

# THE REVOLUTION ABSOLUTE

## PART I. THE METHOD OF PROPHECY

BY CHARLES FERGUSON

IT HAS been said that the test of science is prophecy. You are no astronomer unless you can forewarn us of an eclipse of the moon or a transit of Venus, and tell us precisely where to go to see it. And you are not a chemist unless you can say by anticipation just what kind of a crystallisation will take place at the jar of the beaker in your hand.

I am undertaking to foreshow things that are coming to pass in the world of men. This is a book\* of prophecy. Yet I make haste to disavow any special inspiration. I have not been with God in the Mount nor spoken familiarly with angels or oracles. Indeed it is my opinion that the best of prophets—even those whose words have become scripture—have had, each in his own degree, only the kind of qualifications that I have. They foretold what would happen to men, because they understood what was happening and what had happened.

Their understanding of events was based upon an understanding of the nature of society in its health—which is a matter concerning which most men have no conception, since none have any experience. No man has ever lived in a society that was not abnormal, in the sense that its order was self-destructive, nurturing fondly in its bosom the fanged wolf.

It is impossible to understand public events unless one is able to measure their meaning against a sound criterion of social health. It is impossible to estimate the strength or weakness of a commonwealth unless one has first achieved a

right conception of the way to make a commonwealth strong, to the limits of its latent strength.

This business of being a prophet begins therefore with the task of finding out what kind of a thing a human society would be if it were quite sane. I think that is the way Isaiah began and Amos and Micah and the rest. They may or may not have been wholly successful in their quest. It is sufficient to note that the value of their foreshowings was proportionate to the depth of their knowledge of the real nature of society. And this rule holds also for all the prophets who have not been canonised—for Marx and Buckle, for Metternich and Napoleon and Macaulay and the leader-writers in the New York and London newspapers.

If one knows the quality of social health one begins to understand the character and course of social diseases. And then it becomes possible to say, without doing violence to what is called the scientific spirit: Within such and such a time the fever in the nation will run to fatality, or else there will be a resurgence of the life-force and a new and recuperative era will begin. This is substantially the formula of scriptural prophecies. They do not say—as for example Marx and Haeckel do: Given the present facts, and we will tell you certainly what the future will be.

In this matter of social predictions the scriptural prophets are more scientific than most of the moderns; they have a sense of the truth that the fatality of passing events is balanced—and may at any moment be over-balanced—by a spiritual fatality, a gravitation toward health. That is why the old prophets stated their predictions in alternative terms—as a good physician does. The

\*This is the first of a series of three articles by Mr. Ferguson, to appear in *THE BOOKMAN*, which the author will expand into a book for publication this coming April under the title *The Revolution Absolute*.—Editor's Note.

doctor says: The patient will die at such a stage of the distemper, unless the *vis medicatrix* shall intervene before that stage is reached. Even so the old prophets were content to say: You shall arrive at perdition at a specified juncture—unless you repent.

It is however to be observed that a competent prophet, like a good physician, is sometimes made aware of the invincibility of health, even in the face of frightful disease. He can say with certitude: There is great strength here in reserve, the fever will only burn up morbid tissue, the recuperation may be slow and painful, but a new and abundant life is assured. That is the kind of prophecy to which, in all severity of study and understanding, I am able to invite your attention—in face of the fever of nations. I am going to give you reasons for assurance that a new civilisation, far happier than we have known or imagined, is in process of being born.

I begin by telling you how I know. I will explain to you in advance the method of this prophecy. This is a chapter on what the philosophers would call epistemology—the science of how one comes to know things.

Francis Bacon published in 1620 his *Novum Organum* to explain how one may best acquire a knowledge of the natural sequence of physical phenomena. The world has made no mistake in accepting his demonstration. Prodigies of intellectual and practical achievement have been accomplished by the method that Bacon defined. He is the father of modern physical science and of the vast modern development of technology. In him the spirit of the Italian Renaissance acclimated itself in Elizabethan England, and in due time sent forth to America and the four quarters of the world the gospel of earth-subduing realism that is the canon and inspiration of great business. It was through the incomparable work of Francis Bacon that the history of the universal mind turned, as a door turns upon its hinges. True it is that

the balance of political and academic power still remains with those who have not been penetrated by the Baconian spirit; but that is only to say that the door which Francis Bacon opened upon a new kingdom of the mind has not yet been definitively closed upon the old order.

We must understand that up to the middle of the fifteenth century there had nowhere been any large-scale social effort to direct the higher powers of the mind toward the business of making people at home in the material world. And the movement in Southern Europe that is called the Renaissance would have spent itself in vain, and could not have diverted men's minds from the ancient Mediterranean abstractions and the cult of sacerdotal resignation, could not have committed the Western races to a career of buoyant action and achievement, if it had not found a secure footing in the mind of a first-rate prophet in Elizabethan England.

Bacon elaborated the intellectual technique whereby the modern world has acquired its earth-grip. He invented the mental machinery that has made possible the co-operation of myriads of minds in the working of the physical mechanism of a machine-age. Our modern working organisation with its instantaneous communications, its high technology, its corporate structure, its world-changing mastery of tools, comes straight from the *Novum Organum*.

I am going to show that it is precisely this modern working organisation, with its incalculable implications of misunderstood or unacknowledged political power, that has precipitated the world-crisis of our times. Thus it may be said, in a sense, that Francis Bacon made the Great War. Yet I insist that he should be exonerated from all blame. For the deeper truth is that the war is due to our own blamable failure to fulfil the work that Bacon began. The great conflict is at bottom a collision between the forces that Bacon set in motion, and certain other ancient and belated powers of

the mind that have stubbornly refused to be touched by the modern spirit, and that now are giving disastrous battle at their last stand.

The edge of the conflict is an inherent contradiction between a modernised working system and a political and social structure that is not modern. It ought to be admitted that *The Advancement of Learning* and *The Novum Organum* do not reveal any clear prevision on the part of their author of the danger of such a contradiction. He attended to the work he had in hand, and began at the right beginning of it. He laid his emphasis upon the need of "restoring or cultivating a just and legitimate familiarity between the mind and things." He spoke with a strange voice of order and sense, to a world that was inveterate in intellectual confusion. He was lonely, and his task was heavy upon him. One may find in his own words some measure of the gravity and difficulty of the undertaking—such words as these:

Francis of Verulam thought thus, and such is the method that he determined within himself, and which he thought it concerned the living and posterity to know. . . . Whilst men agree to admire and magnify the false powers of the mind and neglect or destroy those that might be rendered true, there is no other course left but with better assistance to begin the work anew, and raise or rebuild the sciences, arts and all human knowledge from a firm and solid basis. This may at first seem an infinite scheme unequal to human abilities, yet it will be found more sound and judicious than the course hitherto pursued, as tending to some issue; whereas all hitherto done with regard to the sciences is vertiginous or in the way of perpetual rotation. . . . Nor is he ignorant that he stands alone in an experiment almost too bold and astonishing to obtain credit, yet he thought it not right to desert either the cause or himself, but to enter boldly on the way and explore the only path that is pervious to the human mind. . . . Uncertain however whether these reflections would occur

to another, and observing that he had never met any person disposed to apply his mind to similar thoughts, he determined to publish whatsoever he found time to perfect. Nor is this the haste of ambition; but anxiety, that if he should die there might remain behind him some outline and determination of the matter his mind had embraced, as well as some mark of his sincere and earnest affection to promote the happiness of mankind.

These are words of high emotion. Who can read them unmoved? Who shall reproach Francis Bacon for neglecting—say rather refraining with nicest calculation of costs and consequences—to point out the inevitable antagonism between inductive science and the Aristotelian abstractions that ruled the politics of his day and of ours? For my own part I am content with him and am deeply impressed with the dignity and validity of his warfare. The social problem was not his problem, and he did well to let it alone.

His intellectual valour and his discretion are alike remarkable. He took the social order as he found it and saluted king, lords, commons and the academic and ecclesiastical establishments with a deference that may seem obsequious, but was strategic. He quotes with significant relish the saying of the sage who would not dispute his best with the Emperor Adrian, because "It is reasonable to yield to a man who commands thirty legions."

It is related that Diogenes, when challenged to explain why it was that philosophers followed the rich while the rich did not follow philosophers, said it was because the philosophers knew what they needed and the rich did not. This acid answer was Baconian. Whatever one may think of Bacon's political morals there is no lack of the completest proof that he himself thought ill of them, and of the legal and social circumstances to which he had adapted them. When he was deposed from the High Chancellorship by the House of Lords for taking customary gifts from litigants, he re-

marked concerning the judgment: "I was the justest judge that was in England these fifty years; but that was the justest censure that was in Parliament these two hundred years."

Three centuries ago this wise, bright Francis Lord Verulam "rang the bell," as he said, "to call the wits together." They came; and during these long cycles it has happened that they have done their work of freeing the world from the sway of loose words and vain abstractions—mainly in the realms of chemistry, physics and kindred studies. In these realms they have given us the kind of knowledge that can be turned into life-sustaining power. But "the wits" have mostly stood, as Bacon stood, with their backs to the fictions and utilities of law and politics. They have let those sleeping dogs lie—or have left it to men of lesser faculty to disturb them.

Hence it has come to pass that modern science and practical art are unsocial—in the sense that industry and great business have broken loose from social conscience. On the other hand it should be set down in strictness of speech that there is as yet no such thing as social science—no ordered knowledge of the real nature of society or understanding of the reasons why nations rise and fall.

In law, politics and diplomacy we are fog-bound and rudderless on the bosom of a tumultuous sea—because in social affairs we are blinded by the brilliance of ancient words. In our manner of using such words as property, sovereignty, authority, liberty, they are devoid of realistic and definite signification.

Thus the spirit of science has conquered the integument and extremities of life, but not the blood currents or the pulsing heart of it. We understand astronomy, geography, the chemical elements, plants and the lower animals, but we do not understand human nature in its massive action. Some say that it is good, some that it is bad, and some that it changes quickly from good to bad or *vice versa*; but no living man can define with authority this goodness or badness,

or offer a convincing exhibit of the causes that work the changes. We can make machines to weave tissues or cut isthmuses, machines to conquer great distance and obstruction; but we have no agreed and workable comprehension of the social mechanism, or of the dynamics of high-powered society. We can compass Orion and the nebulae and chart the ways of protoplasm and bacteria, but neither Washington nor Wall Street has any sure and foreseeing knowledge about the psychology of money, or credit, or commercial panic, or war.

Now I protest it is not necessary or inevitable that the modern spirit, the passion for science and reality, should content itself with the mastery of the periphery of life, and submit to be endlessly excluded from the emotional centre of it. There is really no reason to suppose that knowledge can penetrate the things that matter least, but not those that matter most. The intrinsic laws of society are not unknowable. What is necessary is to ring the bell again and call the wits together. And that is what I propose to do.

It is necessary to finish the work that Francis Bacon with such bravery—and withal such careful reserves of prudence—has successfully begun. The scientific spirit must penetrate to the heart of the social problem.

Up to this moment social reformers have in general either used the methods of an antique philosophism or else have misapplied the Baconian method. We have had nothing but a pull and haul between utopians and statisticians. The utopians from Rousseau and Mazzini to Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Hillquit have tried to finish off a perfect state dedicated to social justice. The statisticians on the other hand—such as the English Fabians, including Bernard Shaw, and Americans of the type of Professor Ely and Mr. Gompers—have assumed that natural evolution will succour us, if duly assisted by figures, and by intestine fights for small but cumulative improvements. These have supposed themselves to be

acting in a modern and scientific spirit; but I venture to say that Francis Bacon would not suppose so.

It is not scientific to assume that human affairs must improve by mere lapse of time. It is no more scientific to trust to time than to trust to space. And as for the gains made by the statistical study of specific social wrongs and disabilities, they are very nearly negligible. They generally cost as much as they come to.

The true social implication of the Baconian culture is not that men should be studied as things are studied, or bred as horses are bred—but quite the opposite of that. Bacon laboured to draw society out of its inveterate pre-occupation with itself, and to direct its will and mental energy to the mastery of the sub-human world. Thus the all-inclusive social question from the Baconian point of view is this: *How can the social constitution be made to achieve the highest possible power over the forces and materials of nature?*

How is society to be cleared of its morbid moralisms, its paralysing legalities, and mobilised for the advancement of the practical arts? That is the social problem, stated in Baconian terms. The war will force the most reluctant to give respectful attention to such a statement of the problem. For war is Baconian in its argument. It finds the world full of loose words and vain abstractions, but in the deepening intensity of its agony there is no room for rhetoricians.

If men are slow to perceive that the Baconian statement of the social problem is the true statement, it will be discovered to the surprise of many preachers that the reluctance proceeds primarily not from selfish attachment to gainful interests that must be sacrificed, but rather from a false culture of heart and mind that has blinded us to the truth that social virtue and social strength are the same thing, and that the social mastery of arts and arms involves all spiritual issues.

For my own part, the confidence I

have in the prophecy of a vast and recuperative social change, rests upon a Baconian habit of mind fortified by peculiar disciplines. I am not disconcerted by the doubts of others, because I know that with their outlook I should share their doubts. The resistance of traditions to the great change I foresee—traditions legal, ecclesiastical, academic, commercial, political, populist—seems invincible to those who look out upon the world from the standpoint of one or another fixed social or professional status. They do not fully feel, as I do, the force of the cancellation that these several traditions exercise upon one another. Therefore they do not perceive that the way to the renewal is wide open.

For twenty-five years or a little more I have had no absorbing preoccupation—save for frequent intervals of idleness and waste—but the problem of social mobilisation: How to escape from the deadlock and disaster toward which the world was running. I should have preferred farming or a technical specialty or the pursuit of money to play with, rather than any intellectual or clerical profession—if I had not seen the social problem in terms of sharp antithesis challenging a definitive solution, and so luring me on to try my wits upon it in professional establishments and institutions. Always the quest was for a conception of social health and power that I could feel to be clear and scientific—a working knowledge of the kind of society that would really work.

I did not occupy myself with reforms, and no reform has ever interested me. For I have been forewarned that no change in forms can save us from failure. We require nothing less than a new and modern conception of the source and sanction of law and order; and an institution of commanding energy and authority to impose this modern definition of Right upon the severed parts and faculties of our disordered life.

It is of course impossible to believe that any institution of commanding au-

thority can be brought into existence merely because discreet men see the need of it. Their discretion should go deeper. They should understand that an organ necessary to sustain the life of a living body must in the nature of things be already in existence in some vestigial or prophetic shape. Accordingly I have spent a quarter of a century in making intimate acquaintance with the organs and functions that belong to what may be called the physiology of modern society. I have submitted to every professional discipline that seemed likely to help toward the discovery of the true emotional centre or vital plexus of modern communities—and to many other

disciplines that are not called professional. I have absorbed myself by turns in the practice and routine of the law, the church, journalism, official life, finance, commerce, engineering, agriculture—caring for each as if it were all, and turning away from each not in distaste or flagrant disability—but because I was pressed on to finish the search I had undertaken.

And now I am through; I have found what I was looking for—as anybody else might have done, with like persistence.

In attempting to exhibit to others what I have discovered I am assisted by the moving argument of events, written in the head-lines of all the newspapers.

*Part II in the group of three articles by Mr. Ferguson will appear next month under the title "The Epiphany of Power."*

## JERUSALEM RETAKEN

BY NORREYS JEPHSON O'CONOR

ABOVE the pounding of the winter sea,  
 From far off on the bloody Continent,  
 Where men are crazed by war's wild agony,  
 I heard, as though a mighty instrument  
 Sighed with the winds' rebellious discontent,  
 The voices of the knights of four crusades,  
 Murmurous men's voices, in one shouting blent  
 With clank of armour and the clash of blades,  
 As though ten thousand spirits from the shades  
 Again were quickened, and were heartening them  
 Who, putting by a hundred peaceful trades,  
 In the world's adventure took Jerusalem.  
 "Brothers in arms, what boots it now our loss,  
 When from her towers floats the Christian cross?"