

MISCELLANEOU S ESSAYS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649649679

Miscellaneous Essays by W. R. Greg

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W. R. GREG

**MISCELLANEOU
S ESSAYS**

Henry & Mary Peto
Witten Julia Greg's love
January 1st 1882

MISCELLANEOUS ESSAYS

BY

W. R. GREG

LONDON:

TRÜBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL.

1882.

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I

ROCKS AHEAD AND HARBOURS OF REFUGE.

SOME five or six years ago I ventured, under the allusive, but not inappropriate pseudonym of Cassandra, to call attention to a few of the dangers which appeared to me to threaten our social well-being in some very material points. My representations excited considerable notice, and produced several replies. The country, however, had then been revelling in a long period of almost unexampled prosperity, and was little inclined to listen to gloomy forebodings, or to criticisms of a disparaging character, or to take cognisance of the small clouds on the horizon, "scarcely bigger than a man's hand," which appeared to me ominous of coming storm and darkness. Indications of mischief, which could not be altogether denied, I was held to have exaggerated; I was generally regarded as a prophet of evil, constitutionally disposed to look at everything *en noir*; and on the whole my warnings met with little more belief or practical recognition than did those of my namesake in the days of Troy. Since the publication of my first note of caution a marked "change has come over the spirit of our dream;" the small cloud

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has overspread a very considerable part of the sky, the prevalent prosperity of 1872 has been replaced by heavy losses and by distress at once wide-spread and severe; commercial activity has been succeeded by commercial stagnation, disaster and alarm; and, speaking generally, the spirit of sanguine self-confidence and self-satisfaction characteristic of Englishmen in their periods of sunshine, is giving way to a tone of depression and uneasiness not perhaps more dignified, but at least of more hopeful augury for the future, and indicative of a mood of mind in which warnings are more likely to be listened to. "Sweet"—not are, but may be—"the uses of adversity"; and assuredly the lessons of the last two or three years, harsh enough, no doubt, have neither been few, nor trivial, nor conveyed in language difficult to read. On the deplorable and unsuspected unsoundness in certain circles of the mercantile and monetary world, revealed by the disasters of 1878, I am not going to dwell, nor do I wish to enter on the unprofitable and irritating field of mere party politics, though both might furnish texts for sermons more than ordinarily impressive. But I think I am justified, by the bearing of the facts upon two of my former warnings, in reminding my readers, first, that we have been under the management of Ministers, who, rightfully or wrongfully, wisely or unwisely, have changed the spirit of British policy; who, in doing this, and by their mode of doing it, have given great offence and, as far as can be yet discovered, have achieved no

beneficent aims, but have created or exasperated bitter enmities in three quarters of the globe ; who, in the pursuit of this course of action, have increased expenditure heavily and enhanced taxation somewhat, though how much no one can predict and few have the courage honestly to calculate, but enough at least to change a surplus into a deficit ;—and who (which is to our more immediate purpose) in acting thus and entailing these consequences on the country, have been supported, cheered, hounded on, and glorified, not only by the “ residuum,” but by a majority of those electors whose ignorance, thoughtlessness, and excitable temperament I ventured to point out as valid reasons against too hastily endowing them with that electoral franchise which, in the judgment of all Liberals, they have so sadly misused.

The second point relates to the various dangers which I enumerated as threatening the economic and productive supremacy of Great Britain, unless our artisan classes could be warned and moralised in time. These warnings were unhappily disregarded for the most part by those classes themselves, and made light of, or absolutely denied by too many not only of their professional leaders, but of their more sanguine advocates and advisers among philanthropic natures. The probability of foreign rivalry was not believed in, or was treated as at least distant and problematic ; the alleged deterioration of British labour was stoutly contested ; in the undeniably unfortunate disputes between the workmen and their employers, it was

maintained that the former were generally right and the objects they aimed at were at all events desirable and probably attainable; while it was confidently urged that the artisans might be trusted to understand and manage their own interests better than their masters could do for them. The experience of the last two years, and more especially the disastrous proceedings of 1878, have lowered the confident tone of the soberer among the workmen's friends, and brought about, more speedily than I had hoped, and far more painfully than I could wish, a recognition of many facts once noisily denied, and justified assuredly nearly all the neglected warnings of Cassandra. The state of trade has been stagnant, gloomy, and disastrous in the extreme, and it cannot be denied that much of its deplorable condition has not been immediately traceable to the specific causes which I pointed out as so ominous in the approaching times. But still less can it be controverted—indeed it is almost universally admitted—that this condition has been enormously aggravated by the almost incredible blunders and perversity of the working classes themselves, all the more disheartening because the true facts and bearings of the case have been fairly and anxiously laid before them by friends whose sincere and well-proved sympathy should have secured at least a patient hearing.

It has been shown by practical proofs and special instances that the possibility and even imminence of foreign competition in more than two or three of