

The Gospel of Content

By Frederick Greenwood

I

How it was that I, being so young a man and not a very tactful one, was sent on such an errand is more than I should be able to explain. But many years ago some one came to me with a request that I should go that evening to a certain street at King's Cross, where would be found a poor lady in great distress; that I should take a small sum of money which was given to me for the purpose in a little packet which disguised all appearance of coin, present it to her as a "parcel" which I had been desired to deliver, and ask if there were any particular service that could be done for her. For my own information I was told that she was a beautiful Russian whose husband had barely contrived to get her out of the country, with her child, before his own arrest for some deep political offence of which she was more than cognisant, and that now she was living in desperate ignorance of his fate. Moreover, she was penniless and companionless, though not quite without friends; for some there were who knew of her husband and had a little help for her, though they were almost as poor as herself. But none of these dare approach her, so fearful was she of the danger of their doing so, either to themselves or her husband or her

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her child, and so ignorant of the perfect freedom that political exiles could count upon in England. "Then," said I, "what expectation is there that she will admit me, an absolute stranger to her, who may be employed by the police for anything she knows to the contrary?" The answer was: "Of course that has been thought of. But you have only to send up your name, which, in the certainty that you would have no objection, has been communicated to her already. Her own name, in England, is Madame Vernet."

It was a Saturday evening in November, the air thick with darkness and a drizzling rain, the streets black and shining where lamplight fell upon the mud on the paths and the pools in the roadway, when I found my way to King's Cross on this small errand of kindness. King's Cross is a most unlovely purlieu at its best, which must be in the first dawn of a summer day, when the innocence of morning smiles along its squalid streets, and the people of the place, who cannot be so wretched as they look, are shut within their poor and furtive homes. On a foul November night nothing can be more miserable, more melancholy. One or two great thoroughfares were crowded with foot-passengers who bustled here and there about their Saturday marketings, under the light that flared from the shops and the stalls that lined the roadway. Spreading on every hand from these thoroughfares, with their noisy trafficking so dreadfully eager and small, was a maze of streets built to be "respectable" but now run down into the forlorn poverty which is all for concealment without any rational hope of success. It was to one of these that I was directed—a narrow silent little street of three-storey houses, with two families at least in every one of them.

Arrived at No. 17, I was admitted by a child after long delay, and by her conducted to a room at the top of the house. No
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voice responded to the knock at the room door, and none to the announcement of the visitor's name ; but before I entered I was aware of a sound which, though it was only what may be heard in the grill-room of any coffee-house at luncheon time, made me feel very guilty and ashamed. For the last ten minutes I had been gradually sinking under the fear of intrusion—of intrusion upon grief, and not less upon the wretched little secrets of poverty which pride is so fain to conceal ; and now these splutterings of a frying-pan foundered me quite. What worse intrusion could there be than to come prying in upon the cooking of some poor little meal ?

Too much embarrassed to make the right apology (which, to be right, would have been without any embarrassment at all) I entered the room, in which everything could be seen in one straightforward glance: the little square table in the centre, with its old green cover and the squat lamp on it, the two chairs, the dingy half carpet, the bed wherein a child lay asleep in a lovely flush of colour, and the pale woman with a still face, and with the eyes that are said to resemble agates, standing before the hearth. Under the dark cloud of her hair she looked the very picture of Suffering—Suffering too proud to complain and too tired to speak. Beautiful as the lines of her face were, it was white as ashes and spoke their meaning ; but nothing had yet tamed the upspringing nobility of her tall, slight, and yet imperious form.

Receiving me with the very least appearance of curiosity or any other kind of interest, but yet with something of proud constraint (which I attributed too much, perhaps, to the untimely frying-pan), she waved her hand toward the farther chair of the two, and asked to be excused from giving me her attention for a moment. By that she evidently meant that otherwise her supper would be spoiled. It is not everything that can be left to cook unattended ;
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and since this poor little supper was a piece of fish scarce bigger than her hand, it was all the more likely to spoil and the less could be spared in damage. So I quietly took my seat in a position which more naturally commanded the view out of window than of the cooking operations, and waited to be again addressed.

On the mantel-board a noisy little American clock ticked as if its mission was to hurry time rather than to measure it, the frying-pan fizzed and bubbled without any abatement of its usual habit or any sense of compunction, now and then the child tossed upon the bed from one pretty attitude to another ; and that was all that could be heard, for Madame Vernet's movements were as silent as the movements of a shadow. In almost any part of that small room she could be seen without direct looking ; but at a moment when she seemed struck into a yet deeper silence, and because of it, I ventured to turn upon her more than half an eye. Standing rigidly still, she was staring at the door in an intensity of listening that transfigured her. But the door was closed, and I with the best of hearing directed to the same place could detect no new sound : indeed, I dare swear that there was none. It was merely accidental that just at this moment the child, with another toss of the lovely black head, opened her eyes wide ; but it deepened the impressiveness of the scene when her mother, seeing the little one awake, placed a finger on her own lips as she advanced nearer to the door. The gesture was for silence, and it was obeyed as if in understood fear. But still there was nothing to be heard without, unless it were a push of soft drizzle against the window-panes. And this Madame Vernet herself seemed to think when, after a little while, she turned back to the fire—her eyes mere agates again which had been all ablaze.

Stooping to the fender, she had now got her fish into one warm plate, and had covered it with another, and had placed it on the
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broad old-fashioned hob of the grate to keep hot (as I surmised) while she spoke with and got rid of me, when knocking was heard at the outer door, a pair of hasty feet came bounding up the stair, careless of noise, and in flashed a splendid radiant creature of a man in a thin summer coat, and literally drenched to the skin.

It was Monsieur Vernet, whose real name ended in "ieff." By daring ingenuity, by a long chain of connivance yet more hazardous, by courage, effrontery, and one or two miraculous strokes of good fortune, he had escaped from the fortress to which he had been conveyed in secret and without the least spark of hope that he would ever be released. For many months no one but himself and his jailers knew whether he was alive or dead: his friends inclined to think him the one thing or the other according to the brightness or the gloominess of the hour. Smuggled into Germany, and running thence into Belgium, he had landed in England the night before; and walking the whole distance to London, with an interval of four hours' sleep in a cartshed, he contrived to bring home nearly all of the four shillings with which he started.

But these particulars, it will be understood, I did not learn till afterwards. For that evening my visit was at an end from the moment (the first of his appearance) when Vernet seized his wife in his arms with a partial resemblance to murder. Unobserved, I placed my small packet on the table behind the lamp, and then slipped out; but not without a last view of that affecting "domestic interior," which showed me those two people in a relaxed embrace while they made me a courteous salute in response to another which was all awkwardness, their little daughter standing up on the bed in her night-gown, patiently yet eagerly waiting to be noticed by her father. In all likelihood she had not to wait long.

This was the beginning of my acquaintance with a man who had a greater number of positive ideas than any one else that ever I have known, with wonderful intrepidity and skill in expounding or defending them. However fine the faculties of some other Russians whom I have encountered, they seemed to move in a heavily obstructive atmosphere; Vernet appeared to be oppressed by none. His resolutions were as prompt as his thought; whatever resource he could command in any difficulty, whether the least or the greatest, presented itself to his mind instantly, with the occasion for it; and every movement of his body had the same quickness and precision. His pride, his pride of aristocracy, could tower to extraordinary heights; his sensibility to personal slights and indignities was so trenchant that I have seen him white and quivering with rage when he thought himself rudely jostled by a fellow-passenger in a crowded street. And yet any comrade in conspiracy was his familiar if he only brought daring enough into the common business; and wife, child, fortune, the exchange of ease for the most desperate misery, all were put at stake for the sake of the People and at the call of their sorrows and oppressions. And of one sort of pride he had no sense whatever—fine gentleman as he was, and used from his birth to every refinement of service and luxury: no degree of poverty, nor any blameless shift for relieving it, touched him as humiliating. Privation, whether for others or himself, angered him; the contrast between slothful wealth and toiling misery enraged him; but he had no conception of want and its wretched little expedients as mortifying.

For example. It was in November, that dreary and inclement month, when he began life anew in England with a capital of three shillings and sevenpence. It was a bleak afternoon in December, sleet lightly falling as the dusk came on and melting

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as it fell, when I found him gathering into a little basket what looked in the half-darkness like monstrous large snails. With as much indifference as if he were offering me a new kind of cigarette, Vernet put one of these things into my hand, and I saw that it was a beautifully-made miniature sailor's hat. The strands of which it was built were just like twisted brown straw to the eye, though they were of the smallness of packthread ; and a neat band of ribbon proportionately slender made all complete. But what were they for ? How were they made ? The answer was that the design was to sell them, and that they were made of the cords—more artistically twisted and more neatly waxed than usual—that shoemakers use in sewing. As for the bands, Madame Vernet had amongst her treasures a cap which her little daughter had worn in her babyhood ; and this cap had close frills of lace, and the frills were inter-studded with tiny loops of ribbon—a fashion of that time. There were dozens of these tiny loops, and every one of them made a band for Vernet's little toy hats. Perhaps in tenderness for the mother's feelings, he would not let her turn the ribbons to their new use, but had applied them himself ; and having spent the whole of a foodless day in the manufacture of these little articles, he was now about to go and sell them. He had selected his "pitch" in a flaring bustling street a mile away ; and he asked me ("I must lose no time," he said) to accompany him in that direction. I did so, with a cold and heavy stone in my breast which I am sure had no counterpart in his own. As he marched on, in his light and firm soldierly way, he was loud in praise of English liberty : at such a moment *that* was his theme. Arrived near his "pitch," he bade me good-night with no abatement of the high and easy air that was natural to him ; and though I instantly turned back of course, I knew that at a few paces farther the violently proud man moved off the pathway into the gutter,
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and stood there till eleven o'clock ; for not before then did he sell the last of his little penny hats. Another man, equally proud, might have done the same thing in Vernet's situation, but not with Vernet's absolute indifference to everything but the coldness of the night and the too-great stress of physical want.

But this Russian revolutionist was far too capable and versatile a man to lie long in low water. He had a genius for industrial chemistry which soon got him employment and from the sufficiently comfortable made him prosperous by rapid stages. But what of that ? Before long another wave of political disturbance rose in Europe ; Russia, Italy, France, 'twas all one to Vernet when his sympathies were roused ; and after one or two temporary disappearances he was again lost altogether. There was no news of him for months ; and then his wife, who all this while had been sinking back into the pallid speechless deadness of the King's Cross days, suddenly disappeared too.

II

For more than thirty years—a period of enormous change in all that men do or think—no word of Vernet came to my knowledge. But though quite passed away he was never forgotten long, and it was with an inrush of satisfaction that, a year or two ago, I received this letter from him :

“ . . . I have been reading the —— *Review*, and it determines me to solicit a pleasure which I have been at full-cock to ask for many times since I returned to England in 1887. Let us meet. I have something to say to you. But let us not meet in this horribly large and noisy town. You know Richmond ? You know the Star and

and Garter Hotel there? Choose a day when you will go to find me in that hotel. It shall be in a quiet room looking over the trees and the river, and there we will dine and sit and talk over our dear tobacco in a right place.

“To say one word of the past, that you may know and then forget. Marie is gone—gone twelve years since; and my daughter, gone. I do not speak of them. And do not you expect to find in me any more the Vernet of old days.”

Nor was he. The splendidly robust and soldierly figure of thirty-five had changed into a thin, fine-featured old man, above all things gentle, thoughtful, considerate. Except that there was no suggestion of a second and an inner self in him, he might have been an ecclesiastic; as it was, he looked rather as if he had been all his life a recluse student of books and state affairs.

It was a good little dinner in a bright room overlooking the garden; and it was served so early that the declining sunshine of a June day shone through our claret-glasses when coffee was brought in. Our first talk was of matters of the least importance—our own changing fortunes over a period of prodigious change for the whole world. From that personal theme to the greater mutations that affect all mankind was a quick transition; and we had not long been launched on this line of talk before I found that in very truth nothing had changed more than Vernet himself. It was the story of Ignatius Loyola over again, in little and with a difference.

“Yes,” said he, my mind filling with unspoken wonder at this during a brief pause in the conversation, “Yes, prison did me good. Not in the rough way you think, perhaps, as of taking nonsense out of a man with a stick, but as solitude. Strict Catholics go into retreat once a year, and it does them good as Catholics: whether otherwise I do not know, but it is possible.

You have a wild philosopher whom I love ; and wild philosophers are much the best. In them there is more philosophic sport, more surprise, more shock ; and it is shock that crystallises. They startle the breath into our own unborn thoughts—thoughts formed in the mind, you know, but without any ninth month for them : they wait for some outer voice to make them alive. Well, once upon a time I heard this philosopher, your Mr. Ruskin, say that only the most noble, most virtuous, most beautiful young men should be allowed to go to the war ; the others, never. And he maintained it—ah ! in language from some divine madhouse in heaven. But as to that, it is a great objection that your army is already small. Yet of this I am nearly sure ; it is the wrong men who go to gaol. The rogues and thieves should give place to honest men—honest *reflective* men. Every advantage of that conclusive solitude is lost on blackguard persons and is mostly turned to harm. For them prescribe one, two, three applications of your cat-o'-nine tails——”

“There is knout like it !” said I, intending a severity of retort which I hoped would not be quite lost in the pun.

“——and then a piece of bread, a shilling, and dismissal to the most devout repentance that brutish crime is ever acquainted with, repentance in stripes. Imprisonment is wasted on persons of so inferior character. Waste it not, and you will have accommodation for wise men to learn the monk's lesson (did you ever think it *ah* foolishness ?) that a little imperious hardship, a time of seclusion with only themselves to talk to themselves, is most improving. For statesmen and reformers it should be an obligation.”

“And according to your experience what is the general course of the improvement ? In what direction does it run ?”

“At best ? In sum total ? You know me that I am no monk nor lover of monks, but I say to you what the monk would say
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were he still a man and intelligent. The chief good is rising above petty irritation, petty contentiousness; it is patience with ills that *must* last long; it is choosing to build out the east wind instead of running at it with a sword."

"And, if I remember aright, you never had that sword out of your hand."

"From twenty years old to fifty, never out of my hand. But there were excuses—no, but more than excuses; remember that that was another time. Now how different it is, and what satisfaction to have lived to see the change!"

"And what is the change you are thinking of!"

"One that I have read of—only he must not flatter himself that he alone could find it out—in some Review articles of an old friend of Vernet's whose portrait is before me now." And then, a little to my distress, but more to my pleasure, he quoted from two or three forgotten papers of mine on the later developments of social humanity, the "evolution of goodness" in the relations of men to each other, the new, great and rapid extension of brotherly kindness; observations and theories which were welcomed as novel when they were afterwards taken up and enlarged upon by Mr. Kidd in his book on "Social Evolution."

"For an ancient conspirator and man of the barricades," continued Vernet, by this time pacing the room in the dusk which he would not allow to be disturbed, "for a blood-and-iron man who put all his hopes of a better day for his poor devils of fellow-creatures on the smashing of forms and institutions and the substitution of others, I am rather a surprising convert, don't you think? But who could know in those days what was going on in the common stock of mind by—what shall we call it? Before your Darwin brought out his explaining word 'evolution' I should have said that the change came about by a sort of mental chemistry; that

that it was due to a kind of chemical ferment in the mind, unsuspected till it showed entirely new growths and developments. And even now, you know, I am not quite comfortable with 'evolution' as the word for this sudden spiritual advance into what you call common kindness and more learned persons call 'altruism.' It does not satisfy me, 'evolution.'

"But you can say why it doesn't, perhaps."

"Nothing, more, I suppose, than the familiar association of 'evolution' with slow degrees and gradual processes. Evolution seems to speak the natural coming-out of certain developments from certain organisms under certain conditions. The change comes, and you see it coming; and you can look back and trace its advance. But here? The human mind has been the same for ages; subject to the same teaching; open to the same persuasions and dissuasions; as quick to see and as keen to think as it is now; and all the while it has been staring on the same cruel scenes of misery and privation: no, but very often worse. And then, presto! there comes a sudden growth of fraternal sentiment all over this field of the human mind; and such a growth that if it goes on, if it goes on straight and well, it will transform the whole world. Transform its economics?—it will change its very aspect. Towns, streets, houses will show the difference; while as to man himself, it will make him another being. For this is neither a physical nor a mere intellectual advance. As for that, indeed, perhaps the intellectual advance hasn't very much farther to go on its own lines, which are independent of morality, or of goodness as I prefer to say: the simple word! Well, do you care if evolution has pretty nearly done with intellect? Would you mind if intellect never made a greater shine? Will your heart break if it never ascends to a higher plane than it has reached already?"

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“Not a bit ; if, in time, nobody is without a good working share of what intellect there is amongst us.”

“No, not a bit ! Enough of intellect for the good and happiness of mankind if we evolve no more of it. But this is another thing ! This is a *spiritual* evolution, spiritual advance and development—a very different thing ! Mark you, too, that it is not shown in a few amongst millions, but is common, general. And though, as you have said, it may perish at its beginnings, trampled out by war, the terrible war to come may absolutely confirm it. For my part, I don't despair of its surviving and spreading even from the battle-field. It is your own word that not only has the growth of common kindness been more urgent, rapid and general this last hundred years than was ever witnessed before in the whole long history of the world, but it has come out as strongly in making war as in making peace. It is seen in extending to foes a benevolence which not long ago would have been thought ludicrous and even unnatural. Why, then, if that's so, the feeling may be furthered and intensified by the very horrors of the next great war, such horrors as there *must* be ; and—God knows ! God knows !—but from this beginning the spiritual nature of man may be destined to rise as far above the rudimentary thing it is yet (I think of a staggering blind puppy) as King Solomon's wits were above an Eskimo's.”

“Still the same enthusiast,” I said to myself, “though with so great a difference.” But what struck me most was the reverence with which he said “God knows !” For the coolest Encyclopedist could not have denied the existence of God with a more settled air than did “the Vernet of old days.”

“And yet,” so he went on, “were the human race to become all-righteous in a fortnight, and to push out angels' wings from its shoulders, every one ! every one ! all together on Christmas Day,
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it would still be the Darwinian process. Yes, we must stick to it, that it is evolution, I suppose, and I'm sure it contents me well enough. What matter for the process! And yet do you know what I think?"

Lights had now been brought in by the waiter—a waiter who really could not understand why not. But we sat by the open window looking out upon the deepening darkness of the garden, beyond which the river shone as if by some pale effulgence of its own, or perhaps by a little store of light saved up from the liberal sunshine of the day.

"Do you know what I think?" said Vernet, with the look of a man who is about to confess a weakness of which he is ashamed. "I sometimes think that if I were of the orthodox I should draw an argument for supernatural religion, against your strict materialists, from this sudden change of heart in Christian countries. For that is what it is. It is a change of heart; or, if you like to have it so, of spirit; and the remarkable thing is that it is *nothing else*. Whether it lasts or not, this awakening of brotherliness cannot be completely understood unless that is understood. What else has changed, these hundred years? There is no fresh discovery of human suffering, no new knowledge of the desperate poverty and toil of so many of our fellow-creatures: nor can we see better with our eyes, or understand better what we hear and see. This that we are talking about is a heart-growth, which, as we know, can make the lowliest peasant divine; not a mind-growth, which can be splendid in the coldest and most devilish man. Well, then, were I of the orthodox I should say this. When, after many generations, I see a traceless movement of the spirit of man like the one we are speaking of—a movement which, if it gains in strength and goes on to its natural end, will transfigure human society and make it infinitely more like heaven—I think the
divine

divine influence upon the development of man as a spirit may be direct and continuous ; or, it would be better to say, not without repetition."

Vernet had to be reminded that the intellectual development of man had also shown itself in sudden starts and rushes toward perfection—now in one land, now in another ; and never with an appearance of gradual progress, as might be expected from the nature of things. And therefore nothing in the spiritual advance which is declared by the sudden efflorescence of "altruism" dissociates it from the common theory of evolution. This he was forced to admit. "I know," he replied ; "and as to intellectual development showing itself by starts and rushes, it is very obvious." But though he made the admission, I could see that he preferred belief in direct influence from above. And this was Vernet !—a most unexpected example of that Return to Religion which was not so manifest when we talked together as it is to-day.

"You see, I am a soldier," he resumed, "and a soldier born and bred does not know how to get on very long without feeling the presence of a General, a Commander. That I find as I grow old ; my youth would have been ashamed to acknowledge the sentiment. And for its own sake, I hope that Science is becoming an old gentleman too, and willing to see its youthful confidence in the destruction of religious belief quite upset. For upset it certainly will be, and very much by its own hands. Most of the new professors were sure that the religious idea was to perish at last in the light of scientific inquiry. None of them seemed to suspect what I remember to have read in a fantastic magazine article two or three years ago, that unbelief in the existence of a providential God, the dissolution of that belief, would not retard but probably draw on more quickly the greater and yet unfulfilled triumphs of Christ on earth. Are you surprised at that ? Certainly it is not
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the general idea of what unbelief is capable of. 'And what,' says some one in the story, 'what are those greater triumphs?' To which the answer is: 'The extension of charity, the diffusion of brotherly love, greed suppressed, luxury shameful, service and self-sacrifice a common law'—something like what we see already between mother and child, it was said. Now what do you think of that as a consequence of settled unbelief? As for Belief, we must allow that *that* has not done much to bring on the greater triumphs of Christianity."

"And how is Unbelief to do this mighty work?" said I.

"You would like to know! Why, in a most natural way, and not at all mysterious. But if you ask in how long a time—! Well, it is thus, as I understand. What the destruction of religious faith might have made of the world centuries ago we cannot tell; nothing much worse, perhaps, than it was under Belief, for belief can exist with little change of heart. But these are new times, Unbelief cannot annihilate the common feeling of humanity. On the contrary, we see that it is just when Science breaks religion down into agnosticism that a new day of tenderness for suffering begins, and poverty looks for the first time like a wrong. And why? To answer that question we should remember what centuries of belief taught us as to the place of man on earth in the plan of the Creator. This world, it was 'a scene of probation.' The mystery of pain and suffering, the burdens of life apportioned so unequally, the wicked prosperous, goodness wretched, innocent weakness trodden down or used up in starving toil—all this was explained by the scheme of probation. It was only for this life; and every hour of it we were under the eyes of a heavenly Father who knows all and weighs all; and there will be a future of redress that will leave no misery unreckoned, no weakness unconsidered, no wrong uncompensated that was patiently borne. Don't
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you remember? And how comfortable the doctrine was! How entirely it soothed our uneasiness when, sitting in warmth and plenty, we thought of the thousands of poor wretches outside! And it was a comfort for the poor wretches too, who believed most when they were most miserable or foully wronged that in His own good time God would requite or would avenge.

“Very well. But now, says my magazine sermoniser, suppose this idea of a heavenly Father a mistake and probation a fairy tale; suppose that there is no Divine scheme of redress beyond the grave: how do we mortals stand to each other then? How do we stand to each other in a world empty of all promise beyond it? What is to become of our scene-of-probation complacency, we who are happy and fortunate in the midst of so much wrong? And if we do not busy ourselves with a new dispensation on their behalf, what hope or consolation is there for the multitude of our fellow-creatures who are born to unmerited misery in the only world there is for any of us? It is clear that if we must give up the Divine scheme of redress as a dream, redress is an obligation returned upon ourselves. All will *not* be well in another world: all must be put right in this world or nowhere and never. Dispossessed of God and a future life, mankind is reduced to the condition of the wild creatures, each with a natural right to ravage for its own good. If in such conditions there is a duty of forbearance from ravaging, there is a duty of helpful surrender too; and unbelief must teach both duties, unless it would import upon earth the hell it denies. ‘Unbelief is a call to bring in the justice, the compassion, the oneness of brotherhood that can never make a heaven for us elsewhere.’ So the thing goes on; the end of the argument being that in this way unbelief itself may turn to the service of Heaven and do the work of the believer’s God. More than that: in the doing of it the
spiritual

spiritual nature of man must be exalted, step by step. That may be its way of perfection. On that path it will rise higher and higher into Divine illuminations which have touched it but very feebly as yet, even after countless ages of existence.

“Do you recognise these speculations?” said Vernet, after a silence.

I recognised them well enough, without at all anticipating that so much of them would presently re-appear in the formal theory of more than one social philosopher.

There was a piano in the little room we dined in. For a minute or two Vernet, standing with his cigar between his lips, went lightly over the keys. The movement, though extremely quick, was wonderfully soft, so that he had not to raise his voice in saying :

“I have an innocent little speculation of my own. How long will it be before this spiritual perfecting is pretty near accomplishment? Two thousand years? One thousand years? Twenty generations at the least! Ah, that is the despair of us poor wretches of to-day and to-morrow. Well, when the time comes I fancy that an entirely new literature will have a new language. There will certainly be a new literature if ever spiritual progress equals intellectual progress. The dawning of conceptions as yet undreamt of, enlightenments higher than any yet attained to, may be looked for, I suppose, as in the natural order of things; and even *without* extraordinary revelations to the spirit, the spiritual advance must have an enormous effect in disabusing, informing and inspiring mental faculty such as we know it now. And meanwhile? Meanwhile words are all that we speak with, and how weak are words? Already there are heights and depths of feeling which they are hardly more adequate to express than the dumbness of the dog can express his love for his master. Yet there

there is a language that speaks to the deeper thought and finer spirit in us as words do not—moving them profoundly though they have no power of articulate response. They heave and struggle to reply, till our breasts are actually conscious of pain sometimes ; but—no articulate answer. Do you recognise—— ? ”

I pointed to the piano with the finger of interrogation.

“ Yes,” said Vernet, with a delicate sweep of the keyboard, “ it is this ! It is music ; music, which is felt to be the most subtle, most appealing, most various of tongues even while we know that we are never more than half awake to its pregnant meanings, and have not learnt to think of it as becoming the last perfection of speech. But that may be its appointed destiny. No, I don’t think so only because music itself is a thing of late, speedy and splendid development, coming just before the later diffusion of spiritual growth. Yet there is something in that, something which an evolutionist would think apposite and to be expected. There is more, however, in what music is—a voice always understood to have powerful innumerable meanings appealing to we know not what in us, we hardly know how ; and more, again, in its being an exquisite voice which can make no use of reason, nor reason of it ; nor calculation, nor barter, nor anything but emotion and thought. The language we are using now, we two, is animal language by direct pedigree, which is worth observation don’t you think ? And, for another thing, when it began it had very small likelihood of ever developing into what it has become under the constant addition of man’s business in the world and the accretive demands of reason and speculation. And the poets have made it very beautiful no doubt ; yes, and when it is most beautiful it is most musical, please observe : most beautiful, and at the same time most meaning. Well, then ! A new nature, new needs. What do you think ? What do you say against music

music being wrought into another language for mankind, as it nears the height of its spiritual growth ? ”

“ I say it is a pretty fancy, and quite within reasonable speculation. ”

“ But yet not of the profoundest consequence, ” added Vernet, coming from the piano and resuming his seat by the window. “ No ; but what is of consequence is the cruel tedium of these evolutionary processes. A thousand years, and how much movement ? ”

“ Remember the sudden starts towards perfection, and that the farther we advance the more we may be able to help. ”

“ Well, but that is the very thing I meant to say. Help is not only desirable, it is imperatively called for. For an unfortunate offensive movement rises against this better one, which will be checked, or perhaps thrown back altogether, unless the stupid reformers who confront the new spirit of kindness with the highwayman’s demand are brought to reason. What I most willingly yield to friend and brother I do not choose to yield to an insulting thief ; rather will I break his head in the cause of divine Civility. Robbery is no way of righteousness, and your gallant reformers who think it a fine heroic means of bringing on a better time for humanity should be taught that some devil has put the wrong plan into their heads. It is his way of continuing under new conditions the old conflict of evil and good. ”

“ But taught ! How should these so-earnest ones be taught ? ”

“ Ah, how ! Then leave the reformers ; and while they inculcate their mistaken Gospel of Rancour, let every wise man preach the Gospel of Content. ”

“ Content—with things as they are ? ”

“ Why, no, my friend ; for that would be preaching content with universal discontent, which of course cannot last into a reign of wisdom and peace. But if you ask me whether I mean content with a very very little of this world’s goods, or even contentment

tentment in poverty, I say yes. There will be no better day till that gospel has found general acceptance, and has been taken into the common habitudes of life. The end may be distant enough ; but it is your own opinion that the time is already ripe for the preacher, and if he were no Peter the Hermit but only another, another——”

“Father Mathew, inspired with more saintly fervour——”

“Who knows how far he might carry the divine light to which so many hearts are awakening in secret ? This first Christianity, it was but ‘the false dawn.’ Yes, we may think so.”

Here there was a pause for a few moments, and then I put in a word to the effect that it would be difficult to commend a gospel of content to Poverty.

“But,” said Vernet, “it will be addressed more to the rich and well-to-do, as you call them, bidding them be content with enough. Not forbidding them to strive for more than enough—that would never do. The good of mankind demands that all its energies should be maintained, but not that its energies should be meanly employed in grubbing for the luxury that is no enjoyment but only a show, or that palls as soon as it is once enjoyed, and then is no more felt as luxury than the labourer’s second pair of boots or the mechanic’s third shirt a week. For the men of thousands per annum the Gospel of Content would be the wise, wise, wise old injunction to plain living and high thinking, only with one addition both beautiful and wise : kind thinking, and the high and the kind thinking made good in deed. And it would work, this gospel ; we may be sure of it already. For luxury has become *common* ; it is being found out. Where there was one person at the beginning of the century who had daily experience of its fatiguing disappointments, now there are fifty. Like everything else, it loses distinction by coming abundantly into all sorts of hands ; and meanwhile

while other and nobler kinds of distinction have multiplied and have gained acknowledgment. And from losing distinction—this you must have observed—luxury is becoming vulgar; and I don't know why the time should be so very far off when it will be accounted shameful. Certain it is that year by year a greater number of minds, and such as mostly determine the currents of social sentiment, think luxury *low*; without going deeper than the mere look of it, perhaps. These are hopeful signs. Here is good encouragement to stand out and preach a gospel of content which would be an education in simplicity, dignity, happiness, and yet more an education of heart and spirit. For nothing that a man can do in this world works so powerfully for his own spiritual good as the habit of sacrifice to kindness. It is so like a miracle that it is, I am sure, the one way—the one way appointed by the laws of our spiritual growth.

“Yes, and what about preaching the gospel of content to Poverty? Well, there we must be careful to discriminate—careful to disentangle poverty from some other things which are the same thing in the common idea. Say but this, that there must be no content with squalor, none with any sort of uncleanness, and poverty takes its own separate place and its own unsmirched aspect. An honourable poverty, clear of squalor, any man should be able to endure with a tranquil mind. To attain to that tranquillity is to attain to nobleness; and persistence in it, though effort fail and desert go quite without reward, ennobles. Contentment in poverty does not mean crouching to it or under it. Contentment is not cowardice, but fortitude. There is no truer assertion of manliness, and none with more grace and sweetness. Before it can have an established place in the breast of any man, envy must depart from it—envy, jealousy, greed, readiness to take half-honest gains, a horde of small ignoble sentiments not only disturbing but poisonous to the
ground

ground they grow in. Ah, believe me ! if a man had eloquence enough, fire enough, and that command of sympathy that your Gordon seems to have had (not to speak of a man like Mahomet or to touch on more sacred names), he might do wonders for mankind in a single generation by preaching to rich and poor the several doctrines of the Gospel of Content. A curse on the mean strivings, stealings, and hoardings that survive from our animal ancestry, and another curse (by your permission) on the gaudy vanities that we have set up for objects in life since we became reasoning creatures."

In effect, here the conversation ended. More was said, but nothing worth recalling. Drifting back to less serious talk, we gossiped till midnight, and then parted with the heartiest desire (I speak for myself) of meeting soon again. But on our way back to town Vernet recurred for a moment to the subject of his discourse, saying :

"I don't make out exactly what you think now of the prospect we were talking of."

My answer pleased him. "I incline to think," said I, "what I have long thought : that if there is any such future for us, and I believe there is, we of the older European nations will be nowhere when it comes. In existence—yes, perhaps ; but gone down. You see we are becoming greybeards already ; while you in Russia are boys, with every mark of boyhood on you. You, you are a new race—the only new race in the world ; and it is plain that you swarm with ideas of precisely the kind that, when you come to maturity, may re-invigorate the world. But first, who knows what deadly wars ?"

He pressed his hand upon my knee in a way that spoke a great deal. We parted, and two months afterwards the Vernet whose real name ended in "ieff" was "happed in lead."