

THE SHIBBOLETH OF LIBERTY.

IN the month of April, 1776, the Reverend Martin Sherlock, as may be read at large in his "Letters from an English Traveler," paid a visit to Voltaire at Ferney, and was "treated with great civility and invited to dinner the next day." He presented himself at that time, accordingly, and found the unvenerable octogenarian arrayed in white cloth shoes, woolen stockings, red breeches, nightgown and waistcoat of blue linen, a grizzle wig with three ties, and over it a silk nightcap embroidered with gold and silver. "As we sat down to dinner," Mr. Sherlock relates, "M. de Voltaire said in English, 'We are here for liberty and property.'" It does not appear what meaning these words conveyed to the traveler, nor, indeed, whether they conveyed any. Mr. Carlyle, who quotes them in his "Life of Frederick the Great," judges that they were "a parody of some old speech in Parliament." I venture to think otherwise. Voltaire himself, in his "*Mémoires*," seems to have indicated their true sense. He had fixed his dwelling at Ferney, he tells us, to obtain that security for his wealth, that freedom of person, speech, and action which, as he had learned by experience, were somewhat ill assured in France and in Prussia. "Here," he writes, "I live in peaceful opulence and in the extreme independence," that is, in that full enjoyment of liberty and property for which, as he said in his somewhat halting English, he had gone there.

So much as to the true meaning of this saying of Voltaire's. The matter is worth clearing up, perhaps, for the phrase is full of significance, and may with advantage be considered a little. Whatever may be our feelings toward the patriarch of the *philosophes*, thus much is beyond question, that he possessed one of the clearest intellects which the world has ever seen. It is true that clearness does not necessarily imply profundity; nay, more, that absolute lucidity is often found in combination with ex-

treme shallowness. And probably, in the present day, the greatest admirer of Voltaire would not claim that any great depth of thought was among his endowments. But, however that may be, what he really did see of any subject lay before him as in sunlight; and this, indeed, is one great secret of the perfection of his literary form. The juxtaposition of liberty and property in his mind, we may be quite sure, was not fortuitous; although it has been reserved for thinkers of other schools to show how close the connection is. We know now, as a matter of fact, that at the dawn of human history personal freedom and single ownership can hardly be said to have existed at all; that the unit of archaic society was not the individual, but the family, whose head possessed despotic power over its members; that common, not individual, possession prevailed; that for long ages the unemancipated son differed in nothing from a slave. The history of civilization, whatever else it may be, is certainly the history of the gradual growth of personal liberty and of private property. The two things arose together, they developed together, they stand together, and they fall together. Property is nothing else than liberty realized. Laboulaye has excellently observed:

“Liberty and property are related to each other as the fruit to the tree, or as the crop to the toil of the agriculturist. If you touch the one, you touch the other. The stroke which kills one, kills both. Consult experience. What are the free countries? Those which respect property. What are the rich countries? Those which respect liberty.”

Property, then, is liberty realized. And, I suppose, liberty is most commonly conceived as the power of doing what one likes with one's own. To pursue one's own good in one's own way, is Mr. Mill's account of individual freedom; its proper limitation being that we do not interfere with others in the pursuit of their own good in their own way—a limitation not altogether easy to respect in a world where the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest are primary laws of life. And, in practice, pursuing one's own good in one's own way means, very generally, putting as much money as one can in one's purse without bringing one's self into the police court. For with money those goods of life which are the well-nigh universal aims of men may be, to a large extent, procured. “*Humana divinaque pulchris*

divitiis parent." To do what one likes with one's own, and to have as much as possible of one's own to do what one likes with—that, I take it, is the ideal of life usually set before themselves by those who are commonly accounted men of understanding. That is the liberty wherewith we are made free by the much-boasted civilization of the nineteenth century, which has so largely converted business into schemes of gambling called "speculation," and into processes of fraud on "the windy side of the law."

If we pass from private life to the public order, the most common and popular notion of the state is that it is a machine for securing person and property, in the unfettered employment of which at one's own will liberty is held to reside. This is supposed to be best attained by what is called "self-government," or "representative government"; the principle accepted being, as Mr. Mill expresses it, that the nation does not need to be protected against itself; that there is no fear of its tyrannizing over itself. I suppose Rousseau must be held to have most clearly formulated this doctrine in his receipt for making a constitution, which is as follows:

"To find a form of association which defends and protects with the public force the person and property of each partner, and by which each, while uniting himself to all, still obeys only himself, and is as free as he was before."

In Rousseau's philosophy, liberty is conceived of as lawlessness. That is supposed to be the natural condition of man—his birth-right, of which civilization has deprived him.

"I am as free as nature first made man,
Ere the base laws of servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran."

No shibboleth is commoner at the present day than this of liberty. And the vast majority of the people who use it understand by it the power of doing what one likes, or freedom from constraint by law.

Now, I take leave to say that this is an extremely false conception of liberty. I say that liberty does not reside in lawlessness. I say that law is not its opposite, but its essential con-

dition. And I say that this is universally true—true in the political order, true in the ethical order, true in the physical order. “Nothing is that errs from law.” Everywhere, to ascertain and obey the law is the one way to freedom. Let us consider it a little in detail.

And, first, take the physical sciences. The deeper our insight into nature, the profounder is our apprehension of the great truth that law reigns throughout the universe, dominating the organic and the inorganic, the smallest things and the greatest, the most complex and the simplest, the seemingly most mutable and capricious and the apparently most fixed and stable; penetrating all spheres of knowledge, all realms of nature, all time, and all space. The great achievement of physicists, in these latter days, has been to demonstrate the continuity of natural law. Even at the risk of putting before my readers what is already familiar to them, let me give one instance of what I am saying, from a book which, I remember, greatly fascinated me when a boy, namely, Sir John Herschell’s admirable little volume on astronomy. He is speaking of the planetary inequalities known to physical astronomy by the name of “perturbations.” When Newton first reasoned his way from the broad features of the celestial motions up to the law of universal gravitation, as affecting all matter and as rendering every particle in the universe subject to the influence of every other, it was impossible for him, owing to the undeveloped state of physical astronomy, to extend his investigations to the mutual perturbations of the planets. But, as Sir John Herschell tells us,

“What Newton left undone, his successors have accomplished; and, at this day, there is not a single perturbation, great or small, which observation has ever detected, which has not been traced up to its origin in the mutual gravitation of the parts of our system, and been minutely accounted for, in its amount and value, by strict calculation on Newton’s principles.”

Now, that process which we call the law of gravitation may stand for a type of the laws of nature in general. These laws are facts everywhere within the limits of physical science. Consider the supreme law of attraction. The planet Jupiter is 386,000,000 miles distant from the earth, yet our planet feels its attraction, and is caused thereby to deviate from her appointed

way round the sun. Again, an electric explosion in the sun makes a magnet on the earth shudder and tremble.

And here let me note the misconception, so prevalent in these days of loose thinking and of looser writing, as to those laws of nature of which we have been speaking. The proper meaning of law is "that which necessarily is." In physical science, necessity has no place. The only sense in which mere physicists have any right whatever to speak of laws, is the sense of ascertained sequences or co-ordinations of phenomena. I freely grant, or rather I strenuously maintain, that the laws of nature are much more than that. But if we wish to know what more they are, we must turn aside from the physicist and inquire of the metaphysician or of the theologian. "The order of nature," St. Augustine tells us, "is the will of God"—"*Dei voluntas est rerum natura.*" The word "cosmos" is excellently explained by Rothe as "*die als zweckvoll gedachte universitas rerum*"—the universe considered as full of purpose. It is an immense variety of causes and forces, issuing from the Infinite and Eternal and tending to return to him by virtue of the supreme law of finality. With which agrees the dictum of Leibnitz, that finality is the light and life of all science. And this age of ours, when astronomy exhibits the majestic harmony of the illimitable universe, when geology reveals the astounding metamorphoses through which our earth has passed, when paleontology lifts the veil from the vast series of changes that have raised our race from its prehuman beginnings to its present height of civilization, when, in a word, all sciences tell the same tale of progressive evolution—surely this is not the age in which materialism should quench the light that illumines the whole scene of nature and that gives us its only rational explanation.

Nobler was the conception of the Hebrew poet, who, in the childhood of the world, revealed the divine concept to his countrymen as Yahveh—he who makes all to be. The laws of nature are necessary, because they proceed from the necessary Being. They are what they are, because he is what he is. "He discreetly veils himself," sings Schiller, "in eternal laws"—"*Bescheiden verhüllt er sich in ewigen Gesetzen.*" Veils himself, and yet manifests himself. For those laws are expressions of

supreme reason; they are emanations from him who is the Truth, of whom all truth is part. Therefore they are, in the strictest sense, divine. And precisely because they are divine, do they rule us. By learning them, and by conforming himself to them, a man emancipates himself from physical fatality and "breaks his birth's invidious bar"; and so Lord Bacon's dictum, "*Natura, non nisi parendo, vincitur.*" In the natural sciences there is no liberty save in obedience to their laws, eternally true and abiding forever. Here, assuredly, it holds good that "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Unquestionably, then, in the physical order, liberty does not consist in doing what one likes. As little does it in the moral order. Here, too, the essential condition of liberty is obedience to law—a doctrine widely discredited in the present day, as I am well aware. Many and influential are the teachers of hedonism, of utilitarianism, of sensism, in various forms, who labor to show that the moral law, in any intelligible sense of the word, has no existence. And the people who hear them gladly are an exceeding great multitude. We may take as a type of them Mr. John Morley, who in his interesting work on "Compromise," uncompromisingly declares: "Moral principles, when they are true, are at bottom only generalizations from experience." But generalizations from experience cannot possibly be, in any real sense, laws. They are merely indications of what is useful or expedient. They may suggest; they cannot command. They may furnish motives; they cannot impose obligations. And the essence of law is necessity. In physical law that necessity is expressed by the word "must," in ethical law by the word "ought." No "generalizations from experience," no considerations derived from Mr. Mill's "utility," Mr. Herbert Spencer's "agreeable feeling," or Professor Huxley's "laws of comfort," can yield that word "ought."

This command of duty, this inner voice in man, Kant has well called "the categorical imperative," because of the unconditioned constraining force which it exercises over us. According to his admirable teaching, the one only worthy motive of action for man, as a moral being, is the moral law speaking to us from within, through conscience. And ethical freedom consists in

this: that a man emancipate himself from the world of sense and its influences; that he renounce every outer material spring of action, and simply obey the heavenly calling. For the moral law is a divine order throughout the universe, "a just and acceptable and perfect Will," ruling over all, either by its mandates or by its penalties. To apprehend it, and to bring his own will into harmony with it, is the only means by which man can tend without obstruction to his true end, which is to live according to reason. To resist it is to fall into the base captivity of "the sensual and the dull," "slaves by their own compulsion." This ethical contest of volition is the sphere of freedom. The imperative dictate of the moral law implies the power to obey it. "Ought" is a meaningless word without "can." Freedom and necessity are closely interwoven. Will any one ever succeed in tracing the line of demarcation? Probably not, for the roots of freedom are in the domain of necessity.

But I must not here occupy myself with that profound question. It is enough, for our present purpose, to insist upon this primary verity, that, in the moral order, liberty is not independence of law; that, on the contrary, only in voluntary obedience to law is liberty realized. And the reason is because man is not, as Rousseau fabled, naturally good. Atavism is unquestionable truth. There is, Plato taught, a wild beast within us, always ready to overpower us. The wild beast, he added, must be tamed. In all of us there are evil instincts, vile passions, inordinate desires; "the law in our members," to use St. Paul's phrase, "warring against the law of our mind." We may choose which law we will obey, and in the choice lies our probation. But in obedience to the higher law alone is moral liberty. Universally true is the doctrine of Leibnitz, that God, in creating beings, placed within them the laws of their development. The law of man's development is ethical. In proportion as he follows it is he "man and master of his fate." According to the saying of another deep thinker, "*Summa Deo servitus, summa libertas*"—"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

And if we come to the political order, the like account of liberty holds good. Civil polity rests upon a moral basis, upon the belief that there is an eternal difference between good and evil,

that there are immutable laws of right and wrong, that there is a nature of things which is ethical, whence rights and duties spring. The moral order is the fundamental fact of social, as of individual, life. In that order is the true source of the authority exercised over us by the state. Man, as man, has no claim upon my obedience; only to the law of right, speaking through human ministers, is my submission due. And political freedom really means living under that law, for then we suffer no wrong. The stupidest of superstitions is the belief that liberty, in the public order, is the necessary product of any constitutional machinery, or of any form of government; and, in particular, that it is the inevitable result of government by numbers. Mr. Herbert Spencer is not without justification from current history when he asserts, in his "Study of Sociology," that "new democracy is but old despotism differently spelt." Long before him Hallam had written: "Popular, that is, numerous, bodies, are always prone to excess, both from the reciprocal influence of their passions and the consciousness of irresponsibility; for which reason a democracy, which is the absolute government of the majority, is, in general, the most tyrannical of all." To this add, if you will, the judgment of Goethe:

*"Alle Freiheits-Apostel sie waren mir immer zuwider,
Willkür suchte doch nur Jeder am Ende für sich."*

Yes, Goethe's clear eyes discerned the truth about those "apostles of freedom" who did so much, in his time, to retard the cause of true liberty in France. Their liberalism, it has been well observed, was the diminutive of liberty. They professed it much in the same way as that in which the sophists are said by Aristotle to have professed political philosophy, "without knowing what it is, and wherewithal it is concerned." Their practical application of it Rivarol rightly judged to consist in restricting the liberties of others. They had not the least glimpse of the great truth that liberty is a moral good, having its root in the elemental reason, in virtue of which a man is a law unto himself. They supposed that it was a mere result of mechanism cunningly devised by constitution-mongers. Surely it is high time now for the world to learn the lesson that representative institutions,

even if they are a reality, and not, as too often happens, an imposture, can do no more than express the mind of the represented. They are but the instruments and pledges of liberty; they are not liberty itself. A very clear and acute thinker, the late Mr. Bagehot, judged their chief advantage over despotism to be in this, that they compel discussion before action is taken. Unquestionably, discussion is an invaluable security of political freedom, if it be rational, that is, if it recognize those "moral laws of nature and of nations" which afford the only true guarantees of individual right, the only effectual protection for the legitimate employment of the energies of human personality. To the ever-deepening apprehension of those laws, as the primary facts of public and of individual life, I confess that I look for the growth of true freedom. Here, too, it holds good that "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Well worthy, in this connection, of being deeply pondered, are certain words of Mr. Carlyle:

"It is not mendacities, conscious or other, that the divine powers will patronize, or even, in the end, put up with at all. . . . On the great scale, and on the small, and in all seasons, circumstances, scenes, and situations, where a son of Adam finds himself, that is true, and even a sovereign truth. And whoever does *not* know it, human charity to him (were such always possible) would be that he were furnished with handcuffs as part of his outfit in the world, and put under guidance of those who do. Yes; to him, I should say, a private pair of handcuffs were much usefuller than a ballot-box, were the times once settled again, which they are far from being!"

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IS VERSE IN DANGER?

WE are passing through a period obviously unfavorable to the development of the art of poetry. A little while ago there was an outburst of popular appreciation of living verse, but this is now replaced, for the moment, by an almost ostentatious indifference. These alternations of curiosity and disdain deceive no one who looks at the history of literature with an eye which is at all philosophical. It is easy to say, as is commonly said, that they depend on the merit of the poetry which is being produced. But this is not always, or even often, the case. About twenty years ago a ferment of interest and enthusiasm was called forth, all over the English-speaking world, by the early writings of Mr. Swinburne and by those of the late Mr. Rossetti. This was deserved by the merit of those productions; but the disdain which, twenty years earlier, the verse of Mr. Robert Browning and Mr. Matthew Arnold had met with, cannot be so accounted for. It is wiser to admit that sons never look at life with their fathers' eyes, and that taste is subject to incessant and almost regular fluctuations. At the present moment, though men should sing with the voice of angels, the barbarian public would not listen, and a new Milton would probably be less warmly welcomed in 1890 than a Pomfret was two centuries ago or a Bowles was in 1790. Literary history shows that a demand for poetry does not always lead to a supply, and that a supply does not always command a market. He who doubts this fact may compare the success of Herrick with that of Erasmus Darwin.

The only reason for precluding a speculation on the future of the art of poetry with these remarks, is to clear the ground of any arguments based on the merely momentary condition of things. The eagerness or coldness of the public, the fertility or exhaustion of the poets, at this particular juncture, are elements of no real importance. If poetry is to continue to be one of the living arts of humanity, it does not matter an iota whether