any day, with consequences incalculably damaging for the meantime, though not conclusively destructive, and perhaps necessary as a step towards an improved system of things—the bringing in of what Ben Jonson calls 'an age of better metal.'

In the frame of mind which these speculations induce—not very greatly alarmed about such extraordinary contingencies, yet not insensible to the solemnity of the thought of what may come to pass even before our living eyes—it is curious, and not necessarily unpleasant, to consider what might be the actual phenomena attending a cometary collision. We know not what comets are composed of, but are certain that they consist of some palpable matter, however diffused, for they observe the rules of motion in their revolutions round the sun. On the whole, the most plausible supposition as to their composition, is that which regards them as watery vapour or cloud, of great tenuity. How like, for example, to the doings of a cloud, is the splitting into two, which has been occasionally observed in them! Well, if they be clouds, the coming of one into contact with our earth would most likely deposit with us an immense addition to our stock of water. It would be instantaneous, or nearly so. Only think of a sudden fall of water sufficient to raise the ocean a hundred feet, and submerge all parts of the land which were less than that height above the present level of the sea! There would, of course, be a fearful abridgment of our continents; all big islands would be made little; and many littler ones would cease to be. The surviving lands would be so swept by the flood, that scarcely any of the present features would remain unchanged. All animals and movable things would be engulfed. In a few minutes, this brawling, chattering, bustling world would be stilled in universal death. What a settlement of 'questions' there! What a strike of work! What a command of Silence!

A board of bank directors was hesitating about a bill for L.100, some thinking it rather indifferent paper, others viewing it more favourably; when down comes the cometic flood, and while the manager rings his bell to see what is the matter, it enters by doors and windows, and in an instant closes the whole concern. A criminal court was sitting in expectation of the return of the jury with their verdict. There was one thinking that death may not be far from his door, and a hundred pitying him in the contrast of their own assurance from the imminent foe, when lo! the flood, and judges, jury, criminal, and sympathising audience, are all instantly on a level. A sanitary commission

was deliberating on impediments to the bringing in of fresh and the taking away of foul water, and wondering if there ever would be a body of their denomination which could do anything it wished to do for the benefit of a mild, expectant, inactive, suffering public. The comet pours in its fresh water on the instant, and the whole difficulties of the case are at once resolved. A synod had been called to consider some nice point, hardly palpable to common understandings, but which everybody thought a very important point notwithstanding, and three gentlemen speaking at once to contrary purposes were about to be interrupted by a fourth of a different opinion still, when enter comet—a real Moderator—and at one stroke decides what poor mankind had been wrangling about for centuries, and what, to all appearance, but for this 'redding straik,' they would have wrangled about for centuries to come. Lord Augustus Anser had demanded satisfaction of the Honourable Mr Pavo for an injurious remark, and they were proceeding by railway to make a deadly end of it, when, lo! the comet dashes in like an undesired train from a siding, and quashes one of the prettiest quarrels which has happened for a twelvemonth. There was an unpleasant dispute with America about a herring-barrel, and barrels of a different kind were likely to be resorted to to settle it. The Admiralty was all astir as to how many vessels it might be necessary to set afloat for the business. Brother Jonathan was calculating what could be made of the crisis in working out the election of a president. The comet takes upon itself to set the whole naval force of both countries afloat—the 'origo mali' too—and at the same time to countermand the presidential election. So that matter passes. Another president was on the point of electing himself emperor—a loving pair was about to be wed—the Court of Chancery was just commencing a career of reform—a new author was starting into fame with the most brilliant novel of the season—when the comet thwarts every hope. Lloyd's had never calculated on such an accident. On 'Change, if there had been time for a moment's remark, it would have been regarded as a most unheard-of thing. The life-assurance companies, having in their tables made no allowance for such a contingency, would have been ruined by so many policies 'emerging' (oh, word of mockery!) at once, had it not been that there were no survivors to claim the various amounts. Debts, bonds, contracts, obligations of all kinds, in like manner were absolved by the comet, and Creation itself left to open a new score in, it is to be hoped, a less blotted book.

Considered as a reform, our possible event must be viewed with great interest. The patriot's heart is broken, in the ordinary current of things, by the passive resistance he meets with from the great, inert mass of prejudice and contrary interest. His most generous views are thwarted by thousands of accidents which there was no foreseeing when he put the affair down on paper. Tories hate and scandalise him; despots put him in prison; he only can bequeath his scheme to be wrought out by the happy man of a happier age. Here, however, comes me in a besom which sweeps all the old peccant institutions away at one whisk. Church and state are severed, and for ever. The Holy Alliance against the liberties of mankind is broken up—the pomp and corruption of courts is annihilated—bribery and bigotry are no more. What a clean sweep!—how hopeless reaction! Surely the most extravagant views of the Destructives must be gratified and contented at last.

If the event shall ever happen, it cannot be doubted that the present Mankind will leave many interesting memorials of themselves and their progress for the examination of a new race, should such ever arise. When the geologist of the after-world begins his work—who can tell how many hundreds of thousands of years hence?—he will find, over all our stratification and palæontology, a drift containing the remains of the ancient human species—here a *tibia* of a stockbroker, there the skull of a poet—here a lady's dressing-case in a fossilised state, there a gentleman's box of cigars: besides all these odds and ends, there will doubtless be ruins of temples, fortresses, ships, gin-palaces, and other pertinents of an active, passionate humanity, the purposes of which will form most curious matter of speculation for the more angelic species then at last come upon the earth. Nothing in writing or print will have survived to convey an idea of the state of our knowledge, or of the attainments of our great writers; but it is possible that a few inscriptions may be disinterred, and that through these some glimpses may be obtained of our history, though of a most detached and confused nature. Probably,

the most puzzling thing of all will be our warlike implements and munitions; for to one who never thought of harming his neighbour, how incomprehensible must be any tool designed expressly for that purpose! If the intent of these articles be penetrated, they will doubtless be ranged in museums as curious monuments of passions long extinct, just as we see the instruments of torture used by the Inquisition and other ancient judicatories hung up in antiquarian collections of our own day.

Well, well, my dear brethren—you have read thus far without, I hope, being too much distressed by the idea of the physical contingencies to which it is shewn we are liable. Probably you have, each of you, too many matters of sore concern pressing closely upon you, to be much incommoded by possibilities of so infinitesimal a character. It cannot, nevertheless, be amiss, that you should know these amongst other things that may any day leap from the laps of the Parcaë, were it only to expand your souls a little with things superior to the eternal commonplaces of life. It is, after all, a great thing to be a part of so great a system as that revealed to us in the external frame of things, and to feel in what a mighty hand our destiny lies. Even in the danger of what is here styled a Possible Event, there is a grandeur—both as to the event itself, and the Power under whose permission it will, if at all, take place, and our filial relations to that Power, which never leaves us without hope—which, to a high and purified mind, must be felt as more than reconciling.

BARTHOLD GEORGE NIEBUHR

We have been reading with profound interest the life and letters of one of the great men of Germany, Barthold Niebuhr, published very recently in an English garb.¹ The original work we have not seen, but we understand it is about one-third larger than the present selection, made in a great measure under the auspices of the Chevalier Bunsen, the friend of Niebuhr, and his immediate successor in the Prussian embassy to Rome. The interest of the book is, indeed, principally derived from the private letters of Niebuhr, the greater part of which were addressed to his early friend, M^{me} Hensler, whose younger sister was his first wife, and her niece his second. Most unfortunately, the valuable series of his letters to his father was destroyed by fire a short time before his own death; but the account given of him by M^{me} Hensler is quite sufficient to connect all that remains; and from this, and one or two other sources open to us, we shall try to fill up our present narrative.

Niebuhr is one of those men whose advent forms an era in the history of human knowledge. It is a mistake, however, to suppose that he was the first to infuse even into Roman story that element of doubt which has changed the whole fabric of historical science. If Niebuhr was a mere sceptic, he would be only the humble follower of Bayle, Lesurignes de Pouilly, and other writers of the last century; but his merit lies in reconstruction—in the jealous care with which he distinguishes between the true monuments of history and the mass of traditional rubbish in which they lay entombed. In his Roman history, however, although by that alone he is known in England, we find only a portion of the intellectual man: he was learned in the learning of all times, modern as well as ancient; and yet he was so completely immersed, not merely as an observer, but as a participator, in the business of the world and the great events of his own time, that even literature seems to have been little more than a study indulged in during the pauses of active life. The history of a mind so vast is by no means, we are aware, adapted for pages like ours; and yet it seems important—indeed indispensable—that in a popular journal, flowing on with the spirit of the age, we should trace some authentic records of the character and career of the man.

Carsten Niebuhr, the father of the historian, had not the advantages of early education. He was no more than a free peasant, living on the marsh-farm in Friesland, which had been possessed by several generations of his ancestors; but at the age of two-and-twenty he put himself under mathematical tutorship at Hamburg, and then studied at Gottingen. He was invited to join a mission which the Danish government determined to send into Arabia; and the proposal, at first scarcely made in earnest to the half-educated young farmer, was accepted by him with eagerness. By a singular fatality, he was the only one of the travellers sent out on this expedition who returned; he was absent more than six years, during four of which he was alone, all his companions being dead. He had added largely to what was previously known of Egypt; had made scientific observations of great value in the deserts of Arabia, and undergone prodigious hardships; but the most remarkable thing was, that his eagerness to fulfil in some measure the purposes of the expedition, made the whole journey a work of preparation and study, as well as of actual exploration. In 1773, being then just forty years of age, he married the orphan daughter of Dr Blumenberg, a Thuringian physician, and lived at Copenhagen, with the rank of captain of engineers, till the year 1778. He then removed to Meldorf, a town in the province of Ditmarsch, Holstein, where he settled for life as collector of the revenues of the district.

Barthold George Niebuhr was born in Copenhagen on the 27th of August 1776; but with the little old town of Meldorf—once the capital of an ancient commonwealth—his earliest associations were connected. A kind of rude equality still reigned in the manners of the rustic population, which was not likely to be disturbed by the influx of the world into a bleak and gloomy district remote from

¹ By the Chevalier Bunsen and Professors Brandis and Loebell. 2 vols. 8vo. London: Chapman & Hall. 1852.

the great roads. Here young Niebuhr grew up a studious and solitary boy; instructed by his father in French, the rudiments of Latin, and above all, in geography and history, which the old traveller taught him to illustrate by maps and plans, and by digging regular fortifications in the garden. The sheriff of Meldorf, and editor of the *Deutsches Museum*, a man of both fancy and learning, assisted in this early education; and the boy—who had never been a child—employed himself, even at seven years of age, in writing down the instructions he received. In future years, he regretted his having thus 'lost the life of a child.' 'I found matter for my childish fancy only in books, engravings, or conversation. I drew into its sphere all I read, and I read without reason and without aim; but the real world was closed to me, and I could not conceive or imagine anything which had not been first conceived or imagined by another.'

From this *second-hand world* he removed at the age of thirteen, when he was sent to the school at Meldorf, where the principal, Dr Jäger, gave him as much attention as he could spare for a pupil, who, though much the youngest, was the most advanced in the class. Afterwards, finding it was impossible to do for him what this strange child required, Dr Jäger advised his removal, and gave him a private lesson of an hour every day instead. This was continued with only a few months' interruption and unsuccessful trial of a school at Hamburg, till Barthold was eighteen, when he was sent to the university of Kiel.

His interest in politics dated from a very early period. At the age of eleven, he studied the newspapers, English ones especially, which he read with ease; and his knowledge of geography enabled him to follow all the details of a campaign with vivid interest.

His going to the university was an important incident in his life. His particular vocation, indeed, seems to have been clear enough from even an earlier period; for though he was a learned linguist, history especially, and philology, were the pursuits to which his heart was given. The letters he wrote from Kiel to his parents are amiable, full of affectionate outpourings about the new men and women to whom he was introduced, about his studies, and about his theories. He profits by the kindness of the physician, Dr Hensler, whose house and friendly advice were always accessible; but he declines evening-parties; and contemplates the mountain of knowledge, up whose steep sides he has yet to climb, with profound awe and some anxiety. 'My head swims when I survey what I have yet to learn—philosophy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, natural history. Then, too, I must perfect myself in history, German, and French; study Roman law, and the political constitutions of Europe, as far as I can, &c.; and all this must be done within five years at most.... I *must* know all these things; but how I shall learn them, Heaven knows! That I shall require them as a learned man, or in any position I may occupy, I am fully convinced.'

In Dr Hensler's house he saw frequently M^{me} Hensler, the widow of the doctor's son. She was six years older than Niebuhr; but to him, unused to female society, and admitted at once into domestic familiarity with a sensible and engaging woman, this disparity was nothing—perhaps, indeed, it added to the charm. From other sources, we learn that he at first became attached to M^{me} Hensler herself; but being discouraged as a lover, allowed her to introduce him to her younger sister, Amelia Behrens, a beautiful and intellectual woman; and although the attachment he then formed was not sudden or violent, it became very profound. After his engagement with this lady in 1797, and before his marriage, he visited England; and in Scotland—chiefly in Edinburgh—he spent nearly a year. The account given in his letters of his sojourn in our capital, would interest and amuse many of its present inhabitants. The Edinburgh of 1797 was more different perhaps from its present self in outward things, than in mental characteristics. His remarks on the want of a more open manifestation of feeling and affection among his friends there are striking. 'It is quite a national trait,' he says, 'not to dwell on what concerns us personally, upon what fills our heart; and it is as unnatural to them to hear me speak of the topics upon which I am feeling strongly, as it would be to do the same themselves.... I am far from attributing it to coldness in these good people. It is altogether national, and it is the same with every one I have known here, whatever their rank, calling, learning, or sex. It has quite surprised me,

for example, that if you meet a person in whose family some one has been ill, he will hardly allude to it, beyond a short answer to your inquiries, or speak of it with any feeling. In this way, it must be allowed, people may easily be independent of each other. I believe firmly that the Scots love their children—that Playfair is a good father; and yet the former only speak of them because they have them with them in the evenings, and the boys make their presence known: the latter behaves exactly as if his boy were not in the room. So far from inviting me to speak of my relations, so far from Mr Scott making any inquiries as to my father's position—though he is, nevertheless, as much attached to him as possible—they have met every attempt on my part to talk to them on these subjects with a silence which admits of no other explanation, than that it is not in good taste to say much about these things. They have never once asked after my mother and sister.' We have copied the above, because there is no trace in any part of Niebuhr's writings, former or latter, of narrow national judgments; and he repeatedly bears testimony to the fatherly kindness with which he was welcomed, especially in the two houses mentioned in the above extract. It is simply the sense of a difference, and a difference we should be inclined to regret as well as he, between the German and the English or Scotch habit. We shall never forget the earnest, *pained* manner in which a young German in England once said, when adverting to the case of some very irreproachable English youths, who yet were never heard to express a feeling, scarcely to utter a kind thing: 'Your young countrymen seem to me positively *ashamed* of being good.'

The diligence of Niebuhr, though often impeded by illness, was immense. Languages, philosophy, history, natural science, all took their turn. His number of languages was not short of twenty at this time, and in some he was profoundly versed—in most, very respectably. But the most remarkable thing through life was his memory, and its wonderful combination of retentiveness and readiness. This, rather than the imaginative power, it was that made his descriptions so graphic. Seeing and retaining everything, he painted as if all history was before him. When he spoke of a striking event, the coast, the mountain-line, or the plain, all the accompaniments rose up and were grouped before him. You felt carried away with him, as if he had lived there, and was taking you up by the way.

His return to Denmark took place late in 1799. A double appointment awaited him at Copenhagen—two government offices, neither bringing in a large salary, but sufficient to allow of his marrying; and accordingly Amelia Behrens became his wife in May 1800. The five following years found him engaged in the civil service at Copenhagen—sometimes in very onerous and uncongenial duties, sometimes in a position of peril, for the bombardment of the city under Nelson took place in 1801, and he keenly entered into every political incident. During this period of five years, his official service was more than once changed, but it seems always to have been connected with finance. He still found time for study, straining every power of his mind, he says, at one time in investigating Roman history, sure 'that the representations of all the moderns, without exception, are but mistaken, imperfect glimpses of the truth.' This Copenhagen life allowed him time but for one visit to his parents; and a disappointment which annoyed him considerably, in what, he thought, a just expectation of preferment, disposed him, in 1806, to accept an offer from the Prussian government of a post at Berlin not unlike that he had occupied in Copenhagen, but promising many advantages in society and literary opportunities.

Never was there a more disastrous commencement of a new career. The Niebuhrs reached Berlin in October 5, 1806, and on the 14th came the dreadful battles of Jena and Auerstadt, while Napoleon, with his conquering army, marched rapidly upon the city, and seven of the Prussian ministers gave in their allegiance to the French without even the ceremony of communicating with their king. The new bank-director shared in the general misfortune, and was forced to fly, with the court and ministry, first to Danzig, then to Königsberg, afterwards to Memel and Riga. A fearful time it was; yet still Niebuhr could write soothingly to his parents: 'You must not be uneasy: I can earn a living either as a scholar or a merchant; and if I do not succeed in one country, I shall in another.' To M^{me}

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