VII.

POLITICAL FETICHISM.

[FROM THE READER FOR JUNE 10, 1855.]
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A HINDOO, who, before beginning his day’s work, salaams to a bit of plastic clay, out of which, in a few moments, he has extemporized a god in his own image, is an object of amazement to the European. We read with surprise bordering on scepticism of worship done by machinery, and of prayers which owe their supposed efficacy to the motion given by the wind to the papers they are written on. When told how certain of the Orientals, if displeased with their wooden deities, take them down and beat them, men laugh and wonder.

Why should men wonder? Kindred superstitions are exhibited by their fellows every day—superstitions that are, indeed, not so gross, but are intrinsically of the same nature. There is an idolatry which, instead of carving the object of its worship out of dead matter, takes humanity for its raw material, and expects, by moulding a mass of this humanity into a particular form, to give it powers or properties quite different from those it had before it was moulded. In the one case as in the other, the raw material is, as much as may be, disguised; there are decorative appliances by which the savage helps himself to think that he has something more than wood before him; and
the citizen gives to the political agencies he has helped to create, such imposing externals and distinctive names expressive of power as serve to strengthen his belief in the benefits prayed for. Some faint reflection of that "divinity" which "doth hedge a king" spreads down through every state department to the lowest rank, so that, in the eyes of the people, even the policeman puts on along with his uniform a certain indefinable power—nay, the mere lead symbols of authority excite reverence in spite of better knowledge; a legal form of words seems to have something especially binding in it, and there is a preternatural efficiency about a government-stamp.

The parallelism is still more conspicuous between the persistency of faith in the two cases, notwithstanding perpetual disappointments. It is difficult to perceive how graven images, that have been thrashed for not responding to their worshipper's desire, should still be reverenced and petitioned; but the difficulty of conceiving this is diminished when we remember how, in their turns, all the idols in our political pantheon undergo castigations for failing to do what was expected of them, and are nevertheless daily looked up to in the trust'ul hope that future prayers will be answered. The stupidity, the slowness, the perversity, the dishonesty of officialism, in one or other of its embodiments, are demonstrated afresh in almost every newspaper that issues. Probably half the leading articles written have for texts some absurd official blunder, some exasperating official delay, some astounding corruption, some gross official injustice, some incredible official extravagance. And yet these whippings, in which balked expectation continually vents itself, are immediately followed by renewed faith; the benefits that have not come are still hoped for, and prayers for others are put up. Along with proof that the old State machines are in themselves inert, and owe
such powers as they seem to have to the public opinion that sets their parts in motion, there are continually proposed new state machines of the same type as the old. This inexhaustible credulity is counted on by men of the widest political experience. Lord Palmerston, who probably knows his public better than any other man, lately said, in reply to a charge made in the House—"I am quite convinced that no person belonging to the government, in whatever department he may be, high or low, would be guilty of any breach of faith in regard to any matter confided to him." To assert as much in the face of facts continually disclosed, implies that Lord Palmerston knows well that men's faith in officialism survives all adverse evidence.

In which case are the hopes from state agency realized? One might have thought that the vital interests at stake would have kept the all-essential apparatus for administering justice up to its work; but they do not. On the one hand, here is a man wrongly convicted, and afterward proved to be innocent, who is "pardon ed" for an offence he did not commit; and has this as consolation for his unmerited suffering. On the other hand, here is a man whose grave delinquencies a Lord Chancellor overlooks, on partial restitution being made—may more, countenances the granting of a pension to him. Proved guilt is rewarded, while proved innocence is left without compensation for pains borne and fortunes blasted! This marvellous antithesis, if not often fully paralleled in the doings of officialism as administrator of justice, is, in endless cases, paralleled in part. The fact that imprisonment is the sentence on a boy for stealing a pennyworth of fruit, while thousands of pounds may be transferred from a public into a private purse without any positive punishment being adjudged, is an anomaly kept in countenance by numerous
other judicial acts. Theoretically, the state is a protector of the rights of subjects; practically, the state continually plays the part of aggressor. Though it is a recognized principle of equity that he who makes a false charge shall pay the costs of the defence, yet, until quite recently, the Crown has persisted in refusing to pay the costs of citizens against whom it has brought false charges. Nay, worse, deliberate attempts used to be made to establish charges by corrupt means. Within the memory of those now living, the Crown, in excise-prosecutions, bribed juries; when the verdict was for the Crown, the custom was to give double fees; and the practice was not put an end to until the counsel for a defendant announced in open court that the jury should have double fees if their verdict was for his client!

Not alone in the superior parts of our judicial apparatus is this ill-working of officialism so thrust on men's notice as to have become proverbial; not alone in the life-long delays and ruinous expenses that have made Chancery a word of dread; not alone in the extravagances of bankruptcy courts, that lead creditors carefully to shun them; not alone in that uncertainty which makes men submit to gross injustice rather than risk the still greater injustice which the law will, as likely as not, inflict on them; but down through the lower divisions of the judicial apparatus are all kinds of failures and absurdities daily displayed. It may be fairly urged in mitigation of the scandals current respecting the police, that among so many men cases of misconduct and inefficiency must be frequent; but we might have expected the orders under which they act to be just and well considered. Very little inquiry shows that they are not. There is a story current that, in the accounts of an Irish official, a small charge for a telegram, which an emergency had called for, was objected to at the head office in
London, and, after a long correspondence, finally allowed, but with the understanding that in future no such item would be passed, unless the department in London had authorized it! We cannot vouch for this story, but we can vouch for something which gives credibility to it. A friend who had been robbed by his cook went to the police-office, detailed the case, gave good reasons for inferring the direction of her flight, and requested the police to telegraph, that she might be intercepted. He was told, however, that they could not do this without authority; and this authority was not to be had without a long delay. The result was that the thief, who had gone to the town at the time supposed, escaped, and has not since been heard of. Take another function assumed by the police—the regulation of traffic. Daily, all through London, ten thousand fast-going vehicles, with hard-pressed men of business in them, are stopped by a sprinkling of slow-going carts and wagons. Greater speed in these comparatively few carts and wagons, or limitation of them to early and late hours, would immensely diminish the evil. But, instead of dealing with these really great hindrances to traffic, the police deal with that which is practically no hindrance. Men with advertisement-boards were lately forbidden to walk about, on the groundless plea that they are in the way; and incapable, prevented thus from getting a shilling a day, were driven into the ranks of paupers and thieves. Worse cases may be observed. For years past there has been a feud between the police and the orange girls, who are chased hither and thither because they are said to be obstructions to foot-passengers. Meanwhile, in some of the chief thoroughfares, may constantly be seen men standing with toys, which they delude children and their parents into buying by pretending that the toys make certain sounds, which they themselves make, and when the police, quietly
watching this obtainment of money under false pretences, are asked why they do not interfere, they reply that they have no orders. Admirable contrast! Trade dishonestly, and you may collect a small crowd on the pavement without complaint being made that you interrupt the traffic. Trade honestly, and you shall be driven from the pavement-edge as an impediment—shall be driven to dishonesty!

One might have thought that the notorious inefficiency of officialism as a protector against injustice would have made men skeptical of its efficiency in other things. If here, where citizens have such intense interests in getting a function well discharged, they have failed through all these many centuries in getting it well discharged—if this agency, which is in theory the guardian of each citizen, is in so many cases his enemy, that going to law is suggestive of impoverishment and possible ruin, it might have been supposed that officialism would scarcely be expected to work in all directions where the interests at stake are less intense. But so strong is the influence of political fetishism, that neither these experiences, nor the parallel experiences which every state-department affords, diminish men's faith. For years past there has been thrust before them the fact that, of the funds of Greenwich Hospital, one-third goes to maintain the sailors, while two-thirds go in administration; but this and other such facts do not stop their advocacy of more public administrations. The parable of straining at gnats and swallowing camels they see absolutely paralleled by officialism, in the red-tape particularity with which all minute details are enforced, and the astounding carelessness with which the accounts of a whole department, like the Patent Office, are left utterly uncontrolled; and yet we continue to hear men propose government-audits as checks for mercantile companies! No diminution of confidence seems to result from the disclos-
ure of stupidities which even a wild imagination would scarcely have thought possible; instance the method of promotion lately made public, under which a clerk in one branch of a department takes the higher duties of some deceased superior clerk, without any rise of salary, while some clerk in another branch of the department gets the rise of salary without any increase in his responsibilities!

Endless a.e these evils and absurdities, and surviving generation after generation, as they do, spite of commissions and reports and debates, there is an annual crop of new schemes for government agencies that are expected by citizens to work just as they propose them to work. With a system of army promotion which insures an organized incompetence, but which survives perpetual protests; with a notoriously ill-constituted admiralty, of which the doings are stock-subjects of ridicule; with a church that maintains its most effete formulas, notwithstanding almost universal repudiation of them; there are daily fresh demands for more law-established appliances. With building acts under which arise houses less stable than those of the last generation; with coal-mine inspection that does not prevent coal-mine explosions; with railway inspection that has for its accomplishment plenty of railway accidents—with these and other such failures continually displayed, there still prevails what M. Guizot rightly calls that "gross delusion, a belief in the sovereign power of political machinery."

A great service would be done by any man who would analyze the legislation, say of the last half century, and compare the expected results of Acts of Parliament with their proved results. He might make it an instructive revelation by simply taking all the preambles, and observing how many of the evils to be rectified were evils produced by preceding enactments. His chief difficulty would
be that of getting within any moderate compass the immense number of cases in which the benefits anticipated were not achieved, while unanticipated disasters were caused. And then he might effectively close his digest by showing what immense advantages have, in instance after instance, followed the entire cessation of legislative action; not, indeed, that such an accumulation of cases, however multitudinous and however conclusive, would have an appreciable effect on the average mind. Political fetishism will continue so long as men remain without scientific discipline—so long as they recognize only proximate causes, and never think of the remoter and more general causes by which their special agencies are set in motion. Until the thing which now usurps the name of education has been dethroned by a true education, having for its end to teach men the nature of the world they live in, new political delusions will grow up as fast as old ones are extinguished. But there is a select class existing, and a larger select class arising, on whom a work of the kind described would have an effect, and for whom it would be well worth while to write it.