

The Essence of True Justice^{*}

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I always speak with the greatest delight and satisfaction in the presence of my friends the members of the Vegetarian Society. With them I am quite at my ease, I have no reservation, I have no dissatisfaction. This is not the case when I speak for my friends the Anti-Vivisectionists, the Anti-Vaccinationists, the Spiritualists, or the advocates of freedom for women. I always feel that such of these as are not abstainers from flesh-food have unstable ground under their feet, and it is my great regret that, when helping them in their good works, I cannot openly and publicly maintain what I so ardently believe—that the Vegetarian movement is the bottom and basis of all other movements towards Purity, Freedom, Justice, and Happiness.

I think it was Benjamin D'Israeli who said that we had stopped short at Comfort, and had mistaken it for Civilisation, content to increase the former at the expense of the latter. Not a day passes without the perspicacity of this remark coming forcibly before me. Comfort, luxury, indulgence, and ease abound in this age, and in this part of the world; but, alas! Of Civilisation we have as yet acquired but the veriest rudiments. Civilisation means not mere physical ease, but moral and spiritual Freedom—Sweetness and Light—with which the customs of the age are in most respects at dire enmity. I named just now freedom for women. One of the greatest hindrances to the advancement and enfranchisement of the sex is due to the luxury of the age, which demands so much time, study, money, and thought to be devoted to what is called the "pleasures of the table." A large class of men seems to believe that women were created chiefly to be "housekeepers," a term which they apply almost exclusively to ordering dinners and superintending their preparation. Were this office connected only with the garden, the field, and the orchard, the occupation might be truly said to be refined, refining, and worthy of the best and most gentle lady in the land. But, connected as it is actually with slaughter-houses, butchers' shops, and dead carcasses, it is an occupation at once unwomanly, inhuman, and barbarous in the extreme. Mr. Ruskin has said that the criterion of a beautiful action or of a noble thought *is* to be found in song, and that an action about which we cannot make a poem is not fit for humanity. Did he ever apply this test to flesh-eating? Many a lovely poem, many a beautiful picture, may be made about gardens and fruit-gathering, and the bringing home of the golden produce of harvest, or the burden of the vineyards, with groups of happy boys and girls, and placid, mild-eyed oxen bending their necks under their fragrant load. But I defy anyone to make beautiful verse or to paint beautiful pictures about slaughterhouses, running with streams of steaming blood, and terrified, struggling animals felled to the ground with pole-axes; or of a butcher's stall hung round with rows of gory corpses, and folks in the midst of them bargaining with the ogre who keeps the place for legs and shoulders and thighs and heads of the murdered creatures! What horrible surroundings are these for gentle and beautiful ladies! The word "wife" means, in the old Saxon tongue, a "weaver," and that of "husband" means, of course, a "husbandman." "Lady," too, is a word originally signifying "loaf-giver." In these old words have come down to us a glimpse of a fair picture of past times. The wife, or weaver, is the spinner, the maker, whose function it is to create forms of beauty and decorative art, to brighten, adorn, and make life lovely. Or if, as "lady" of the house, we look on her in the light of the provider and dispenser of good things, it is not loathsome flesh of beasts that she gives, but bread—sweet and pure, and innocent type of all human food. As for the man, he is the cultivator of the ground, a sower of grain, a tiller of the field. I would like to see these old times back, with all their sweet and tender Arcadian homeliness, in the place of the ugly lives which most folks lead in our modern towns, whose streets are hideous, above all at night with their crowded gin-palaces, blood-smearred butchers' stalls, reeling drunkards, and fighting women. People talk to me sometimes about peace conventions, and ask me to join

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societies for putting down war. I always say: "You are beginning at the wrong end, and putting the cart before the horse." If you want people to leave off fighting like beasts of prey, you must first get them to leave off living like beasts of prey. You cannot reform institutions without first reforming men. Teach men to live as human beings ought to live, to think wisely, purely, and beautifully, and to have noble ideas of the purpose and meaning of Humanity, and they will themselves reform their institutions. Any other mode of proceeding will result only in a patchwork on a worthless fabric, a whitening of a sepulchre full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Flesh-meats and intoxicating drinks—the pabulum of Luxury—are the baneful coil of hydra-headed Vice, whose ever-renewing heads we vainly strike, while leaving the body of the dragon still untouched. Strike there—at the heart—at the vitals of the destructive monster, and the work of Heracles, the Redeemer, is accomplished. [...]

I have stood so often on this and on other platforms throughout England, as well as in Scotland and Switzerland, to speak to my friends about the physiological, chemical, anatomical, and economical aspects of the non-flesh diet, that tonight, for a change, I am going to take another and a higher line. We will, therefore, if you please, take "as read" all the vindications of our mode of living furnished by various scientific arguments: that we have the organisation of the fruit-eater; that the constituent elements of vegetable food furnish all the necessary force and material of bodily vigour; that it is cheaper to buy beans and meal than to buy pork and suet; that land goes further and supports more people under a vegetable cultivation than when laid out for pasture, and so forth. All these arguments, more or less eloquently and clearly formulated, most of you have by heart, and those who have not may buy them all for sixpence of the Vegetarian Society. So I am going to talk to you tonight about quite another branch of our subject, the loftiest and fruitfulest branch of the whole tree. I am going to tell you that I see in the doctrine we are here to preach the very culmination and crown of the Gentle Life, that Life which, in some way, we all of us in our best moments long to live, but which it is only given now and *again* to some great and noble soul, almost divine, fully to realise and glorify in the eyes of the world. I said just now that "in our best moments" we all long to lead the Ideal Life. Some of us have many "best moments," and long ones too: moments that dominate and top our work-a-day efforts always, like a light of stars overhead, through which the Heaven looks down on us. Some of us, again, have very few "best moments," short and feeble, like lights over a marsh, never steadfast, always flickering in and out, and paling and flitting when we get abreast of them. With this class of persons the Ideal is very faint and unstable, while with the former it is strong and masterful. Societies like ours are made to encourage the "best moments" of the weakly, and to glorify those of the strong. Societies like ours are made to train soldiers and provide them with leaders to fight for the Ideal. Beginners and feeble folk cannot stand without encouragement in the teeth of a hot fire, nor rush upon the enemy unless some hero heads them and shows the way. The Ideal Life, the Gentle Life, has many enemies, and the weapons used by these are various. They are pseudo-scientific, pseudo-religious, pseudo-philanthropic, pseudo-aesthetic, and pseudo-utilitarian. And the enemies are of all ranks, professions, and interests. But of all the weapons used, the most deadly, the most terrific, is—Ridicule. Yes, Ridicule slays its tens of thousands!

To be laughed at is far more awful to average mortals than to be preached at, groaned at, cursed at. It is the weapon which the journalists almost always handle with the greatest facility. These are the men who laugh for their living. They have replaced, in modern days, the paid domestic jesters of olden times. Every town keeps its paid jester now in the office of its local paper, just as, a few centuries back, great nobles kept their man in cap and motley to crack jokes on the guests at table. We have not changed in manners, but in manner only. And the very first thing that Reformers have to do is to get over minding the man in motley. Let him laugh. He cannot argue. Laughing is his stock-in-trade. If he laugh not too coarsely, and avoid blaspheming, he is, after all, very harmless. It is his privilege to laugh at all that is new and unwonted. All children do that, and the man in motley is but a clever child. Why let him knock you down with his fool's truncheon? Wince, and shrink, and expostulate: he sees his advantage then, and belabours you pitilessly. But heed him not, and go on doing your work

with a great heart as though it were a royal thing to do, and he will soon be off to some other quarry. Only be sure in your own mind that you are *right*; only be set in dead earnest on keeping that royal thing in clear view and working up to it, and the Ideal will reward you by becoming the Real and Actual. It is not necessary to go very far afield to find this royal work. It does not lie—for most of us—in setting out to accomplish some vast task. Most of us will find it in just simply and calmly shaping out and lifting up our own lives so as to beautify and perfect and unify them, being just and merciful to all men and all creatures. We Vegetarians carry the Ideal a stage lower, and therefore a stage higher than do other folk. We find the duty to the lowliest the duty completest in blessing. Let me tell you a story. Once, in the far-away old days of romance, there was a Christian Knight of peerless repute, whose greatest longing and dearest hope it was to have the Vision of the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail is the name given in chivalry to the Chalice of the Altar containing the Sacred Blood of Christ, and this was said to be shown in a Vision by God to those whom He judged worthy of the sight of this supreme symbol of His Grace, in the moment when they pleased Him most. Well, the Knight of whom I speak, in pursuance of the Object of his desire, joined the Crusaders, and performed prodigies of valour and wonderful feats of arms in battle against the Infidels, but all in vain; he had no Vision and remained unblest. Then he left Palestine and went and laid aside his sword in a monastery, and lived a life of long penance and meditation, desiring always a sight of the Holy Grail. But that, too, was in vain. At last, sorrowful and almost despairing, he returned homeward to his domain. As he drew near his castle, he saw gathered about its gates a crowd of beggars, sick, maimed, aged and infirm, old men, women, babes, and children—all who were left behind on the land while the hale and hearty went to fight the Saracens. Then he said to his squire: "What are these?" "They are beggars," the squire answered, "who can neither work nor fight. They clamour for bread; but why heed such a herd of useless, despicable wretches? Let me drive them away." "Nay," said the Knight, touched to the heart, "I have slain many abroad, let me save some at home. Call these poor folk together, give them bread and drink; let them be warmed and clothed." And lo! As the words passed his lips, a light from heaven fell upon him, and looking up, he saw, at last, the longed-for vision of the Holy Grail! Yes, that humble, simple, homely duty of charity was more precious in the Eyes Divine than all his deeds of prowess in the field of arms, or his long devotions in the cloister!

And so with us. Who so poor, so oppressed, so helpless, so mute and uncared for, as the dumb creatures who serve us—they who, but for us, must starve, and who have no friend on earth if man be their enemy? Even these are not too low for pity, nor too base for justice. And, without fear of irreverence or slight on the holy name that Christians love, we may truly say of them, as of the captive, the sick, and the hungry: "Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto me."

For, as St. Francis of Assisi has told us, all the creatures of God's hand are brethren. "My sisters the birds," he was wont to say, "My brothers the kine in the meadows." The essential of true justice is the sense of solidarity. All creatures, from highest to lowest, stand hand in hand before God. Nor shall we ever begin to spiritualise our lives and thoughts, to lighten and lift ourselves higher, until we recognise this solidarity, until we learn to look upon the creatures of God's hand, not as mere subjects for hunting and butchery, for dissecting and experimentation, but as *living souls* with whom, as well as with the sons of men, God's covenant is made.