From *Chartism* by Thomas Carlyle

Chapter II

STATISTICS

A WITTY statesman once said, you might prove anything by figures. We have looked into various statistic works, Statistic-Society Reports, Poor-Law Reports, Reports and Pamphlets not a few, with a sedulous eye to this question of the Working Classes and their general condition in England; we grieve to say, with as good as no result whatever. Assertion swallows assertion; according to the old Proverb, 'as the statist thinks, the bell clinks'! Tables are like cobwebs, like the sieve of Danaides; beautifully reticulated, orderly to look upon, but which will hold no conclusion. Tables are abstractions, and the object a most concrete one, so difficult to read the essence of. There are innumerable circumstances; and one circumstance left out may be the vital one on which all turned. Statistics is a science which ought to be honourable, the basis of many most important sciences; but it is not to be carried on by steam, this science, any more than others are; a wise head is requisite for carrying it on. Conclusive facts are inseparable from inconclusive except by a head that already understands and knows. Vain to send the purblind and blind to the shore of a Pactolus never so golden: these find only gravel; the seer and finder alone picks up gold grains there. And now the purblind offering you, with asseveration and protrusive importunity, his basket of gravel as gold, what steps are to be taken with him?—Statistics, one may hope, will improve individually, and become good for something. Meanwhile, it is to be feared the crabbed satirist was partly right, as things go: 'A judicious man,' says he, 'looks at Statistics, not to get knowledge, but to save himself from having ignorance foisted on him.' With what serene conclusiveness a member of some Useful-Knowledge Society stops your mouth with a figure of arithmetic! To him it seems he has extracted the elixir of the matter, on which now nothing more can be said. It is needful that you look into his sad extracted elixir; and ascertain, alas, too probably, not without a sight, that it is wash and vapidity, good only for the gutters.

Twice or three times we have heard the lamentations and prophesies of a human Jeremiah, mourner for the poor, cut short by a statistic fact of the most decisive nature: How can the condition of the poor be other than good, be other than better; has not the average duration of life in England, been proved to have increased? Our Jeremiah had to admit that, if so, it was an astounding fact; whereby all that ever he, for his part, had observed on other sides of the matter, was overset without remedy. If life last longer, life must be less worn upon, by outward suffering, by inward discontent, by hardship of any kind; the general condition of the poor must be bettering instead of worsening. So was out Jeremiah cut short. And now for the 'proof'? Readers who are curious in statistic proofs may see it drawn out with all solemnity in a Pamphlet 'published by Charles Knight and Company,'—and perhaps himself draw inferences from it. Northampton tables, compiled by Dr. Price 'from registers of the Parish of All Saints from 1735 to 1780;' Carlisle tables, collected by Dr. Heysham from observations of Carlisle City for eight years, 'the calculations founded on them' conducted

by another Doctor; incredible 'document considered satisfactory by men of science in France:'—alas, it is not as if some zealous scientific son of Adam had proved the deepening of the Ocean, by survey, accurate of cursory, of two mud-plashes on the coast of the Isle of Dogs? 'Not to get knowledge, but to save yourself from having ignorance foisted upon you'!

The condition of the working man in this country, what it is and has been, whether it is improving or retrograding,—is a question to which from statistics hitherto no solution can be got. Hitherto, after many tables and statements, one is still left mainly to what he can ascertain by his own eyes, looking at the concrete phenomenon for himself. Each man expands his own hand-breadth of observation to the limits of the general whole; more or less, each man must take what he himself has seen and ascertained for a sample of all that is seeable and ascertainable. Hence discrepancies, controversies wide-spread, long-continued; which there is at present no means or hope of satisfactorily ending. When Parliament takes up 'the Condition-of-England question,' as it will have to one day, then indeed much may be amended! Inquiries wisely gone into, even on this most complex matter, will yield results worth something, not nothing. But it is a most complex matter; on which, whether for the past or the present, Statistic Inquiry, with its limited means, with its short vision and headlong extensive dogmatism, as yet often throws not light, but error worse than darkness.

What constitutes the well-being of a man? Many things; of which the wages he gets, and the bread he buys with them are but one preliminary item. Grant, however, that the wages were the whole; that once knowing the wages and the price of bread, we know all; then what are the wages? Statistic Inquiry, in its present unguided condition, cannot tell. The average rate of day's wage is not correctly ascertained for any portion of this country; not only not for half-centuries, it is not even ascertained anywhere for decades or years: far from instituting comparisons with the past, the present itself is unknown to us. And then, given the average of wages, what is the constancy of employment; what is the difficulty of finding employment; the fluctuation from season to season, from year to year? Is it constant, calculable wages; or fluctuating, incalculable, more or less of the nature of gambling? This secondary circumstance, of quality in wages, is perhaps even more important than the primary one of quantity. Further we ask, Can the labourer, by thrift and industry, hope to rise to mastership; or is such hope cut off from him? How is he related to his employer; by bonds of friendliness and mutual help; or by hostility, opposition and chains of mutual necessity alone? In a word, what degree of contentment can a human creature be supposed to enjoy in that position? With hunger preying upon him, his contentment is likely to be small! But even with abundance, his discontent, his real misery may be great. The labourer's feelings, his notion of being justly dealt with or unjustly; his wholesome composure, frugality, prosperity in the one case, his acrid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking, and gradual ruin in the other,—how shall figures or arithmetic represent all this? So much is still to be ascertained; much of it by no means easy to ascertain! Till, among the 'Hill Cooly' and 'Dog-Cart' questions, there arise in Parliament and extensively out of it 'a Condition-of-England question,' and quite a new set of inquirers and methods, little of it is likely to be ascertained.

One fact on this subject, a fact which arithmetic is capable of representing, we have considered would be worth all the rest: whether the labourer, whatever his wages are,

is saving money? Laying up money, he proves that his condition, painful as it may be without and within, is not yet desperate; that he looks forward to a better day coming, and is still resolutely steering towards the same; that all the lights and darknesses of his lot are united under a blessed radiance of hope,—the last, first, nay one may say the sole blessedness of man. Is the habit of saving increased and increasing, or the contrary? Where the present writer has been able to look with his own eyes, it is decreasing, and in many quarters all but disappearing. Statistic science turns up her Savings-Bank Accounts and answers, "Increasing rapidly." Would that one could believe it! But the Danaides-sieve character of such statistic reticulated documents is too manifest. A few years ago, in regions where thrift, to one's own knowledge, still was, Savings-Banks were not; the labourer lent his money to some farmer, of capital, or supposed to be of capital,—and has too often lost is since or he bought a cow with it, bought a cottage with it; nay hid it under his thatch: the Savings-Banks books then exhibited mere blank and zero. That they sell yearly now, if such be the fact, indicates that what thrift exists does gradually resort more and more thither rather than elsewhither; but the question, Is thrift increasing? runs through the reticulation, and is as water spilt on the ground, not to be gathered here.

There are inquiries on which had there been a proper 'Condition-of-England question,' some light would have been thrown, before 'torch-meetings' arose to illustrate them! Far as they lie out of the course of Parliamentary routine, they should have been gone into, should have been glanced at, in one or the other fashion. A Legislature making laws for the Working Classes, in total uncertainty as to these things, is legislating in the dark; not wisely, not to good issues. The simple fundamental question, Can the labouring man in this England of ours, who is willing to labour, find work, and subsistence by his work? is matter of mere conjecture and assertion hitherto; not ascertainable by authentic evidence: the Legislature, satisfied to legislate in the dark, has not yet sought any evidence on it. They pass their New Poor-Law Bill, without evidence as to all this. Perhaps their New Poor-Law Bill is itself only intended as an experimentum crucis to ascertain all this? Chartism is an answer, seemingly not in the affirmative.