

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DOUBLEDAY THEORY OF POPULATION.

When editing the *Glasgow Argus*, in 1845, I received a letter from Mr. Thomas Doubleday, of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, accompanying his book on the new Theory of Population, which he had lately promulgated. The work had not received recognition from the political economists and social philosophers of the time, but I devoted a leading article in the columns of the *Argus* to its consideration. The article gratified the author, and led him to become a frequent correspondent of the *Argus*. His theory was, that whenever any species of life, whether animal or vegetable, was threatened with extinction from inadequacy of healthful nutriment, its fecundity was for awhile increased, to guard it against the inevitable catastrophe, unless the causes of the temporary and abnormal fecundity were removed by more liberal and healthful diet.

He supported the argument by the fact that the

wives of the very poor were more prolific than those of the very rich—a fact which was within the commonest experience of all who had eyes to see, or who had the faculty of looking wisely about them, or studying the world in which they lived. He also cited instances of the same results in vegetable life—though not, to my mind, with the same cogency—though, on the opposite side of the theory, he supported it by the fact that too much oil put out the lamp, and that a too bountiful use of manure prevented instead of stimulated the growth of plants.

In my comments upon his ingenious theory, I quoted, in support of one branch of his argument, the opinion of King Louis Philippe—of which I had been informed in a letter from a well-informed and influential friend in Paris—that barrenness among the women of the upper classes in France was mainly caused by the excess in eating, if not in drinking, of both husband and wife. This opinion of the King was so well known in courtly circles that he was now and then consulted by the husbands of wedded ladies, who desired heirs to their estates, but who, after several years of wedded life, remained childless. Among the persons in high position who consulted him on the subject was the Duke de Saint Simon. The King asked him what he usually had for breakfast, for dinner, and for supper, and how long his course of living

had continued. When the examination was concluded, the King said to him: "*Vous mangez trop, mon cher Duc. Envoyez-moi Madame votre épouse afin que je l'interroge* (You eat too much, my dear Duke. Send the Duchess to me that I may interrogate her also)." The Duchess waited upon him accordingly, and underwent a similar examination and cross-examination. His Majesty concluded with the warning that she ate too much, and that an absolute change of diet and a severer regimen were necessary for her health, and the accomplishment of the object of the mutual wishes of herself and her husband. The story current in Paris at the time I first became acquainted with it—and as I narrated it in the *Argus*, in my recommendation of Mr. Doubleday's treatise—was that the King prescribed for them both a much more meagre diet than they had been previously accustomed to; that he diminished the quantity of animal food and wine in which they indulged, increased the quantity of fruit and vegetables to be daily consumed at their repasts, and ordered both of them to take more frequent and more protracted exercise in the open air than the fashionable and artificial life of high society in Paris permitted them. He advised them to adhere strictly to the rules and regimen laid down for them for at least a year, when they might consult him again. The Duke and Duchess adhered to

the rules rigorously for a year and a half or more, with the result—whether attributable to the King's prescription or not—that a healthy child was born to them. The wicked wits of Paris reported that, when the event was communicated to His Majesty, he rubbed his hands in great glee, saying: "*Cet enfant est à moi!* (That child is mine!)" The cynical jesters of the licentious capital did His Majesty injustice in their witticism, for in all his domestic relations the King was a model of virtue and propriety.

Mr. Doubleday was delighted with the anecdote, which was wholly new to him, and sent the King a copy of his book, which His Majesty duly acknowledged.

There may be much more in Mr. Doubleday's theory than the world is yet aware of, a truth which may go far towards explaining the as yet occult and unacknowledged causes of the decay and fall of great and powerful nations, the inordinate increase in squalor and misery of a weak and spiritless population, and the abnormal barrenness of the upper and too luxurious classes, having the leisure and the capacity for government. But the subject is too vast for discussion in these pages.

THE "WHISTLE BINKIE."

Among the other literary acquaintances with whom, as editor of the *Argus*, I was often brought into social and friendly communication, was Mr. David Robertson, of Argyll Street, an eminent publisher, who acted as the kindly and liberal Mécænas of second- and third-rate poets and song-writers, of whom Scotland, far more than England, is so prolific. Mr. Robertson, before I knew him, had published at intervals several small booklets, at a cheap price, and of a size and form convenient for the waistcoat-pocket, under the title of *Whistle Binkie*. The collection consisted of songs in the Scottish vernacular written by living authors. He did not know the origin or meaning of the word, neither did anybody else, but found it floating on the popular breath, and signifying vaguely an uninvited guest at a so-called "penny wedding" among the rural population of the lowest class, who, in return for a share in the whisky or other refreshments provided, either sang a song or played a tune on a flute or flageolet, or merely whistled, without instrumental aid, for the amusement of the company. He adopted the phrase "*faute de mieux*," as quite suggestive enough of the character and purpose of his unpretending collection,

and as one to be easily understood by all who were familiar with broad Scotch.

The only explanation of the title which the publisher, or any of his contributors, could give was taken from Jamieson's Scottish Dictionary, in which it is stated that "Whistle Binkie is one who attends a penny wedding, but without paying anything, and, therefore, has no right to take any share of the entertainment—a mere spectator, who is left, as it were, to sit on a *bench* (a 'bink' or bunk) by himself, and who, if he pleases, may *whistle* for his own amusement." This derivation—on a par with too many others that pass muster with the industrious and too-easily-satisfied Dr. Jamieson—was not accepted as correct by Mr. Robertson, who excused himself for using it by saying that it was enough for him if the people understood it. I had not studied Gaelic when I was in Glasgow, as I have since done, or I might have informed him that neither "whistle," "bench" [*bink*], nor any Teutonic or English word, had anything to do with the strange phrase, but that it was derived from the Gaelic *uasal*, "gentle, kind, courteous," whence, *duine uasal* (*usal* pronounced *wassel*), "a gentleman"; and *beannachaidh* (pronounced *bennakie*), "a blessing," and signified the blessing given to the newly-married couple by the superior or chief, of whom the humble guests at the penny

wedding were the retainers or servants, and who usually graced the assembly for a short time, and shared in the hospitalities and festivities of the evening.

Most of the poetical contributors to Mr. Robertson's *Whistle Binkie* were men of the people, many of them in the humblest positions of life. Some were ploughmen, shepherds, handicraftsmen of various kinds, such as weavers, tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, compositors, even beggars, tramps, and strolling vagrants—all more or less imbued, or fancying themselves imbued, with the divine afflatus that inspired Allan Ramsay and Robert Burns. In aspiring to emulate or to rival their great predecessors and exemplars, many of these humble bards displayed a degree of genius that, had they been born a hundred years earlier, might have raised them into fame quite equal to that of Allan Ramsay, though not, perhaps, equal to that of Robert Burns; but that, appearing in an overcrowded age—when so many thousands of voices were crying in the streets, in every department of literature, and most obstreperously of all in that of verse-making, too often falsely called poetry—could not be heard amid the hubbub.

Among the multitude of rhymers that were benevolently welcomed to the shop of Mr. Robertson, to inscribe their names and their effusions in

the pages of *Whistle Binkie*, half-a-dozen at least were worthy to be called poets—not of the highest class, indeed, but far up in the second—and who wrote songs equal to any of those bearing the great name of Robert Burns, and in some instances superior. Burns was a great poet, but he was not a great song-writer—as he probably would have been willing to confess, if he had been questioned on the subject—and owes much of his reputation to such beautiful songs as “There’s nae luck about the house,” “Auld Robin Gray,” “Were na my heart light I would dee,” “Oh, Nanny, wilt thou gang wi’ me?” “Annie Laurie,” “The land o’ the leal,” “My boy Tammie,” and a score of others which he never wrote, but which have been, and still are, attributed to him by uninformed people, who imagine that every popular Scottish song was, and must of necessity have been, written by Robert Burns. Among the few of the brighter stars of *Whistle Binkie* that shine pre-eminently above the crowd that twinkle with inferior light, and with most of whom I was more or less intimately acquainted in Glasgow and Edinburgh, may be cited Alexander Rodger, James Ballantine, Alexander MacLaggan, Alexander Smart, and Robert Gilfillan.

Alexander Rodger was originally a weaver, afterwards a pawnbroker’s assistant, a reporter of local news for the *Glasgow Chronicle*, and finally an

assistant in the business department of the *Scottish Reformer's Gazette*, under Mr. Peter Mackenzie, a well-known personage in the newspaper circles of Glasgow.

Rodger's songs are alike remarkable for their humour and tenderness, two qualities that are more closely allied than the world is inclined to admit. His best-known effusion, "Behave yourself before folk," abounds in what in Scotland is called "paukieness," a word for which there is no exact English synonym, but which may be paraphrased as a mixture of archness, shrewdness, simplicity and good humour.

Behave yourself before folk,
And dinna be sae rude to me,
As kiss me sae before folk.
It wadna gie me meikle pain,
Gin we were seen and heard by nane,
To tak a kiss or grant you ane,
But gude sake nae before folk !

The answer of the amorous lad to the remonstrance of the equally amorous lass, is even more spirited and full of humour, and has few equals in Scottish poetry. And both of them drew down, deservedly, the cordial praise of Professor Wilson in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. In a similar style and of equal merit is—

Oh, mither, anybody
But a creeshie weaver.

The serious songs of Alexander Rodger that

appear in *Whistle Binkie*, are entitled to as much commendation as the jocose ones; and the amorous passion expressed in them never degenerates, as some of the more fervid of the love-songs of Burns do, into the ultra heat of immodesty, or call a blush to the cheek of maidenly innocence or matronly purity.

James Ballantine of Edinburgh, who appears to have become extensively known to his countrymen as a poet in the pages of *Whistle Binkie*, ranks quite as high as, or even higher than, Alexander Rodger. He was originally a journeyman painter and glazier. By dint of good conduct, thrift, and high character, he was enabled in early middle life to establish himself in business on his own account. He ultimately became a prosperous citizen, and was noted for the artistic manufacture of stained-glass windows, in which he carried on a lucrative commerce. He never neglected his business to devote himself to poetry, nor allowed the care of business to dull his taste for poetry, or cool his love for it; but found time, to the last months of his useful and exemplary life, to write such simple, tender, and pure-minded lyrics, as endeared his name to his countrymen for the greater part of half a century. "Ilka blade o' grass keeps its ain drap o' dew," "The trysting tree," "Rosie-cheekit apples," "The wee, wee flowers," and scores of others of equal grace and beauty, are familiar to

that still numerous class in Scotland, and to that still more numerous class of people of Scottish descent in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, who cherish a love for the old Scottish tongue, that recalls to the memory the happy days of their childhood, and whose hearts warm not only to the tartan, and the skirl of the bagpipes, but to the words and accents of the Scottish Lowlands, spoken by their mothers, their playmates, their schoolfellows, and their sweethearts, "in life's morning march when their bosoms were young."

Alexander Smart, the author of *Rambling Rhymes*, was a compositor in the printing office of the venerable but now defunct Edinburgh newspaper, the *Caledonian Mercury*, and wrote far better poetry than many men of superior education and more pretensions who have since sat in professorial chairs at the University, or in the high places of the learned professions.

But all the contributors to *Whistle Binkie*, who gathered under the sheltering wing of Mr. David Robertson, were not men of the labouring classes, although they formed the great majority of his *clientèle*. He doubtless found them to be somewhat expensive as retainers, and had to put his hand oftener in his pocket to relieve the necessities of clever "ne'er do weels" than was always convenient. Some of them, and these not among the

least gifted, were as unwisely fond of the whisky-bottle as they were of the unprofitable pursuit of mediocre poetry, and became permanent pensioners on his bounty, or would have done so, unless he had from time to time closed his purse-strings, or doled out to them a scantier guerdon than they imagined themselves entitled to. So, in self-defence, and also, it must be said, to the improvement of the quality and the style, as well as to the increase of the popularity of *Whistle Binkie*, he drew upon the stores of lately deceased writers of a higher rank in life, in which there was no copyright, and upon those of still living poets who demanded and expected no remuneration.

Among the former were William Motherwell, once editor of a Glasgow newspaper, who died some years previously to my residence in that city; and among the latter George Outram, editor of the *Glasgow Herald* (brother of General James Outram of Indian fame, whose statue stands on the Thames Embankment), whose humorous legal song of the "Annuity" is still a favourite in Scotland, wherever convivial lawyers meet together; Charles Lever, the Irish novelist, and last, not least, John Gibson Lockhart, the son-in-law of Sir Walter Scott, and for many years editor of the *Quarterly Review*. Mr. Lockhart was the author of many songs not exactly to be ranked as poetry, one of which, the "Lament for Captain Paton,"

originally published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1819, when the author was scarcely known to fame, continues to flourish in immortal youth in the social circles of Scotland, especially in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

AN INTERESTING VISIT.

During my editorship of the *Argus*, and my residence at Ibrox Holme, my friend Robert Carruthers of Inverness, during a month's holiday that he took from business, made my house his home for a week on his way to London. Ibrox Holme was within a couple of miles or less from Pollockshaws; and Mr. Carruthers, having been informed that a daughter of Robert Burns was a resident of that little town, persuaded me to accompany him on a visit to one who stood in such near relationship to Scotland's most famous poet. Her name was Thomson, the wife of a poor weaver, and she had the reputation of being an honest and highly respectable woman, much esteemed by her own class of society. She was the illegitimate daughter of the "Annie" celebrated by Burns in "Corn Rigs and Barley Rigs," one of his most impassioned and popular songs:—

I hae been blythe wi' comrades dear,
 I hae been merry drinking,
 I hae been joyfu' gathering gear,
 I hae been happy thinking.

But a' the pleasures e'er I saw,
Tho' three times doubled fairly,
That happy night was worth them a',
Among the rigs o' Barley.

We found Mrs. Thomson without much difficulty, a comely woman upwards of sixty years of age (Burns's poem to her mother was written in 1782, sixty-four years previously), bearing traces of youthful beauty on her calm and interesting countenance, full of homely intelligence and matronly modesty. Her person and her little apartment were scrupulously neat and clean, and she received us without the slightest symptom of embarrassment, or any attempt to ignore the cause that had induced us to visit her. She was meekly proud of her paternity, and did not affect to conceal it, but spoke of the poet with as much admiration for his genius as she might have displayed had she not been so nearly related to him, and never mentioned her mother, feeling, no doubt, with womanly instinct, that, whatever the world might think, it was not for her to think ill of her. She had her troubles like other people, but the principal one seemed to be that her son, Robert Burns Thomson, imagined himself to be a poet, one day to become as celebrated as his grandfather. This idea which had taken possession of his mind, and which he had as yet done nothing to justify, rendered him dissatisfied and idle, unfitted for and

averse from his work as a weaver, and made him a sore trouble to both of his parents. Neither he nor his father made his appearance during our visit ; but Mr. Carruthers afterwards learned from a leading inhabitant of Pollockshaws, with whom he was acquainted, that the elder Mr. Thomson was well-esteemed in the town as a steady and respectable man. Though nearly forty years have elapsed since I first heard the name of Robert Burns Thomson, and was told by his mother of his high ambition, I have never learned that the seed implanted in his imagination ever germinated into leaf or blossom, much less into fruit, or that he generously forbore making any attempt to eclipse his father's genius by the superior splendour of his own. It is more probable that he remained "a mute inglorious Milton," a dumb Burns, who had no voice to cry, even in the wilderness.

ORIGIN OF THE GLASGOW ATHENÆUM.

I received, when in Glasgow, a flattering invitation from the directors of the Athenæum in Manchester to be present at a grand *soirée* to be held in that city, to meet, among other persons, Dr. Whateley, the Archbishop of Dublin, and Mr.

George Dawson, then celebrated as a lecturer, and the pastor or minister of a Unitarian Church at Birmingham. Several bishops who were invited refused to meet Mr. Dawson, and sent excuses more or less explanatory of their reasons; but Dr. Whateley, larger minded and more tolerant, had no personal objections, and was curious rather than otherwise to see and hear a person of whom so many uncharitable opinions had been expressed. I sat next to Dr. Whateley on the platform. After Mr. Dawson had delivered a set oration, rich in words but poor in ideas, the Archbishop turned to me, and remarked that his reverend brethren on the episcopal bench, had they been present, would have received no shock to their feelings by Mr. Dawson's discourse, except, perhaps, the shock of knowing that so shallow and harmless a person had so large a following in so intellectual a hive of industry as Birmingham. "But then," added Dr. Whateley, "popularity is no test of merit, or Barabbas would not have received the applauses of the crowd at the crucifixion of our Lord."

I was called upon to address the assembly after Dr. Whateley and several other notabilities had spoken; and being unprepared with a speech, and never having imagined that I would be expected to make one, I was utterly at a loss what to say. But a happy thought suddenly shot through my brain. Remembering that the great city of Glasgow, of

which I was the representative on the occasion, had not such an educational institution as an Athenæum for the benefit and instruction of the multitudes of young men engaged in business during the day, I began a short address in praise of Manchester for having established, and in dispraise of the lack of public spirit in the still more populous city of Glasgow for not having established, an Athenæum, or any similar institution, for the benefit of its future citizens. My remarks were well received, and fully reported in the newspapers. On my return to Glasgow, I was waited on at the *Argus* office by a deputation of young men interested in the subject, who asked my assistance, both editorially and personally, in promoting the object in view. I cordially agreed to give it; and, as Lord Provost Lumsden's place of business was almost immediately opposite to the *Argus* office, I requested the deputation there and then to accompany me to his Lordship's sanctum, to which, being a privileged person and an intimate friend, I had access at all hours. Within less than a quarter of an hour, having "interviewed" the Lord Provost and explained to him what we wanted, we were authorised to form a provisional committee, under his chairmanship. A list of seven of the principal citizens of Glasgow, personally known to me, was forthwith drawn up. All of these when applied to gave their names unhesitatingly, some of them enthusiastically, and

two or three subscribed liberally to the preliminary expenses. A Glasgow Athenæum was the speedy result of the movement thus happily commenced; and, after a lapse of more than forty years, is still in useful and, I believe, vigorous existence.
