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*by* HENRY W. NEVINSON

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"O Democracy, I shout for you!

Back! Make me a space round me, you kid-gloved, rotten-breathed paralytic world, with miserable antics mimicking the appearance of life.

England! for good or evil it is useless to attempt to conceal yourself—I know you too well.

I am the very devil. I will tear your veils off, your false shows and pride I will trail in the dust—you shall be utterly naked before me, in your beauty and in your shame.

For who better than I should know your rottenness, your self-deceit, your delusion, your hideous grinning corpse-chattering death-in-life business on top? (and who better than I the wonderful hidden sources of your strength beneath?)

Deceive yourself no longer."

THAT was the cry of Edward Carpenter when he published the first edition of *Towards Democracy* in 1883, he being then in his fortieth year. I met him first very soon afterwards in Toynbee Hall, and then described him as "what is called a 'charming' man, with mild brown eyes, grey-brown hair and short beard, fine, irregular face, grey flannel shirt-collar; altogether pleasing, earnest, sweet-tempered, modest and clever." But that is too gentle a description for "the very devil." And so indeed is a fuller and truer note in my diary after hearing him talk to an assembly at St. Martin's Town Hall upon new ideas in science (October, 1896). He had a worthy audience—Sydney Olivier, Bernard Shaw, Henry Salt, Fred Evans (the enthusiastic bookseller), Mrs. N. F. Dryhurst, Mrs. Arthur Wilson (noble-hearted Anarchists), and almost the whole gang of the rebellious leaders in the vanguard of what I have called "the Stage Army of the Good." For indeed there is in England a band of high-spirited people who can always be depended upon to fight for every good cause, and, having worked their way round behind the scenes, to reappear at any new front.

Of the man himself I wrote a description which, though

it omits the devil in him, would stand fairly well for him at any time during the remaining thirty-three years of his life, when at frequent intervals I was with him and came to know him very intimately :—

“ He is certainly a very beautiful and attractive person ; tall, slim, and fairly straight ; loose hair, and beard just grizzled ; strong, dark eyebrows, dark brown eyes, straight nose, and thin cheeks palish brown ; the whole face very like Carlyle’s at forty-five—a Carlyle rather fined down and ‘cultured.’ He was dressed in loose greys, with a blue shirt, and tie in a large bow ; voice soft but strong enough without effort ; spoke from a few notes and went slowly ahead in almost perfect grammar, and with apparent composure ; not many ‘points’ and hardly any laughter ; perhaps an intentional avoidance of such things. His main purpose was to show that Science, owing to its limitation, is apt to leave out many vital sides. The study of it should teach increased perception like that of savages ; it should be intellectual, but also dwell on the moral or emotional relations of the object to ourselves. He illustrated this by a passage from a scientific treatise which described the heart as ‘a common pump’—the heart that throbs and vibrates to every emotion of love and fear and happiness. The study of medicine, again, should not be of drugs, but of health, until the body becomes so pure as to be conscious of its internal states and changes, as certain Indians are.”

That denunciation of unimaginative science had been already expanded in *Civilisation : its Cause and Cure* ; and *England’s Ideal* had also been published and was selling by thousands. To myself they rank among his very best works, perhaps because they were written in plain, straightforward prose. But *Towards Democracy* was better known, and it is as the writer of that extraordinary rhapsody that Carpenter is best still remembered. For, though on one occasion he had himself to wheel a lot of the unsold copies around on a barrow, it had an immense circulation and profound influence at all events up to 1914, when the wretchedness of the Great War wiped out all hopeful enthusiasm.

After his terms at Cambridge and his happy escape from Holy Orders, he had lectured about the country upon mathematics and astronomy, and had visited the United States to enjoy converse with Walt Whitman, whose Titanic poetry possessed him. Finding that, with small savings and a small inheritance, he had enough to live upon for a time, he then stayed with a friendly farmer at the little village of Bradway, and there began to write like one inspired :—

“ I never hesitated for a moment. Day by day it came along from point to point. I did not hurry. I expressed everything with slow care, and to my best ; I utilised former material which I had by me ; but the one illuminating mood remained and everything fell into place under it ; and rarely did I find it necessary to remodel, or rearrange to any great extent, anything that I had once written.

“ What sweet times were those ! all the summer to the hum of the bees in the leafage, the robins and chaffinches hopping around, an occasional large bird flying by, the men away at work in the fields, the consuming pressure of the work within me, the wonderment how it would turn out ; the days there in the rain, or in the snow ; nights sometimes, with moonlight or a little lamp to write by ; far, far away from anything polite or respectable, or any sign or symbol of my hated old life.

“ Then the afternoons at work with my friends in the fields, hoeing and singling turnips or getting potatoes, or down in Sheffield on into the evenings with new companions among new modes of life and work—everything turning and shaping itself into material for my poem.”

He was sick of civilisation as it existed during the third quarter of last century. He had known it in Brighton and London and Cambridge. He had known it in Society, in the upper middle classes, and among the dons. It was the wretchedness of comfortable women's life that moved him most. One may find what he thought of it in canto XXIV of the poem. It is a terrible description of the English middle classes as we all knew them then, and as most of us accepted them without much question. He starts with the misery of the poor, but he goes on to the spiritual misery of the

well-to-do—"the avenues of young girls and women, with sideway flopping heads, debarred from work, debarred from natural sexuality, weary to death with nothing to do":

"When I see, flickering around, miserable spectrums and nostrums of reform—mere wisps devoid of all body—philanthropic chatter-boxes; when I see and hear the droning and see-sawing of pulpits; when the vision of perfect vulgarity and common-placeness arises upon me—of society—and of that which arrogates to itself the sacred name of England."

So he continues with his scathing vision of the country and people around him, with whom he was compelled by his education and comfortable means to associate.

In the midst of a complacent society which counted the growth of wealth as progress and a quadrupled population as national glory, he uttered his denunciation of the age, and pointed to an ideal far beyond its practice to fulfil. Before he was mature, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Dickens had shaken the faith of commercial Liberalism, and Carpenter stood as a priest in heretical succession to them. He opened his attack through evidences of physical and spiritual sickness. The very numbers of our medical and spiritual doctors proved what invalids we are. Crawling phenomena like policemen showed the rottenness of our state. Compared with the cat, we are degenerates of nature, who have lost our unity. Compared with the fox or the Bushman, we are self-conscious, distracted, and ugly. As to our civilization, he wrote:—

"The civilised man disowns the very breasts that suckled him. He deliberately turns his back upon the light of the sun, and hides himself away in boxes with breathing-holes, which he calls houses. He muffles himself in the cast-off furs of the beasts, each century swathing himself in more and more layers, till he ceases to be recognisable as the Man who was once the crown of the animals, and presents a more ludicrous spectacle than the monkey that sits on his own barrel-organ."

Before he was forty Carpenter had given up all desire



for the intellectual life in cloistered academies. It seemed to him a fraud and weariness. I like to remember his poem on the British Museum Library in Part IV of *Towards Democracy* :

“ How lovely !  
All the myriad books—wellnigh two millions of volumes—the  
interminable iron galleries, the forty miles or so of closely packed  
shelves ; ”

And then further on, he suddenly exclaims :

“ How lovely !  
To think there are all these books—and one need not read  
them.”

But the inspired value of *Towards Democracy* does not lie in its denunciation of civilised English life, hampered by conventions and all the stress and inequality of acquisitive society. It lies in its brilliant little pictures of common human life, of natural labour, of sex, and all the natural desires of men and women. There is a passage in *Jean Christophe*\* which reproduces so exactly Carpenter's mood and manner in this his most famous work that I may quote a few of its sentences :

“ Show the life of every day to the men and women of every day ; that life is deeper and more vast than the sea. The smallest among you bears the infinite in his soul. The infinite is in every man who is simple enough to be a man, in the lover, in the friend, in the woman who pays with her pangs for the radiant glory of the day of childbirth, in every man and every woman who lives in the obscure self-sacrifice which will never be known to another soul ; it is the very river of life, flowing from one to another, and back again and round.

“ Write the simple life of one of these simple men ; write the peaceful epic of the days and nights following, following one life to another, all sons of the same mother from the dawning of the first day in the life of the world. Write it simply, as simple as its own unfolding. You are addressing all men ; use the language of all men . . .

\* *Jean Christophe*, IV, 58 (quoted by Sir Arnold Wilson in his *Walks and Talks*, page 6).

There are only styles which say or do not say exactly what they have to say. Let the rhythm of your heart prevail in your writings."

Such sentences might be extracted from *Towards Democracy* itself. It is hard to realise that Romain Rolland, the author of them, had probably never even heard of Edward Carpenter.

It was for natural life in the open air, in community with nature and simple men, that he longed. Rousseau, Thoreau, Ruskin and Walt Whitman had known the longing, and to some extent had fulfilled their desire. Carpenter was their follower, but in passing one must notice that those other true lovers of nature had only a very limited knowledge of what nature really is. They knew nothing of the stifling heat and innumerable pests of the tropics, nothing of the deadly cold with which nature surrounds the Poles. To dwell in community with nature in Savoy, or the Lakes, or Massachusetts, is enviable and may be holy, but in those charming regions praise of nature as a whole may go too far, and that gives a certain weakness to all such famous and influential thinkers. For their adoration of nature is narrow and closely bounded.

But Carpenter for a brief interval did at all events attempt to extend his knowledge of nature beyond the limits reached by his great predecessors. In 1890 he abandoned his temperate and beneficent valley in Derbyshire for the widely different scenes and climate of Ceylon. His book *Adam's Peak to Elephanta* tells the story, but if you would realise how vast the difference was, you may learn it from *Jungle Tide* by John Still, whose knowledge of Ceylon was gained by a generation of years. It was not only to a more savage aspect of nature that Carpenter was then introduced. All through the years when he was something over forty and at the height of his powers, the minds of such English people as cared for thought were much exercised by impalpable visions and ghosts of Oriental philosophy.

We were at that time rather overwhelmed by mystic seers, mahatmas, holy precipitators, and devotees guided by their own self-assured intuition to the neglect of reason.

In the utterances of most among these maundering prophets and prophetesses, as of Mme. Blavatsky, for instance, Carpenter could discover only "general rot and confusion," and indeed, as being a sane person, I have found it hard to discover anything else, for such utterances were perhaps not intended for the sane. At all events, at the invitation of a thoughtful Sinhalese, the same who had previously sent him a copy of the *Bhagavat Gita*, the most definite of India's sacred scriptures, Carpenter set out for Ceylon, and was there introduced to a certain Gñani, whom he came to regard as "a high type of pre-civilisation man."

Few Englishmen are visionaries or mystics, but the thoughtful among us are often conscious of a desire to pierce behind this outer world into the hidden "realities" of which all phenomena may be but the shadows. The diversity of life in its innumerable forms and degrees—the gulfs fixed between the personalities of man and man—such diversities are obvious to us all. But Carpenter had from the first, or at all events since his meeting with Walt Whitman, maintained the essential unity of all life, and in this Gñani, he tells us, it was a matter of absorbing interest to feel himself in contact with the root-thought of all existence—the intense *consciousness* (not conviction merely) of the oneness of all life—the germinal idea which in one form or another has spread from nation to nation, and become the soul and impulse of religion after religion.

After a space of ten years, he tells us, he came to realise that the true line consists in combining and harmonising both body and soul, the outer and the inner. They are the eternal and needful complements of each other, and perhaps he may have thus recalled to himself the prayer of Socrates to the rural god Pan that his inward and his outward life might be made one. If carried to excess, he says, the Eastern methods result in over-quietness, and even torpor; but the Western habits tend to over-activity and external distraction of the mind, which may result in disintegration. As recognising the necessity of the Eastern side of thought, Carpenter may perhaps be called a mystic, but he maintained the balance of the visionary life as against the practical with enviable exactness.



After Ceylon he returned to a life in the healthy nature of England, which to him was almost irresistible. But at least equally strong was the attraction of manual work. For a time he had already attempted to get into touch with the workers of the factory cities by lecturing, and even miners listened to him fairly well, though with their backs turned to the lecturer ; I suppose to show that what he said was not of much importance to them. But lecturing was not sufficient. He tells us that once on his way through France it suddenly flashed upon him, with a vibration through his whole body, that he would and must somehow go and make his life with the mass of the people and the manual workers. For a time he had lived in a Sheffield attic practising ironwork, as far as such a nature could, in association with railway men, porters, clerks, signalmen, ironworkers, coach-builders, Sheffield cutlers ; and from the first, he tells us, he got on excellently and felt fully at home with them—"and I believe," he adds, "in most cases they with me." It must have been very difficult, for he always remained "very much the gentleman," and owing to our inequality of life and food and education there yawns a disastrous gulf between the worker and the gentleman. Strive as I may to be one with them, I have always felt that gulf, and the workers have felt it too. But Carpenter possessed a share of a faculty described by Colonel T. E. Lawrence as the secret of his own power among the Arabs :—

"Among the Arabs there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except the unconscious power given a famous sheikh by virtue of his accomplishment ; and they taught me that no man could be their leader except he ate the ranks' food, wore their clothes, lived with them, and yet appeared better in himself."\*

I think that in England even Carpenter never quite succeeded in attaining to that height of equality with the workers. He could not even swear naturally. But in 1883 he made his next gallant attempt. He purchased the freehold of three fields, about seven acres, at Millthorpe, between Sheffield and Chesterfield, and that was his home

\* *Colonel Lawrence*, by Liddell Hart, p. 111.

for forty years. As he says, the strange gadfly (he uses the Greek word *oistros*) of hard manual work, and digging down to the very roots of things, spurred him on :

"I hardly know how to account for it," he writes in *My Days and Dreams*. "It possessed me. Every habit, every custom or practice of daily life—house arrangement, diet, dress, medicine, &c., was overhauled and rigorously scrutinised. I worked for hours and for whole days together out in the open fields or garden, or digging drains with pick and shovel, or carting along the roads ; going into Chesterfield and loading and fetching manure, or to the coalpit for coal, grooming and bedding down the horse, or getting off to market at 6 a.m. with vegetables and fruit, and standing in the market-place behind a stall till 1 or 2 p.m. ; I was not satisfied but I must do everything that was necessary to be done myself."

Those of us who have felt that stinging gadfly driving to active or manual work, can appreciate and envy. Though I did not go to stay with him at Millthorpe myself till 1917, while I was for a time away from the War, many were naturally attracted to such a man, leading so unusual a life and writing books of such influence in prose and the irregular but rhythmic forms adopted from Walt Whitman's manner.

In his proposed solitude he was beset by earnest and innocent reformers, cranks and faddists of every degree, advocates of theoretic systems, public benefactors (of whom he was particularly shy), freelovers, mystics, tee-totallers, vegetarians, nudists, the charming worshippers of nature whose knowledge was limited to idyllic literature and week-ends in the country, worshippers of himself, both male and female, adorers even of his self-made sandals as symbols of nobly uncivilised existence. I noticed with pleasure that he met their adulations or even their simple praise with low growls like a suspicious dog or even with outspoken barks of "Wow, wow, wow." As he grew older, he said that excessive cleverness and all that sort of thing bored him rather than otherwise, and it comforts me to know that when I stayed with him at Millthorpe after my return from the Dardanelles and Salonika, he

found no cleverness in me at all, but wrote to his friend Charles Sixsmith that I was always "so natural and homely."

For a long time he found the country people around him suspicious and aloof, for in England they are accustomed to regard every "gentleman" as allied to the squire and the parson in enmity against them. "But by slow degrees," he writes, "the rustics accepted me as almost one of themselves, and gave me, some of them, their warm friendship":

"Despite the great differences between them and the town-workers, and the greater intelligence and alertness of the latter, I admire the character of the country-folk most—their extraordinary serenity and good humour, their tenacity, sincerity, and real affectionateness. Even their silent ways—though irritating at times—are a relief from the eternal gabble of the cities."

I remember with what pleasure he told me of a farm woman with whom he condoled upon the departure of her daughter from home, only to be answered: "Yes, I do miss her, especially on washing days!" It was the saying of people who live very close to the rocks of reality, and also of the English nature always so careful to conceal the commonplaces of emotion. As to the gabble of theorists and doctrinaires, he must often have disappointed them because he refused to take the oath of allegiance to any party or definite cause. Though abstemious in his own way of daily life, he was not even a teetotaller or a vegetarian, when such peculiarities might give his hostess or his companions trouble. "Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?" And in higher matters too he refused to submit to rules and definitions of thought or action:

"That neither Hyndman in his time, nor Morris in his, nor the Fabian Society in theirs, nor Keir Hardie, nor Kropotkin, nor Blatchford, nor any other individual or body, succeeded in capturing the social movement during these years and moulding it to his or their heart's desire, must always be matter for congratulation."

By temperament, if not by conviction, he was a complete anarchist, detesting all commandments, authority, and forms of government. Most ethical teachers allow the Mosaic Decalogue to pass, but Carpenter writes :

"The Decalogue may have been a rough and useful ready-reckoner for the Israelites; but to us it admits of so many exceptions and interpretations that it is practically worthless."

When I objected that anarchism had not worked even among the angels of heaven, and that man was a little lower than the angels and did not seem in any hurry to catch them up, he admitted that even in Kropotkin, so courageous and attractive an anarchist, he perceived a charming naïveté which summed up all human evil in the one word "government," misleading by its apparently simple solution. But still he hoped that Russia might one day lead the great European reaction towards a freer and more voluntary state of society. When I observed that the day of freedom was still far from dawning in Russia, he replied with his great saying, "History is a difficult horse to drive."

In "practical politics" he took little interest, though he strongly supported Women's Suffrage as a symbol of deliverance from the idle and unsatisfied existence in which he had seen his sisters languishing at Brighton. His ideal of the great city was (to borrow Walt Whitman's phrase) where the men and women think lightly of the laws. "External law," he proclaimed emphatically, "must always be false," and he could not have existed under a dictatorship which superseded freedom by compulsion, as in the Russia, Germany and Italy of to-day. The Internal Law of self-expression was the only motive of behaviour which he acknowledged. At a public meeting in London soon after the war he took as his text, "To thine own self be true," and when I suggested that the quotation came from the stupidest old fool in Shakespeare, and that if a politician whom I named were true to his own self, the resulting man would be a devil indeed, he replied that even in that politician there must be a core of good which he could follow as his own true self. So unfailing was his optimism.



He retained it even when in his later years at Guildford, George Merrill, his friend and attendant, would return from the town in a state of maudlin drunkenness in the afternoon. Carpenter would look a little anxious, but I never heard a word of reproach, and he never recovered from his grief at the death of George.

Like most of us Carpenter was much occupied with all the problems and variations of sex, and in the middle nineties he published, or rather distributed, two or three pamphlets upon that irresistible subject. Owing to the prosecution of Oscar Wilde opinion was much agitated about sex in those years, and the pamphlets were banned at first. Collected afterwards under the title *Love's Coming of Age*, they had a wide circulation, and probably exercised greater influence than any of Carpenter's works except *Towards Democracy*. As in his other works he here denounces the shame and secrecy which were then still attached to the body and all relations of sex :

"Until these subjects," he writes, "are openly put before children and young people with some degree of intelligent and sympathetic handling, it can scarcely be expected that anything but the utmost confusion, in mind and in morals, should reign in matters of Sex. That we should leave our children to pick up their information about the most sacred, the most profound and vital, of all human functions, from the mere gutter, and learn to know it first from the lips of ignorance and vice, seems almost incredible and certainly indicates the deeply rooted unbelief and uncleanness of our own thoughts."

He warns married people against the boredom and vulgarisation of love where sex has been the only bond :

"The weary couples that may be seen at seaside places and pleasure resorts—the respectable working-man with his wife trailing along by his side, or the highly respectable stock-jobber arm in arm with his better and larger half—their blank faces, utter want of any common topic of conversation which has not been exhausted a thousand times already, and their obvious relief when the hour comes which will take them back to their several and divided occupations—these illustrate sufficiently what I mean."



But it is possible for sex to lead to a higher plane of intercourse :

"In all men who have reached a certain grade of evolution, and certainly in almost all women, the deep rousing of the sexual nature carries with it a romance and tender emotional yearning towards the object of affection, which lasts on and is not forgotten even when the sexual attraction has ceased to be strongly felt."

Or for a finer and more poetic expression of his idea one may read the passage in *Towards Democracy* headed "The Ocean of Sex" :

"To hold in continence the great sea, the great ocean of Sex within one,  
With flux and reflux pressing on the bounds of the body, the beloved genitals,  
Vibrating, swaying emotional to the star-glint of the eyes of all human beings,  
Reflecting Heaven and all Creatures,  
How wonderful !

"Scarcely a figure, male or female, approaches, but a tremor travels across it.

As when on the cliff which bounds the edge of a pond someone moves, then in the bowels of the water also there is a mirrored movement,

So on the edge of this Ocean

The glory of the human form, even faintly outlined under the trees or by the shore, convulses it with far reminiscences ;  
(Yet strong and solid the sea-banks not lightly to be over-passed !)

Till maybe to the touch, to the approach, to the incantation of the eyes of one,

It burst forth, uncontrollable."

He did not limit this sense of romance and tender emotional yearning to the love between man and woman. He found it possible and indeed frequent between members of the same sex, as it certainly existed in ancient Athens and other Greek states. His volume on *Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk* describes a kind of men who willingly undertake domestic and similar services usually deputed to women. But his insistence is not upon these rather

abnormal types. It is upon the affectionate comradeship that he had found in such examples as Walt Whitman, and, as he believed, in Shelley, and had certainly experienced in his own life and relationships. Knowing that I did not share these feelings but was always passionately in love with women only, he observed to me once rather sadly, "You know I am rather heavily weighted on that side." But he did not regret it.

What, then, is the upshot and consummation of such a man? How should we rank him among the Democrats? He belonged to the class of men that England produces from time to time—men like Cromwell, Byron, Shelley, Charles Gordon, and T. E. Lawrence; aristocrats by birth or by nature, but always standing on the side of the common people, the side unpopular with their own class. To him the expression of Self was not only an aim; it was a necessity. But Self could find expression only in what he calls Democracy. In a great passage which brings us to a natural conclusion, he said:

"Of that which exists in the Soul, political freedom and institutions of equality, etc., are but the shadows (necessarily thrown), and Democracy in the States or Constitutions but the shadow of that which first expresses itself in the glance of the eye or the appearance of the skin. Without these the others are of no account, and need not be further mentioned."

Or, to take a further passage from *Towards Democracy* itself:

"To realize Freedom or Equality (for it comes to the same thing)—for this hitherto, for you, the universe has rolled;

"For this the heroes and lovers of all ages have laid down their lives; and nations like tigers have fought, knowing well that this life was a mere empty blob without Freedom.

"Where this makes itself known in a people or even in the soul of a single man or woman, there Democracy begins to exist."

Whether Carpenter will be much read in future, or is much read now, does not greatly matter. He does not

rank among the few supreme poets or writers of the world's history. He is not one of the Twelve (for indeed there have been no more). We must remember him as a noble and characteristic type of our English nature—individualist, active, thoughtful, courageous, polite, but capable of burning indignation at the sight of cruelty or distress. Few may read him now, few can remember him, but in our souls he lives, he moves. Like a benignant ghost, unconsciously he haunts our steps. That is what I attempted to say over his grave in the Guildford cemetery when we buried him on July the 1st, 1929.