CHAPTER XV.

A MORAL GEHENNA.

In the morning Vernon took us into his workshop, where windmills and water-wheels of all sorts were working and being tested. In the garden a water-wheel, worked by the river, supplied the house with compressed air, and the windmills supplied electricity, so that motive power was abundant. Thus two powers—the wind and the water—so much neglected at Ura and the Middle Globe, were at Zara made a leading study, and Vernon, recognizing their great importance, had given them his personal attention.

"Machines like men must be judged by their work," said Vernon, "we have all manner of wheels working here, and as they change the power of the wind, or the water into light or energy, so we keep or reject them."

After breakfast Mary and I went into Ura with Vernon, on his compressed air launch. Leaving him at the wharf, we strolled into the city; presently we came to a street with very handsome buildings on either side containing offices and residential flats; occasionally we passed beggars, pale-faced and filthy, who pretended to sell some trumpery thing as a cloak to their begging. At the corner of the street we came to where a big strong loafer leant against a wall smoking, while a dirty, excited woman abused him for neglecting his work, and idling about the public houses; nobody, however, paid much attention to them. Luxuriantly dressed people passed on with a smile or a scornful sneer; and the carriages drove by with their occupants undisturbed. Presently a policeman came up, and ordered them to go away, which after a while they did. We turned down the street they disappeared in, and hardly had we travelled two hundred yards before we came to a region where poverty was as extreme as was the wealth of the street we had just left.

"Let us come to the poorest quarters," said Mary, "we can then get a guide to show us round."

We went; and called at an out-station of a great charitable organization, where a number of noble men and women devoted their lives to helping the idle and criminal class to live. These
people spent actually hundreds of thousands of crowns, and so enabled the dregs of civilization to live and multiply at the expense of the desirable class, many of whom were too poor to marry. Here we got a guide, borrowed peculiar hats and cloaks, and so commenced our journey of discovery in a garb common to the neighbourhood. Our guide was a large-eyed, thin-faced woman, with a religious enthusiasm that was wearing her to death. She spoke of the Almighty as she would of a kind friend, and expressed perfect confidence in raising the half-starved human miseries to industry and honesty. Poor woman, she sacrificed her life here to gain a place for herself in heaven, and maintain the most undesirable class of civilization. First we went up some dirty stairs; on every side were sounds of swearing and quarrelling, while the air was heavy with stinks: on the fifth floor our guide knocked at a door which was opened by a woman in a state of semi-starvation; the room contained a bed and a chair—nothing more—and three small boys, who with their mother were supported by their eldest brother, a noble youth whose work enabled him to keep his relations alive. The father had run away with another woman, and left them to starve. This woman shortly afterwards died of starvation. We gave her six papers advocating the organization to which our guide belonged, which one of her sons could sell for her benefit, and then we left. The next place was equally squalid; in a room with a bed and some rough furniture sat a very old woman, nursing a chubby, healthy baby. These two were supported by the baby's mother, a girl of sixteen years of age, who worked in a factory close by, from morning till night, and then walked about the dimly-lighted streets in company with other poor creatures of either sex, equally degraded as herself. Scattered about, near to each other were big houses, where intoxicating drinks of various sorts were sold to the miserable inhabitants of this miserable place. Everything was starvation, idleness, filth, and all evil. At night the houseless half of these human vermin would go to a charitable shelter, where they would get supper, a bed, and breakfast, in exchange for a little work. When they had any money they would herd together in big rooms, the atmosphere of which would become fetid before morning. This was the state of things that charitable people maintained. Under the laws of Zara these people would not be allowed to live this life, but would be sent to Pentona and taught habits of work. At Ura people were sent to prison, and taught habits of idleness, as it was said that if they were made to work, the free labourer would starve. These foolish people did not see that the labourer would not starve, but only work shorter hours, and thrive. The community had to keep these people, and it was surely better to isolate them, and make them work, than allow them to live in idleness and perpetuate themselves.
The dreadful amount of human misery and degradation was awful, and the kind-hearted, but unwise charity that increased the evil was sad to contemplate. Soon this hotbed of misery and vice would be removed, and all its temptations and pitfalls for the poor made things of the past. After supper Vernon took me again into the city, so that I might see the degradations that waylaid the rich, as well as those which waylaid the poor. First we went to a big luxurious house called a club, where a pugilistic contest was to take place for a thousand crowns; we paid three crowns each as the price of admission. The place was crowded with well-dressed men of all ages, the majority of whom did not come to see this contest with a view of increasing their fistic skill, which was surely the only right reason for any one to witness such a struggle, but to share the savage excitement caused by seeing two men bruise one another till one of them became insensible, or too weak to continue the contest.

"Yonder man," said Vernon, pointing out an undersized specimen of humanity, "spends on himself a yearly income of thirty-two thousand crowns, which enables him to keep at his beck and call a small army of harpies of either sex. His great ambition is to ride horses at all the races. The progressive income tax will make his money as great a blessing to humanity as it is now a curse."

I looked at the faces of the spectators, the large majority of which belonged to men who possessed but little brain or muscle; and to whom boxing was a thing too manly for their enervated frames. Many of these people belonged to families who were maintained generation after generation on the interest of money earned by some energetic forefather. As Vernon pointed out, men should no more be allowed to live in idleness on the fruits of the work of some remote ancestor, than they should be made to suffer for the wickedness or sloth of some distant progenitor. A man should rise or sink only by his own worth or unworthiness. We next went to another club, where we found a number of well-dressed men and women talking and laughing in an atmosphere of smoke. The men were very similar to those we had left waiting to see the fight. The women had painted cheeks and shameless faces. Some of them were beautiful, and would have been the cause of joy and worth had their natures not been turned to evil. They were drinking a sparkling wine and smoking fragrant cigars or cigarettes. The music sounded, and many of the people danced, some of them very gracefully, more of them indifferently. At a side table sat a handsome woman alone, sipping a flat glass of sparkling wine. She had golden hair and blue eyes, and seemed a guileless, dreaming innocent. Her jaws were wide at the back, and her chin pointed. She was dressed in pink and looked very pretty. A tall man with a hooked nose and black eyes, came up to her, accompanied by a youth with a
noble head and sweet face, that only lacked determination make it perfect. The younger man was introduced to the woman, who lifted her eyes, and bowed. They chatted and drank the sparkling wine. We went near to them.

"May I tell your fortune?" asked the woman.

"Reena can tell fortunes truthfully by palmistry," said the hook-nosed man. "Dunston showed her his hand, and she told him he would die a violent death early in life. Next day his horse lost a great race, and he was ruined. That night he shot himself. Reena can read what the lines tell."

"I am afraid she might prophesy a calamity," said the youth, incredulously.

"I shall prophesy no calamity," said the woman, looking smilingly into his face; "the palm tells fully what the face only suggests; your eyes will never be heavy with sorrow, sunshine only is for you. Give me your hand."

He held out his hand. The woman followed the lines for a moment with one soft finger, and then looked up and laughed—

"I knew how it would be. Soon you will meet a beautiful woman who will love you and gain your love—perhaps it has already happened—you will be happy with her, and she with you; then you will leave her, and she will learn to be good for your sake and live for the welfare of others. You will marry, children will grow up round you, and you will have only one sorrow. The woman you marry you will soon cease to love, and your fancy will often go back to your first sweetheart."

We went away.

"The first part of that fortune will come true, and probably the last," said Vernon. Sometimes he seemed to be able to foretell the future.

"The young men who have lots of money," he stated, "are sought out by pleasant men and beautiful women, and many of them enticed to lead a life of selfish sloth. All their noble qualities are suppressed, and selfishness made the motive of their life. While men's nature is what it is they will seek for excitement, and love the joy of the wine cup and the smile of the wanton. Great wealth is as dangerous as poverty; we will take the curse of the first and apply it as a blessing to remove the curse of the second, so that both will gain."

Certainly these two evils would together disappear, and though no one would lose, everyone would gain, more or less. As I thought that night of the evils that afflict the rich, and the evils that afflict the poor, I saw the face of the starving woman who subsisted in one room with her four boys. It was a brave face, and a pure, and one that would live in the memory of her sons for ever, and be to them a guide to good, and a shield from evil. Surely she would earn a happy hereafter. Then I saw the soft weak face of the man of luxury, and the fair face of the woman
with rosy lips, from which the kisses came as the scent from the violet. Then again I saw the man's face, but it looked older, and had a weary look; beside him was a woman who talked of duty. He turned away, he only wanted pleasure. Again I saw the faces, the wife was laughing, she looked a queen; her longing for duty had gone. Now she, too, only wanted pleasure. She looked at her husband and smiled; love had given way to contempt, her look seemed to say "don't touch me." He was ill at ease. With many women he had failed to find what one would have brought—content. All his life he had searched, but found not, that which comes only to those who go where duty leads—happiness. I realized why it is so difficult for the rich man to enter heaven; he had so many temptations. Surely the man was descending to a lower life, and the thin-faced woman ascending to a higher. In the morning Cora came to tell us of President Vernon's speech to the Senate, and of the additions that other legislators would make to his suggestions.

"The President," she said with evident elation, "has conceived every detail of the federation; but he is always ready to give a colleague the credit of any idea he likes to adopt."

"But surely, Cora," I expostulated, even you do not give the President credit for understanding and originating everything?"

Her round eyes opened wide. Such eyes are common to all animals who are true to their mates. The dove is a leading example.

"He certainly understands everything," she replied, with offended dignity, "and originates nearly everything."

I laughed at her wide belief in the man she had made her hero.

"How does he manage it?"

"He dictates his ideas on some subjects to Gea, and on others to me, so that we each have certain subjects to work out, and arrange, and index, with all the statistics that bear upon them. Thus the President has every subject under his command."

"Fearfully dry work for you and Gea?"

"No, Doctor Frank, it is not," she asserted positively; "it is the most delightful work."

Certainly women are as ready to make heroes of men as men are to make angels of women. Poor little Cora! she had made an idol out of an energetic, ambition-stricken man.

At last the meeting of the Ura Parliament took place. It was only to draw up a programme and fix a date for the meeting of the first Parliament of Undara, a sort of final rehearsal for the great performance. The Parliament House was built on the bank of the Yanga, and though a poor building compared with the similar structure at Zara, was very much more imposing than the surrounding edifices. On one end was a high clock tower,
which looked on a straggling series of roofs, covering a commodious, but inelegant building. The two chambers formed themselves into a committee, with President Dreman as chairman. The galleries were so badly arranged that you were above the legislators on one side of the chamber; and could consequently only see those on the other three sides. The suggestions of Vernon were all adopted, as suitable for discussion at the meeting of the first Federal Parliament. Three men were elected to represent Ura in the compiling of the phonetic dictionary; a site for a penal city was chosen on the river above Ura, in the neighbourhood of the coal and iron mines, and a date was agreed on for the first meeting of the Undara Parliament, to which the meeting was adjourned. The unanimity of the proceeding surprised me, as there was no sign of a re-election or appeal of any sort to the people, which seemed to me to be desirable on so important a matter; I therefore asked Vernon, who replied,—

"Before we decided on federation we took a plebiscite, which was almost wholly in its favour."

"This is a matter of tremendous difficulty, is it not?" I asked in surprise, "first to take the voting, and secondly to get all, or nearly all, the voters to record their opinion?"

"We find no difficulty; in every town two men are appointed to receive votes by ballot during certain hours on the day of the plebiscite. Any voter who cannot attend personally to vote is entitled to authorize in writing his wife, or child, if of age, to vote for him. If a voter has neither wife nor child of age, and is physically incapable of attending to vote, he can send his vote in a sealed packet with a declaration to that effect, and it is accepted."

"Suppose he does not vote, what then?"

"He is fined two crowns; for we consider it is a man's duty to the community to vote."

On the day for the first meeting of the United Parliaments we again went to witness the proceedings, but this time they were both memorable and brilliant. The galleries were crowded with spectators, and the Council Chamber contained nearly seven hundred legislators. Vernon took the presidential chair, and, after the prayer was said, rose, and in the name of Ura, welcomed the legislators from Zara, and congratulated all present on the meeting of the Federal Parliament. He then left the chair for the election of a president of Undara. President Phedra in a double resolution then proposed that Vernon Dreman be elected as the first President of Undara, and that the term of presidential office be for nine years, so that, as it was decided that the meeting of Parliament be held alternately at Ura and Zara, the presidents should be alternately elected at these places. He then delivered a feeling and brilliant address eulogizing Vernon. This proposition was seconded by Duke Mura, spoken
on by several senators, and carried by acclamation, after which Vernon was led to the presidential chair by ex-President Phedra, amidst the echoing approbation of the legislators and spectators. Vernon, who usually faced his audience, and everything else for that matter, with an upright fearlessness only saved from being dictatorial by his courtesy of manner, now stood bowing and overwhelmed with the praise that had been heaped on him. When the applause had subsided Duke Phedra again spoke. He stated that, as they all knew, the laws once known as the laws of Zara had been adopted as the laws of Undara, of which Ura was a part. Of these laws was one which empowered the two Houses of Parliament together assembled, to confer any one of three titles on any person who by rendering great services to the State, had, in their opinion, earned such an honour. He went on to point out how Vernon had worked for the federation, and how the welfare of the country had been always first with him. How that the progressive income tax would take several thousands of crowns a year from the new President, as he was one of the richest men in Undara, and one who apparently would become in time by far the richest. Some detractors, he proceeded, might say that as President Dreman gave largely to the destitute poor, who would now be looked after by the State, he had only altered the shape of his donation; but he was sure no sensible man would imagine that such an idea ever crossed the President’s mind. He then proposed that a dukedom be conferred on Vernon, as the highest honour the State had to bestow. He made the proposition thus early to show that the Parliament of Undara felt that one of its first duties was to recognize the labours of those who worked wisely and well for the good of the State.”

Other legislators spoke in support of the proposition, and in unmeasured praise of Vernon, and the dukeship was forthwith conferred by unanimous vote. Vernon’s head sank low, and his whole attitude became one of great humility. When the acclamations had subsided his head rose, and he stepped forward and said,—

“Legislators of Undara. When work or trouble comes we face it with a brave heart, knowing that if we do our best we will either conquer and gain happiness here, or die and gain happiness hereafter. When high honours come to us, we ask ourselves if we have deserved them. We know of faults we have been guilty of, that are unknown to others, for every man best knows his own weakness, and we wonder if we can always live the exalted life that alone befits our new condition. We think these things and doubting ourselves feel weak, as I now do.”

His head rose still higher, his nostrils expanded, and his face became brave.

“In the future I shall strive to be, and with the help of the
Almighty, I pray that I may succeed in being worthy of the honours I have to-day received.”

He sat down, and again and again the applause echoed through the building. To my surprise I found I had been completely carried away, and oblivious of everything except Vernon’s words. Such is the magic of oratory. The conferring of the new titles now took place; so that the province of Ura might be represented in the House of Titles of Undara, as in Ura, which was like an ordinary republic, no titles had hitherto been conferred. First came the seven dukes, who were admonished that in every case honours brought responsibilities, and should be therefore only sought by men who were prepared to make their lives an example to their fellow-countrymen, and to consider patriotism before self. It was a most beautiful and impressive ceremony, which only the necessity for shortening this history as much as possible prevents me giving in full. Each of the applicants then took an oath to recognize his responsibilities, and received the ducal coronet, which consisted of leaves made of malachite joined together with gold wire. The next to come were the nine men to receive the second honour, which was the title of “lord.” These were similarly admonished, took a similar oath, and received a decoration of gold which they wore in the left lappet of their coat. Next came the twelve who were to receive the honour of knighthood. These also were admonished, took an oath to respect their responsibilities, and received a silver decoration which they wore as the lords did theirs. These proceedings being finished, the Parliament adjourned till next day. At breakfast I asked Vernon why so many men were anxious to receive a title, and how it could at once be purchasable and a very high honour?

“I will answer your last two questions first,” said Vernon. “Titles are honourable because they are only conferred on men who lead noble lives, and have highly distinguished themselves in some avocation, or on men who donate to the purposes of the State a large sum of money. These must also have led at least blameless lives, or their title would at once be annulled. Further, if a titled person is guilty of any immoral or criminal act, his title is at once cancelled; therefore a man with a title is one who leads an honourable life, receives a good income, and belongs to the most exalted class in the land; therefore all wise men wish for a title, and honour all who have one.”

“Supposing a titled man gets into debt, so that he has to be sent to Pentona, what happens then?” I asked.

“His title would be made void. As a matter of fact, such a thing never happened, as the creditors know that if a man is sent to Pentona their chances of payment would be small. No man can be sent to Pentona for more than five years’ work, which
would give the creditors only from five to eight hundred crowns to divide."

"Do you mean to say that no matter how much a man owes, five years' work in Pentona will release him of all his debts?"

"Certainly; but during that five years, if the Government had to support that man's family—the State supports all destitute children—he would have to work in prison after his five years, till he had paid the cost of their keep."

"It will take me a long time, I am afraid, to learn all your laws and customs."

"You are learning them very fast. They are the easiest laws and customs in the world to learn, because they are the essence of wisdom and the foundation of happiness. If you can arrive at what is wise, you have arrived at what is the law of Undara."

In the evening we all except Vernon again went to the meeting of Parliament. This time the senators and House of Titles each occupied their respective chambers. We went to the former chamber, as nearly all legislation emanated from there. Vernon, who as President was debarred from legislating, had handed over his work to a colleague, who though both able and eloquent, lacked the fearless conviction that made Vernon almost irresistible. First the progressive income tax was passed without debate and sent up to the House of Titles. Then a bill to enable prisoners to be sent to Pentona, and substituting in their sentence days' work instead of days in prison, was similarly treated. Then with little discussion a bill to empower a body of four legislators, under the presidency of the minister of public works, to draw up a plan of how all new buildings should be erected in Ura, and take steps to gradually bring that city under a convenient plan for traffic, and also to wall the river, and lay out a new city like Pentona, on the river Yanga near the mines, and to purchase at a valuation all the required land, passed its first reading. The last two bills were respectively to adopt the law of Zara relating to the imprisonment of all vagabonds, idlers, and destitute people, and to prohibit the granting of any new licences to sell intoxicating liquors. All these bills passed their first reading with hardly any discussion, and were sent up to the House of Titles, where they were similarly treated, so that in the course of three consecutive sittings they all became laws, with the exception of that relating to the arrest of vagabonds, which was suspended for a month, so that scarcity of work would be no excuse for anyone loafing about. That evening I asked Vernon to explain the reason that sellers for intoxicants were to have a monopoly, as they would if no more licences were issued?

"At present we wish to decrease the liquor traffic," he replied. "Now we cannot refuse to renew the present licences, as they were issued under a law of custom which was to the effect that
they were to be renewed during good conduct, unless we compensate the licensees, which we are not prepared to do. Under the laws, licences are occasionally cancelled, and as the population increases, the number of licences per head of course decreases, so that we gradually decrease the liquor traffic—everything should be done gradually—and are only opposed by the distillers and brewers whose opposition, unaided by that of the licensees, we can afford to smile at."

It seemed to me very much like making a compact with the devil, but as it bore good fruit, I must not condemn it.