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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

NOT SO BAD AFTER ALL.

M. FERDINAND BRUNETIERE, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of April 1, gives us some particulars as to the condition of the French peasantry under the *ancien régime* which are contradictory to the views commonly received, and show us that even if the Church had been accountable for the condition of the people in question as it is for the most part assumed, she would not have had so much that was evil, after all, to answer for. The writer begins by quoting certain passages from various authorities, and which are generally brought forward in proof of the extreme misery of the people; these passages he compares with others that are of an exactly opposite value, and represent the people to have been extremely well off. He, then, proceeds to examine the matter in detail. In Champagne, he says, for example, a province whose poverty at the time in question is proverbial, every labourer owned the cottage in which he lived. The clothing of the families appears to have been sufficient, and a certain labourer of Picardy in 1754 was possessed of 27 shirts. The furniture, moreover, was suited to the wants of its owners, and among it, in the time of Louis XVI., there was found in some instances a wooden clock. There are circumstances also to show that on the whole food was abundant and of fair quality, and wine and cider were in common use respectively in those provinces where they were produced. The Provincial Assemblies of the Eighteenth Century have been much spoken of, but there were also Municipal Assemblies whose powers seem to have been very extended, and who managed most of the affairs of their districts, including the repairs of churches and presbyteries, of public buildings, roads, and bridges; in some cases they fixed the hire of the labourers also. As to primary instruction in country places the *ancien régime* had done a great deal to promote it—the peasant of the times in question could find means to educate himself, and, if he were intelligent and industrious, could raise himself in life as he can to-day. We need not seek very far back into the genealogy of Colbert, for example, to find the mason, or into that of Louvois, for the Parisian shopkeeper in a small way. The truth is that under the *ancien régime*, except the embassies and the great military commands, every function up to that of Prime Minister was accessible to all. According to an authority quoted it was hard to see more than one generation of lucky peasants, for the cultivators of the soil had no sooner acquired a little property than he sent his son to find a situation in the town. Michelet speaks of the testimony borne by travellers to the miserable condition of France; but elsewhere they would have seen what was worse. The Englishman would have seen it in Ireland; the Italian in Calabria; the Spaniard in Castille; and the German, in some degree, all over his native land. Arthur Young had only to make a journey of a few days into Catalonia to learn to admire Le Rousillon. "We found ourselves suddenly transported," he wrote, "from a wild, desert, and poor province, into the middle of a country enriched by the industry of man." Again, when Dr. Rigby went to Cleves and thence to Holland, he wrote, "How the countries and peoples we have seen since we quitted France lose by being compared with that country so full of life." But much of Arthur Young's testimony is worthy of quotation. Writing at Pau on August 12, 1787, he says: "A few parts of England compare with this country of Béarn, but we have very few equal to what I have just seen in my drive of 12 miles from Pau to Moneins. . . . Everywhere there breathes an air of cleanliness, well-being, and ease, which is found in the houses, in the newly built offices, in the little gardens, in the enclosures." He speaks also of the rich country around Port l'Evêque and Lisioux, and in the valley of Corbon, whose herds would be remarkable in Leicester or Northampton. But, it has also been said, that the French peasant under the *ancien régime* might well enquire as to what had been done with the heavy taxes he had paid. Nothing, then, in the Seventeenth or Eighteenth Centuries has more astonished travellers in France than the development and splendour of her public works. These taxes have been the price of the political power and moral grandeur of France. Without doubt there was heavy ex-

pense. A King of England and the Princes of the League of the Rhine were not to be bought for nothing. France could not keep in her pay for nothing the King of Sweden and the Elector of Brandenburg. She could not resist a coalition of almost all Europe without great outlay. A great diplomacy is not supported without money, nor fleets, nor armies—nor the fortifications of Vanban which after two hundred years were still found of use. If the internal misery, which was by no means so great as it has been pretended, was the price of the external greatness, this should not be omitted when the *ancien régime* is spoken of.

A NOTABLE FAILURE.

THE late Canon Kingsley once preached a sermon on education, it seems, in which he very energetically accused the religious dissensions of the country of being the means of sending the country to the devil, because they made compulsory Government education impossible. "It is," he added, "the duty of the State, I hold, to educate all alike in those matters which are common to them as citizens—that is, in all secular matters, and in all matters also which concern their duties to each other defined by law. Those higher duties which the law cannot command or enforce they must learn elsewhere, and the clergy of all denominations will find work enough—and noble work enough—in teaching them. We shall always have work enough in such times as these in teaching what no secular education can ever teach, in diffusing common honesty, the knowledge of right and wrong, and the old-fashioned fear of God as the punisher of those who do ill and the rewarder of those who do well." But since this sermon was preached compulsory Government education has been found to be possible and has been enforced and has by no means proved to be the saviour of the rising generations, and the cultivator that should prepare their minds to receive the lessons of the clergy. An English Protestant paper, in fact, published at the end of last February thus describes the changes that have followed in the wake of the improved educational system. It says:—"The winter assizes have just been concluded, and on all the circuits there has been an unusual number of civil and Crown cases. If we analyse the criminal calendars of the recent Assizes, we shall find that, after striking off a fair average of ordinary offences—such as invariably appear and may be accounted as constant quantities on such occasions—the remainder consists chiefly of these two classes:—(1) high crimes such as murder, arson, rape, burglary, and such like; and (2) skilled roguery. It is to this last that we wish to direct attention. Under the head of 'skilled roguery' come all that class of offences which are the ruin of young men—embezzlement, falsifying of accounts, forgeries, obtaining goods by false pretences, and the fraudulent getting up of bubble companies. Thus it would appear that, if we were getting rid of one class of offences, we were enlarging another. It is a very anxious consideration. A large proportion of these offenders have been trained in our elementary schools, some with, and some without religious instruction. Many of them have passed from the school to the warehouse or the counting-house, only to learn the way to the gaol. It forces upon us two grave considerations—first, that it is more important than ever to insist that our schools shall give definite religious instruction, and arm young men with the knowledge which shall enable them to 'cleanse their way' and rule themselves after God's Word. And the other, that we must devise some more effectual means of guiding and controlling young men when they have left school. How this can be done is a hard problem. Though the number of children sentenced under 14 years of age is less than it was, the number over that age is much larger. The increase of crime is on the part of young people of both sexes. Our education is proving itself a failure already. It will be well that this should be looked fully in the face, especially by those who are determined to work for the maintenance of denominational schools. Facts of this kind ought to move them to leave no effort untried to secure for the doctrinal schools a fair share of the rates, and thus to some extent check the evil which threatens to break down society by its weight." Compulsory Government education, then, is hardly of the force that Canon Kingsley anticipated that it would be in improving the moral condition of the rising generations, and it has proved itself to be in England, as it has elsewhere, a failure, and more than a failure—the encouragement of crime and immorality.