



## The New Zealand Graphic

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THE prodigal son has always been a favourite subject for Sabbath homilies and sensational novels. The type is persistent and reappears profusely illustrated, varying in the details but substantially the same, in each succeeding generation. In the received version there is a delightfully happy termination to the story similar to that of the conventional novel, where we are generally left to assume that the earthly passage of the characters thereafter is all that our best wishes could desire for them. If the prodigal son did turn over a new leaf and abstain from making ducks and drakes of what was left of the family patrimony, he was an exception to the generality of his class. As for the prodigal daughter, there is no parable illustrating her career, though, of course, a prodigal son cannot successfully pursue his high calling without some assistance from the other side. Life is a joint-stock concern, and unless a man is a money-grubber, or a hermit, or utterly dionysiac, he generally finds some woman to cheer, after a fashion, his progress on whatever course he may be pursuing. Of all evils to the still sane mind, solitude is the worst. Even among drunkards there are degrees of irreclaimability. Of these the sottish recluse is the worst. The temporary association of the disreputable is at least an indication of still surviving human sympathy.

In nearly every community, from time to time, there appears the spectacle of a man perversely squandering the patrimony he has inherited in pleasures which are not merely questionable, but incomprehensible to his fellows. It is very rarely that a woman of means is seen doing the same things. Such a one, so far from getting her mind unhinged by the acquisition of property, seems to become the more settled and economical in her ways, while being just as ready to sacrifice her independence of movement in the bonds of matrimony. When a woman has found a man upon whom she can, even tolerably, rely, she is content to jog along the usual conventional path with other matrons. In almost all cases where a woman has had a good start in life, sudden poverty or despair of men is responsible for her relapsing into devious paths.

There are, however, men whose prodigality seems to be in the blood, and who long after the age at which the effervescence of youth with its attendant extravagances disappears, continue to dissipate their means injuriously to themselves, their families, and their neighbours. As rotten carrion is to vultures, so are these scatter-goods the centre of attraction to the loathsome parasites of society who batten upon the weaknesses and follies of their fellows. In most cases the evil of their influence is not confined to the abominable example they set, and the encouragement they hold out to the worst elements of the community. It acts directly as a curse upon the wife and children, for whose well-being they are responsible, and whose patrimony often becomes involved in the general ruin of a surely collapsing household. Thanks to the reforming spirit of the age, the law has put it out of the power of an improvident husband to defraud his wife of her property or her earnings, but even yet the ignorance and pliancy of women often lead them into a deliberate renunciation of this advantage.

The sight of a prodigal, whether married or single, is at all times a melancholy one. In many cases the moral flaccidity of the simpleton is so pronounced, that to an ordinary mind it falls little short of a disease. Did the law afford a means of strengthening the arm of an outsider, many a relative or friend of the prodigal's family would intervene to stay a career fraught with destruction to him-

self and degradation to those whose right rearing is of vital importance to the state. But apart from moral suasion, which in most cases is worse than useless, the English law has no provision for forcibly arresting the declensions of a household. The liberty of the subject is far too precious a thing to be lightly trifled with for such a reason. A provision was, however, not unknown to the Roman law, which beneficently provided for the sequestration of a prodigal's estate on good cause being shown to the court by a relative or near friend. There it rested in the hands of a receiver, registrar, or master, and the income was doled out to him in amounts such as the court saw fit to decree.

In days like these, when the reforming spirit has almost thawed out the spirit peculiar to the hard-bound system of English common law, it is strange that so beneficial a measure should never yet have been enacted on our statute book. The absurdity of waiting until a prodigal is adjudged insane before sequestrating his estate is patent, for by that time there is usually little of which to catch hold. The folly of the law in falling behind legal cormorants, publicans, courtisans, and money-lenders in promptness to get hold of the property of a prodigal rests presumably upon the principle 'that a man can do what he likes with his own.' This principle may logically be also freely extended to infants and lunatics. When it is a mere question of time that a man will become thoroughly imbecile through debauchery, it seems ridiculous for the law to offer to put him under tutelage only after all chance of substantially benefiting him or his has disappeared and he has become a burden upon his relatives or the ratepayers. It is a plain case of locking the door after the horse is stolen.

Periodically, when the gigantic gooseberry and the monstrous mangel-wurzel are not on boom and the journalist is at his wits' end for the wherewithal to tickle the palates of his readers, he sitteth down and inditeth an epistle unto himself, plaintively asking what is the matter with the young generation. This lacrymose query he perfidiously baits with some such suggestive pseudonym as 'Jack's tather' or 'Sallie's nanma,' and fires it off in the face of a torpid and grumbling public. It is a salvo which never fails to wake the echoes around the highways and by-ways of the community, and set all the tea-rooms and offices of the place into a condition of extraordinary excitement.

The future is with the young. Nobody seems much concerned to ascertain whether the mothers and fathers of this present age, or the few grandmothers or grandfathers who survive as monuments of an incomparable past, are up to the former average of English parents and grandparents, or whether, if they keep on as they are going, they will be gathered into the bosom of our father Abraham without any demur on the part of St. Peter. By virtue of their survivorship, it is, perhaps, presumed that they are quite up to the sample of bygone Utopia. Possibly another reason may be that children are not particularly interested in reforming their progenitors, or that the progenitors think themselves perfect, or that the elder generation are regarded as hopelessly hardened and that therefore the supreme effort should be directed towards the generation whose minds are still susceptible of these tales of their grandfathers. As for old bachelors and old maids, they are the Hottentot and jettam of society, fit only for stuffing up the tomb and vacating the possessions, of which they make such a partial use. Hence the field is with the boys and the girls.

True is it that youth is interesting. Youth is most interesting to itself, especially in these colonies. Youth is also interesting to age everywhere. It is so delightfully wicked, and age rejoices in the fact that though it is (as it hopes) hastening to a land where there will be no sorrowing or sighing, or cause for complaint, it has not got there yet, and can still indulge in a parting grumble at the degeneracy of the rising generation. In the discussion age has considerably the advantage of the position. 'Look,' says age, 'at us; and we are nothing to those who have gone before.' This rather floors youth, for it is in the self-conscious stage, full of blind hopes and vague yearnings, seeking approbation, sensitive of falling short from its ideals. Age has ceased to hope strongly, or get greatly excited about anything. It has lost much of its enthusiasm and its passion, and its members put on a much more uni-

form appearance of decorous dulness than do the members of the young brigade at their outset on the march of life.

It is with old persons as with young, there is a constant demand for others to be good, only more so. Nothing is more remarkable than the rein people give to their imagination when it is a question of applying a test to the actions of their neighbour. He must be tried by their highest ideal. When it comes to be a question of sitting in judgment on themselves, then their own habits just fit the standard. Thus it happens that there arises periodically a clamour against the things which are, and a thoughtless glorification of the past. The generation which has attained to the dignity of maturity or old age lives to a great extent in its youth—in the period when it saw everything through rose-coloured spectacles, and was oblivious of its own shortcomings. It forgets the trouble it caused the generation which has now gone on to glory, perhaps even congratulates itself that that generation is with its incomparable virtues buried in the silence of the Great Unknown.

There is, however, always a pleasure in baiting the juniors, because they are ever ready to afford good sport. Thus, whenever the question, 'Is the coming race equal to the past?' crops up, it is productive of the most animated of discussions, in which everybody abuses everybody else through the medium of the genial editor, who chuckles at the dust he has so successfully raised. When the turmoil subsides society resumes its old aspect, neither better nor worse, which, seeing the multitudinous weekly sermons it practically ignores, is not surprising. Everybody, however, is the happier for the excitement, far transcending the delights of a good bout of scamall at afternoon tea, and feels that they have been assisting at the most satisfactory of occupations—that of telling your neighbour how good he ought to be.

These young colonies are excellent fields of experiment for the adventurous politician. In consequence of there being little or no debris of past ages encumbering the face of society, no picturesque ruins of crumbling but still persistent institutions, the colonies afford a sort of *tabula rasa* on which the politician can try his prentice hand in scrawling his pot-books and banners in initiation of the most advanced of social models. Sometimes these turn out well, and sometimes otherwise, but as the conditions of life are more simple than in older lands, the failure of any does not entail anything like a corresponding amount of disorganisation and suffering. In any case these offshoots of the British stock, being spared the curse of war and of standing armies through which Europe and America have had to pass in working out the problems of the race, should be ready to contribute in a peaceful way their quota towards the solution of the great impending questions of society.

Of these the employment of the unemployed is the chief. On this turns the future of society. Now that universal suffrage prevails, the voice of the loafer is a power in the land, and whether a person loafs of free will or of necessity, society will have to reckon with him. Only in communities where brute force, wielded by a wealthy minority, governs can the potently rich and the pitifully poor live peacefully side by side. In a society like ours, where there are no hired bayonets, and expression of opinion is free both in the press and at the polls, the crying question is the prevention of a slum and dangerous class. If such a moral cesspool accumulates, retribution will some day surely fall upon New Zealand.

The problem of the unemployed is simple enough in theory. Says society, 'He that will not work, neither shall he eat.' This, however, does not apply to the possessor of accumulated wealth. The next question is, 'What work is there?' It is ridiculous to condemn a person as an idler before it is known whether there is work for him which he can do. It is not reasonable to expect that a seamstress should go lumping upon the water front. Hence the first point to ascertain is 'What work is there, and of what kind?' When this has been done, if will at once become evident whether there is really an excess of labour or not. It will also become patent who is a systematic loafer and who is merely a loafer by compulsion, and society will then have got at the kernel of the problem. For this purpose a Bureau of Labour, conducted by the Government, is indispensable. It must include the whole country, so that at any local office reliable information regarding vacant situations everywhere can be obtained. In time, by such a method the habitual idler will become a marked man, and no one will have any compunction in turning their backs upon him. Hitherto there has been a presumption in the minds of the charitable that the beggar may be innocent, and this has been the sheet-anchor of mendicancy.

Magistrate: 'Are you sure that the prisoner was drunk?' Officer: 'Is it drunk, your Honor? Sure as he had spoke through the tithstone the brith wuv 'im 'ave made the poles stagger.'