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ECONOMY IN DISTRIBUTION

We had lately occasion to proceed by an omnibus from a country town to a station on a railway, by which we were to return to the city where we have our customary abode. On arriving at the station, we learned that we should have to wait an hour for an *up* train, the omnibus being timed in relation to a *down* one, which was about to pass. Had this arrangement been the only one readily practicable, in the case, we should have felt it necessary to submit uncomplainingly to the loss of our hour; but it really was not so. We had come in one of three omnibuses, none of which had more than two or three passengers. Why should not one have come at this hour with *down* passengers, and another come an hour later with *up* ones, thus by the same trouble giving more accommodation? We found that the three omnibuses are run by so many hotels, and that an arrangement for general convenience was impossible, as it might have interfered with the hotel business. On the continent, the government would have ordered matters otherwise: with us, the genius of *laissez faire* permits them to be as we describe.

It is in the same part of the country that a system exists amongst bakers, which we described many years ago in these pages. There are three towns, triangularly arranged, about ten miles from each other. One or more bakers in each has a van, in which he sends bread every day to the other two. As there is no witchcraft in the making of bread, it might be as well for the inhabitants of each town to be supplied by the bakers of their own place exclusively, and then the expense of the carriage would be saved. Such, however, is the keenness of competition in the case, that each baker strives to get supporters in the neighbouring towns, and willingly pays for van, horse, and driver in order to retain their custom. We presume each van goes thirty miles a day, and that there is not much less than 2000 miles of this unprofitable travelling weekly in connection with the three towns.

Any one who has a sincere respect for the principle of untrammelled industry, must lament to see these its abuses or drawbacks. But our commercial world is full of such anomalies. The cause is readily traced in the excessive number of persons engaged in the various trades. Not many years ago, the number of bakers in a town known to us, of the same size as one of those above referred to, was fourteen, while everybody acknowledged that four might have sufficed. In such circumstances, it is not wonderful that expedients like that of the van are resorted to, notwithstanding that it can only diminish the aggregate of profit derived by an already starving trade.

Few persons who walk along a street of nicely-decorated and apparently well-stocked shops, have the slightest conception of the hollowness of many of the appearances. The reality has been tested in part by the income-tax inquisition, which shews a surprising number of respectable-looking shops not reaching that degree of profit which brings the owner within the scope of the exaction. It may be that some men who are liable, contrive to make themselves appear as not so; but this cannot be to such an extent as greatly to affect the general fact. In the assessing of the tax, no result comes out oftener than one of this kind: Receipts for the year, L.2200; estimated profit at 15 per cent., L.330; deductions for rent of shop, taxes, shopmen's wages, and bad debts, L.193; leaving, as net profit, L.137. The commissioners are left to wonder how the trader can support his family in a decent manner upon so small a return, till they reflect that possibly a son brings in a little as a shopman, or a daughter as a day-governess; or that possibly an old female relative lives with the family, and throws her little income into the general stock. It is, after all, a fact capable of the clearest demonstration,

that a vast number of shopkeepers' families maintain decent appearances upon an income below that enjoyed by many artisans—what goes, in the one case, for the decent appearances, being enjoyed in substantial comforts in the other, or else misapplied, to the degradation of body and mind.

The evil primarily lies in an erroneous distribution of industry. Where twenty men offer themselves to do a duty to society for which three are sufficient, it cannot be good for any party; whereas, were the extra seventeen to apply themselves to other departments of the labour required for all, it would be better times for the whole twenty. The light, easy, and pleasant occupations are those most apt to be beset by superfluous hands. Shopkeeping is generally easy, and often pleasant; hence the excessive number of individuals applying themselves to it. In the difficulties of the case, conspicuousness of situation, extravagant decoration, and abundant advertising, are resorted to, as means of obtaining a preference. Many, to help out profits, resort to tricks and cheating. The expense thus incurred, above what is necessary, in distributing certain goods, must be enormous. To bring most articles to the hands of the consumer should be a simple business. Every member of the public must feel that his clothes will be as good, coming from a wareroom on a third floor at L.30 a year, as from a flashy corner shop which costs L.300. He will feel that to make him buy a new hat when he needs one, it is not necessary that an advertising van should be continually rumbling along the streets. His tea and sugar from the nearest grocer cannot be any better because of there being fifty other grocers within two miles of his residence, and forty of these not required. Yet, by reason of the great competition in nearly all trades, these vast expenses, which do nothing for the public, are continually incurred. Means misapplied are means lost. The community is just so much the poorer. And we must pronounce the superfluous shopkeepers, those who live by the rents of fine shops, and those who are concerned in the business of advertising beyond what is strictly necessary for the information of the public, as incumbrances on the industry of the country.

One unfortunate concomitant of competition is, that it prompts in the individual trader an idea which places him in a false position towards the general interest. It is the general interest that all things fit for use should be abundant; but when a man is concerned in producing any of those things, he sees it to be for his immediate interest that they should be scarce, because what he has to sell will then bring a greater price. It is the general interest that all useful things should be produced and distributed as cheaply as possible; but each individual producer and distributor feels that the dearer they are, it is the better for him. It is thus that a trade comes to regard itself as something detached from the community; that a man also views his peculiar trading interest as a first principle, to which everything else must give way. It might, indeed, be easily shewn, that whatever is good for the whole community, must be in the long-run beneficial to each member. He either cannot look far enough for that, or he feels himself unable to dispense with the immediate benefit from that which is bad for the public. In short, each trade considers the world as living for it, not it as living for the world—a mistake so monstrous, that there is little reason to wonder at the enormous misexpenditure to which it gives rise.

The idea essentially connected with these false positions, that *because* there are certain persons in a trade in a particular place, they *ought* to be there, and that the primary consideration regarding them is how to enable them to continue living by that trade—as if they were fixed there by some decree of Providence—is one of the most perverse and difficult to deal with in political economy. The assertion of any principle ruling to the contrary purpose, seems to the multitude of superficial thinkers as a kind of cruelty to the persons, the severity of the natural law being, by an easy slide of thought, laid to the charge of the mere philosopher who detects and announces its operation. In reality, those are the cruel people who would contentedly see a great number of their fellow-creatures going on from year to year in a misery, which, being brought upon themselves by ignorance, and the want of a right spirit of enterprise, can only be banished or lessened by their being rightly informed, and induced to enter upon a proper course.

If there were a right knowledge and just views of these subjects diffused through the community, a man would be ashamed to enter upon a business in which a sufficient number of

persons was already engaged, knowing that he was thereby trifling with his time and fortunes, and perhaps encouraging in himself a love of ease, or some other desire which he was not entitled to gratify. He would rather go to some new country, where he might eat in rough independence the rewards of an actual toil. What is really required, however, is not that men should leave their own country, but enter upon such pursuits there as may preserve an equal instead of an unequal distribution of industry throughout the various fields in which there is something to be done for the general advantage. Distribution should be less a favourite department, and production more so. With more producers and fewer distributors, the waste we have endeavoured to describe would be so far saved, and there would be fewer miserable people on the earth.

Even amidst all the delusions which prevail upon the subject, it is curious to observe that there is a strong current towards a rectification of what is amiss. The interests of the individual, which produce so much fallacy, after all bring a correction. The active, original-minded tradesman, seeing that, with an ordinary share of the entire business of his department, he can scarcely make bread and butter, bethinks him of setting up a leviathan shop, in which he may serve the whole town with mercery at a comparatively small profit to himself, looking to large and frequent returns for his remuneration. The public, with all its sentimentalisms, never fails to take the article, quality being equal, at the lowest price, and accordingly the leviathan dealer thrives, while nearly all the small dealers are extirpated. Now this is a course of things which produces partial inconveniences; but its general effect is good. It lessens the cost of distribution for the consumer, and it decides many to take to new and more hopeful courses, who otherwise might cling to a branch of business that had become nearly sapless. Underselling generally has the same results. When in a trade in which distribution usually costs 43 per cent., one man announces himself as willing to lessen this by 15 or 20 per cent., his conduct is apt to appear unbrotherly and selfish to the rest; but the fact is, that for goods of any kind to cost 43 per cent., in mere distribution, is a monstrosity; and he who can in any measure lessen that cost, will be regarded by the community as acting in the spirit of a just economy, and as deserving of their gratitude. These may be considered as the rude struggles of competition towards a righting of its own evils. The public sees two selfishnesses working in the case, and it naturally patronises that which subserves its own interest.

The waste arising from an over-costly system of distribution, will probably lead to other correctives of even a more sweeping kind than that of underselling, or the setting up of leviathan shops. For the greater number of the articles required for daily use, men begin to find that a simple co-operative arrangement is sufficient. A certain number agree to combine in order to obtain articles at wholesale prices; after which a clerk, shopman, and porter suffice to distribute them. They thus save, in many trades, as much as 15 per cent. So far from their being under any peculiar disadvantage as to the quality of the articles, they are rather safer than usual in that respect; and indeed a freedom from the danger of getting adulterated or inferior goods is one of the recommendations of the system. It would probably extend more rapidly, were it not for the difficulties attending the law of partnership, which, however, will in all likelihood be speedily removed.

We make these remarks on distribution mainly in the hope of saving individuals from entering upon a career in which, not being truly useful to their fellow-creatures, they have little to expect of good for themselves. At present, shopkeeping is limited by what an able writer of the day calls the *bankruptcy check*;¹ that is, men go into it, and remain in it, while they can just barely sustain themselves, not regarding that they do not and cannot thrive, and that they are only adding to a mass of idleness already burdensome to the community. What we desire is, to see men so far enlightened in the principles of economy, that they will be at least less apt to rush into fields where their help is not wanted. We wish to assist in creating a public opinion on this subject, which, fixing on shopkeeping in such circumstances the odium of a masked idleness, will tend to send the undecided into courses

¹ Mr F. O. Ward.

of real activity and serviceableness; thus securing their own good by the only plan which can be safely depended upon—that of first securing the good of the entire community.

THE VENDETTA

In the morning, we were off the coast of Sardinia, steaming rapidly along for the Straits of Bonifacio. The night had been tranquil, and the morning was more tranquil still; but no one who knew the capricious Mediterranean felt confident of continued fair weather. However, at sea the mind takes little thought for the morrow, or even for the afternoon; and as we sat in the warm shade of the awning, looking out to the purple horizon in the east, or to the rocky and varied coast to the west, I felt, and if the countenance be not treacherous, all felt that it was good even for landsmen to be moving over waters uncrisped except by the active paddles, beneath a sky all radiant with light. My companions were chiefly Levant merchants, or sallow East Indians; for I was on board the French packet *Le Caire*, on its way from Alexandria, of Egypt, to Marseille.

I had several times passed the Straits, each time with renewed pleasure and admiration. It would be difficult to imagine a scene more wild and peculiar. After rounding the huge rock of Tavolara—apparently a promontory running boldly out into the sea, but in reality an island, we are at once at the mouth of the Straits. The mountains of Corsica, generally enveloped in clouds, rise above the horizon ahead, and near at hand a thousand rocks and islands of various dimensions appear to choke up the passage. The narrow southern channel, always selected by day, is intricate, and would be dangerous to strangers; and indeed the whole of the Straits are considered so difficult, that the fact of Nelson, without previous experience, having taken his fleet through, is cited even by French sailors as a prodigy.

On one of the rocky points of the Sardinian coast, I observed the ruins of a building, but so deceptive is distance, I could not at first determine whether it had been a fortress or a cottage. I asked one of the officers for his telescope; and being still in doubt, questioned him as I returned it. He smiled and said: 'For the last five or six years, I have never passed through the Straits by day without having had to relate the story connected with that ruin. It has become a habit with me to do so; and if you had not spoken, I should have been compelled, under penalty of passing a restless night, to have let out my narrative at dinner. You will go down to your berth presently; for see how the smoke is weighed down by the heavy atmosphere upon the deck, and how it rolls like a snake along the waters! What you fancy to be merely a local head-wind blowing through the Straits, is a mistral tormenting the whole Gulf of Lions. We shall be tossing about presently in a manner unpleasant to landsmen; and when you are safely housed, I will come and beguile a little time by relating a true story of a Corsican Vendetta.'

The prophecy was correct. In less than a quarter of an hour, *Le Caire* was pitching through the last narrows against as violent a gale as I ever felt. It was like a wall of moving air. The shores, rocks, and islands were now concealed by driving mist; and as the sea widened before us, it was covered with white-crested waves. Before I went below, a cluster of sails ahead was pointed out as the English fleet; and it was surmised that it would be compelled to repeat Nelson's manœuvre, as Sardinia and Corsica form a dangerous lee-shore. However, the atmosphere thickened rapidly; and we soon lost sight of all objects but the waves amidst which we rolled, and the phantom-like shores of Corsica.

The officer joined me, and kept his promise. By constant practice, he had acquired some skill in the art of telling at least this one story; and I regret that I do not remember his exact words. However, the following is the substance of his narrative:—Giustiniani and Bartuccio were inhabitants of the little town of Santa Maddalena, situated on the Corsican side of the Straits. They were both sons of respectable parents, and were united from an early age in the bonds of friendship. When they grew up, Giustiniani became clerk in a very humble mercantile establishment; whilst Bartuccio, more fortunate, obtained a good place in the custom-house. They continued on excellent terms till the age of about twenty-one years, when an incident occurred, that by making rivals of them, made them enemies.

Giustiniani had occasion to visit the city of Ajaccio, and set out in company with a small party mounted upon mules. Bartuccio went with him to the crest of the hill, where they parted after an affectionate embrace. The journey was fortunately performed; in about a month Giustiniani was on his way back, and reached without incident, just as night set in, a desolate ravine within a few leagues of Santa Maddalena. Here a terrific storm of wind and rain broke upon the party, which missed the track, and finally dispersed; some seeking shelter in the lee of the rocks, others pushing right and left in search of the path, or of some hospitable habitation. Giustiniani wandered for more than an hour, until he descended towards the plain, and, attracted by a light, succeeded at length in reaching a little cottage having a garden planted with trees. The lightning had now begun to play, and shewed him the white walls of the cottage streaming with rain, and the drenched foliage that surrounded it. Guided by the rapidly succeeding gleams, he was enabled to find the garden gate, where, there being no bell, he remained for some time shouting in vain. The light still beamed gently through one of the upper windows, and seemed to tell of a comfortable interior and cosy inmates. Giustiniani exerted his utmost strength of voice, and presently there was a movement in the lighted chamber—a form came to the window; and, after some delay, the door of the house was opened, and a voice asked who demanded admittance at that hour, and in such weather. Our traveller explained, and was soon let in by a quiet-looking old gentleman, who took him up stairs into a little library, where a good wood-fire was blazing. A young girl of remarkable beauty rose as he entered, and received him with cordial hospitality. Acquaintance was soon made. Giustiniani told his little story, and learned that his host was M. Albert Brivard, a retired medical officer, who, with his daughter Marie, had selected this out-of-the-way place for economy's sake.

According to my informant, Giustiniani at once fell in love with the beautiful Marie, to such an extent that he could scarcely partake of the supper offered him. Perhaps his abstinence arose from other reasons—love being in reality a hungry passion in its early stage—for next day the young man was ill of a fever, and incapable of continuing his journey. M. Brivard and his daughter attended him kindly; and as he seemed to become worse towards evening, sent a messenger to Maddalena. The consequence was, that on the following morning Bartuccio arrived in a great state of alarm and anxiety; but fate did not permit him again to meet his friend with that whole and undivided passion of friendship in his breast with which he had quitted him a month before. Giustiniani was asleep when he entered the house, and he was received by Marie. In his excited state of mind, he was apt for new impressions, and half an hour's conversation seems not only to have filled him with love, but to have excited the same feeling in the breast of the gentle girl. It would have been more romantic, perhaps, had Marie been tenderly impressed by poor Giustiniani when he arrived at night, travel-stained and drenched with rain, in the first fit of a fever; 'but woman,' said the sagacious narrator, as he received a tumbler of grog from the steward, 'is a mystery'—an opinion I am not inclined to confute.

In a few days, Giustiniani was well enough to return to his home, which he reached in a gloomy and dissatisfied state of mind. He had already observed that Bartuccio, who rode over every day professedly to see him, felt in reality ill at ease in his company, spoke no longer with copious familiarity, and left him in a few minutes, professing to be obliged to return to his duty. From his bed, however, he could hear him for some time after laughing and talking with Marie in the garden; and he felt, without knowing it, all the pangs of jealousy: not that he believed his friend would interfere and dispute with him the possession of the gem which he had discovered, and over which he internally claimed a right of property, but he was oppressed with an uneasy sentiment of future ill, and tormented with a diffidence as to his own powers of pleasing, that made him say adieu to Marie and her father with cold gratitude—that seemed afterwards to them, and to him when reflection came, sheer ingratitude.

When he had completely recovered his strength, he recovered also to, a certain extent his serenity of mind. Bartuccio was often with him, and never mentioned the subject of Marie. One day, therefore, in a state of mingled hope and love, he resolved to pay a visit to his kind host; and set

out on foot. The day was sunny; the landscape, though rugged, beautiful with light; a balmy breeze played gently on his cheek. The intoxication of returning strength filled him with confidence and joy. He met the old doctor herborising a little way from his house, and saluted him so cordially, that a hearty shake of the hand was added to the cold bow with which he was at first received. Giustiniani understood a little of botany, and pleased the old man by his questions and remarks. They walked slowly towards the house together. When they reached it, M. Brivard quietly remarked: 'You will find my daughter in the garden,' and went in with the treasures he had collected. The young man's heart bounded with joy. Now was the time. He would throw himself at once at Marie's feet, confess the turbulent passion she had excited, and receive from her lips his sentence of happiness, or— No, he would not consider the alternative; and with bounding step and eager eye, he ran over the garden, beneath the orange and the myrtle trees, until he reached a little arbour at the other extremity.

What he saw might well plunge him at once into despair. Marie had just heard and approved the love of Bartuccio, who had clasped her, not unwilling, to his breast. Their moment of joy was brief, for in another instant Bartuccio was on the ground, with Giustiniani's knee upon his breast, and a bright poniard glittered in the air. 'Spare him—spare him!' cried the unfortunate girl, sinking on her knees. The accepted lover struggled in vain in the grasp of his frenzied rival, who, however, forbore to strike. 'Swear, Marie,' he said, 'by your mother's memory, that you will not marry him for five years, and I will give him a respite for so long.' She swore with earnestness; and the next moment, Giustiniani had broken through the hedge, and was rushing frantically towards Santa Maddalena.

When he recovered from his confusion, Bartuccio, who, from his physical inferiority, had been reduced to a passive part in this scene, endeavoured to persuade Marie that she had taken an absurd oath, which she was not bound to abide by; but M. Brivard, though he had approved his daughter's choice, knew well the Corsican character, and decreed that for the present at least all talk of marriage should be set aside. In vain Bartuccio pleaded the rights of an accepted lover. The old man became more obstinate, and not only insisted that his daughter should abide by her promise, but hinted that if any attempt were made to oppose his decision, he would at once leave the country.

As may well be imagined, Bartuccio returned to the city with feelings of bitter hatred against his former friend; and it is probable that wounded pride worked upon him as violently as disappointed passion. He was heard by several persons to utter vows of vengeance—rarely meaningless in that uncivilised island—and few were surprised when next day the news spread that Giustiniani had disappeared. Public opinion at once pointed to Bartuccio as the murderer. He was arrested, and a careful investigation was instituted; but nothing either to exculpate or inculpate him transpired, and after some months of imprisonment, he was liberated.

Five years elapsed. During the first half of the period, Bartuccio was coldly received by both M. Brivard and his daughter, although he strenuously protested his innocence. Time, however, worked in his favour, and he at length assumed the position of a betrothed lover, so that no one was surprised when, at the expiration of the appointed time, the marriage took place. Many wondered indeed why, since Giustiniani had disappeared, and was probably dead, any regard was paid to the extorted promise; whilst all augured well of the union which was preceded by so signal an instance of good faith. The observant, indeed, noticed that throughout the ceremony Bartuccio was absent and uneasy—looking round anxiously over the crowd assembled from time to time. 'He is afraid to see the ghost of Giustiniani,' whispered an imprudent bystander. The bridegroom caught the last word, and starting as if he had received a stab, cried: 'Where, where?' No one answered; and the ceremony proceeded in ominous gloom.

Next day, Bartuccio and his young wife, accompanied by M. Brivard, left Santa Maddalena without saying whither they were going; and the good people of the town made many strange surmises on the subject. In a week or so, however, a vessel being wrecked in the Straits, furnished fresh matter of conversation; and all these circumstances became utterly forgotten, except by a few. 'But this drama was as yet crowned by no catastrophe,' said the officer, 'and all laws of harmony would be

violated if it ended here.' 'Are you, then, inventing?' inquired I. 'Not at all,' he replied; 'but destiny is a greater tragedian than Shakspeare, and prepares *dénouements* with superior skill.' I listened with increased interest.

The day after the departure of the married couple, a small boat with a shoulder-of-mutton sail left the little harbour of Santa Maddalena a couple of hours before sunset, and with a smart breeze on its quarter, went bravely out across the Straits. Some folks who were accustomed to see this manœuvre had, it is true, shouted out to the only man on board, warning him that rough weather was promised; but he paid no heed, and continued on his way. If I were writing a romance, if, indeed, I had any reasonable space, I would keep up the excitement of curiosity for some time, describe a variety of terrific adventures unknown to seamen, and wonderful escapes comprehensible only by landmen, and thus make a subordinate hero of the bold navigator. But I must be content to inform the reader, that he was Paolo, a servant of Giustiniani's mother, who had lived in perfect retirement since her son's disappearance, professing to have no news of him. In reality, however, she knew perfectly well that he had retired to Sardinia, and after remaining in the interior some time, had established himself in the little cottage, the ruins of which had attracted my attention. The reason for his retirement, which he afterwards gave, was that he might be enabled to resist the temptation to avenge himself on Bartuccio, and, if possible, conquer his love for Marie. He no longer entertained any hope of possessing her himself; but he thought that at least she would grow weary of waiting for the passage of five years, and would marry a stranger—a consummation sufficiently satisfactory, he thought, to restore to him his peace of mind. Once a month at least he received, through the medium of the faithful Paolo, assistance and news from his mother; and to his infinite discomfiture learned, as time proceeded, that his enemy, whilom his friend, was to be made happy at last. His rage knew no bounds at this; and several times he was on the point of returning to Santa Maddalena, to do the deed of vengeance from which he had hitherto refrained. However, he resolved to await the expiration of the five years.

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