

CHAPTER XXXIII

SOCIAL OLD AGE AND DEATH

NO belief is more generally accepted than that which assigns to nations periods of birth, youth, maturity, decline and death. We speak of the Americans as being a "young people", and the Chinese and Japanese as being "old peoples". We seem to carry in our minds a thought with regard to the United States, or Germany, or England, that each must in the nature of things pass away in a sort of social death, just as Hiram Perkins, Hans Schmidt and Thomas Atkins must pass away.

This is a most important belief—important if it be true, and equally important if it be false. For the decline of a people, like the senility of a man, absolves it from the obligation to be strong and prosperous. If bad government, pauperism, prostitution, evil man-

ON BOARD THE GOOD SHIP EARTH

ners and morals, poverty, plutocracy, oppression and industrial slavery come with the old age of a nation, just as baldness, weak knees, bad teeth, asthma, defective vision, palsy and accumulated capital come with the old age of a man, then what is the use of resisting these things?

Enormous inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power have arisen in the United States in a century. I believe that we should not have been so submissive to those things, had it not been for the deep-seated belief that they come "as the country gets older" as a matter of course. To be sure, our whole theory of government as accepted by the masses was opposed to the idea of plutocracy on the one hand and industrial slavery on the other; but a governmental theory is no match for an ancient notion, so deep-seated that it almost loses the character of belief, and approaches instinct in its nature—and so, we have gradually been abandoning our governmental theory of democracy as a recipe for universal prosperity. It is only

SOCIAL OLD AGE AND DEATH

with the rise of the spirit of "insurgency" in the last few years that the onward march of submission to privilege has been checked and turned back by the old ideas embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Again the faith in equality is spreading and strengthening—not in America only, but all over the world. Is it a rising tide which will ebb as the moon goes down, or one "which yearly gains upon the shore", and merely has "ebb and flow conditioning its march"?

If nations are born but to die, then it will ebb, and ebb, and finally go out in the dead neap tide of decay.

We are a young nation, but are we really a younger people than the Japanese? Not at all. When the forefathers of the Japanese were savages, so were ours. They made a half-emergence from barbarism while we still roamed woods with bulls' horns on our heads, and won manhood by killing in battle. But they halted while we went on; and when Perry broke the seals of the Island Empire, we had already passed them in most of the

ON BOARD THE GOOD SHIP EARTH

qualities which make up real civilization. Once "older" than we, they had become "younger". As a matter of real truth, so far as we know, all men are of equal racial age—that is while we are not bound to accept the theory of any account of the creation in literal form, perhaps, we have no reason to believe that one people has any more advantage or disadvantage over another in years than if we are actually descended from Adam. No matter where we live or how, as a matter of hereditary descent one human being has as long a pedigree as another.

We are the cells that make up the body of the social organism. We are as short-lived and as long-lived in the "young" nation as in the "old" one. Human beings are alike in all phases of human history—or if different, the differences are too slight for the historian's measuring instruments. When the Roman Empire staggered down to its fall like a great, magnificent, dying beast, it was composed of the same sort of men who lived under Numa Pompilius. No change takes place in the in-

SOCIAL OLD AGE AND DEATH

dividuals composing a society which prevents the organization from achieving a life as long as the endurance of the earth itself.

There is no analogy in nature, either, which would lead us to expect a beginning, a culmination and an end of a people. The bird societies of the islands of the sea last forever. The community of muskrats in a Minnesota swamp has lived just as it lives now since before the building of the pyramids. The prairie-dog town which persists in spite of gun, trap and poison on the arid plains of the United States was a flourishing community when Columbus landed at Cat Island. If the earth continues to yield its food, the animal community, while its individual membership changes constantly by births and deaths, lives like the cataract, which, changing momentarily, is always the same.

Indeed, the human society in its simpler and more animal forms is almost as stable as the empires of animals. There is no infancy, growth, maturity and decline of the savage tribe. It goes on and on like a wolf

ON BOARD THE GOOD SHIP EARTH

pack or hive of bees. It is only the civilized society which waxes, wanes and dies.

Doctor Alexis Carrel has learned how to keep alive the cells of which our bodies are composed, outside the body. Bits of lung, liver, kidney or muscle, live and grow under his microscope. But not forever—for the cells rid themselves of substances which finally poison them and bring their lives to an end. It is the old biological story—no living thing can exist in the waste products of its own body.

So it is with nations, empires and communities—in some way, under civilized conditions, they secrete toxins which destroy the organism. These poisons are slavery, plutocracy, monopoly, inequality, exploitation, poverty, luxury, discontent, degeneration and finally national death. Doctor Carrel takes the growing tissue from under his microscope's cover-glass and cleanses it of its poisoned surroundings. Then he gives it new "tissue juice" in which to grow—and it becomes "young" again—it grows faster than ever.

SOCIAL OLD AGE AND DEATH

The problem which civilization has never solved is that of cleansing our body politic of its toxins, and thus keeping it forever young. That it can be done there is no reason to doubt. Civilization is natural or it would not be forever repeating itself in human history. We have not found the way to make it perpetual, that is all. The empire, according to universal laws of evolution, is beset by greater dangers than is the tribe—being more complex it tends more strongly to disintegrate. But, as man is imperiously bidden by instinct to form nations and states, he must, by the exercise of his reason, find out the way to build them on bases of everlasting prosperity.

The evils which wreck civilization are pretty well understood now. They lie mainly in the tendencies of men in communities to gain advantages over one another, and to use them to ends of oppression and exploitation. Society splits into two antagonistic wings—one composed of rich and powerful degenerates, the other of poor and destitute degenerates.

ON BOARD THE GOOD SHIP EARTH

A new era has dawned. We have still these two degenerate wings, but we have an immense middle class, and permeating all classes, we have a new science, a new love of truth, a new altruism, a new social conscience and a fund of arranged knowledge greater than that possessed by all other ages combined. We shall find the right way of collective life, this time, and a blessed immunity from the death that overtook the civilizations of the past.