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<VAGUE PEOPLE.>

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The core of society is compact enough, made up as it is of those real

doers of the world's work who are clear as to what they want and who

pursue a definite object with both meaning and method. But outside

this solid nucleus lies a floating population of vague people;

nebulous people; people without mental coherence or the power of

intellectual growth; people without purpose, without aim, who drift

with any current anywhere, making no attempt at conscious steering and

having no port to which they desire to steer; people who are

emphatically loose in their mental hinges, and who cannot be trusted

with any office requiring distinct perception or exact execution;

people to whom existence is something to be got through with as little

trouble and as much pleasure as may be, but who have not the faintest

idea that life contains a principle which each man ought to make clear

to himself and work out at any cost, and to which he ought to

subordinate and harmonize all his faculties and his efforts. These

vague people of nebulous minds compose the larger half of the world,

and count for just so much dead weight which impedes, or gives its

inert strength to the active agents, as it chances to be handled.

They are the majority who vote in committees and all assemblies as

they are influenced by the one or two clear-minded leaders who know

what they are about, and who drive them like sheep by the mere force

of a definite idea and a resolute will.

Yet if there is nothing on which vague people are clear, and if they

are not difficult to influence as the majority, there is much on which

they are positive as a matter of private conviction. In opposition to

the exhortation to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in

us, they can give no reason for anything they believe, or fancy they

believe. They are sure of the result; but the logical method by which

that result has been reached is beyond their power to remember or

understand. To argue with them is to spend labour and strength in

vain, like trying to make ropes out of sea-sand. Beaten off at every

point, they settle down again into the old vapoury, I believe; and it

is like fighting with ghosts to attempt to convince them of a better

way. They look at you helplessly; assent loosely to your propositions;

but when you come to the necessary deduction, they double back in a

vague assertion that they do not agree with you--they cannot prove you

wrong but they are sure that they are right; and you know then that

the collapse is hopeless. If this meant tenacity, it would be so far

respectable, even though the conviction were erroneous; but it is the

mere unimpressible fluidity of vagueness, the impossibility of giving

shape and coherence to a floating fog or a formless haze.

Vague as to the basis of their beliefs, they are vaguer still as to

their facts. These indeed are like a ladder of which half the rungs

are missing. They never remember a story and they cannot describe what

they have seen. Of the first they are sure to lose the point and to

entangle the thread; of the last they forget all the details and

confound both sequence and position. As to dates, they are as if lost

in a wood when you require definite centuries, years, months; but they

are great in the chronological generosity of 'about,' which is to them

what the Middle Ages and Classic Times are to uncertain historians. It

is as much as they can do to remember their own birthday; but they are

never sure of their children's; and generally mix up names and ages in

a manner that exasperates the young people like a personal insult.

With the best intentions in the world they do infinite mischief. They

detail what they think they have heard of their neighbours' sayings

and doings; but as they never detail anything exactly, nor twice

alike, by the time they have told the story to half a dozen friends

they have given currency to half a dozen different chimeras which

never existed save in their own woolly imaginations. No repute is safe

with them, even though they may be personally good-natured and anxious

not to do any one harm; for they are so vague that they are always

setting afloat exaggerations which are substantially falsehoods; and

if you tell them the most innocent fact of any one you would not

injure for worlds--say your daughter or your dearest friend--they are

sure to repeat it with additions and distortions, till they have made

it into a Frankenstein which no one now can subdue.

Beside this mental haziness, which neither sees nor shapes a fact

correctly, vague people are loose and unstable in their habits. They

know nothing of punctuality at home nor abroad; and you are never sure

that you will not stumble on them at meal-times at what time soever

you may call. But worse than this, your own meal-times, or any other

times, are never safe from them. They float into your house

uncertainly, vaguely, without purpose, with nothing to say and nothing

to do, and for no reason that you can discover. And when they come

they stay; and you cannot for the life of you find out what they want,

nor why they have come at all. They invade you at all times; in your

busy hours; on your sacred days; and sit there in a chaotic kind of

silence, or with vague talk which tires your brains to bring to a

focus. But they are too foggy to understand anything like a delicate

hint, and if you want to get rid of them, you must risk a quarrel and

effectively shoulder them out. They will be no loss. They are so much

driftweed in your life, and you can make no good of them for yourself

nor others.

Even when they undertake to help you, they do you more harm than good

by the hazy way in which they understand, and the inexactness with

which they carry out, your wishes. They volunteer to get you by

favour the thing you want and cannot find in the general way of

business--say, something of a peculiar shade of olive-green--and they

bring you in triumph a brilliant cobalt. They know the very animal you

are looking for, they say, with a confidence that impresses you, and

they send to your stable a grey horse to match your bay pony; and if

you trust to their uncontrolled action in your affairs, you find

yourself committed to responsibilities you cannot meet and whereby you

are brought to the verge of destruction.

They do all this mischief, not for want of goodwill but for want of

definiteness of perception; and are as sorry as you are when they make

'pie' and not a legible sheet. Their desire is good, but a vague

desire to help is equal to no help at all; or even worse--it is a

positive evil, and throws you wrong by just so much as it attempts to

set you straight. They are as unsatisfactory if you try to help them.

They are in evil case, and you are philanthropically anxious to assist

them. You think that one vigorous push would lift the car of their

fortunes out of the rut in which it has stuck; and you go to them with

the benevolent design of lending your shoulder as the lever. You

question them as to the central fact which they wish changed; for you

know that in most cases misfortunes crystallize round one such evil

centre, which, being removed, the rest would go well. But your vague

friends can tell you nothing. They point out this little superficial

inconvenience, that small remediable annoyance, as the utmost they can

do in the way of definiteness; but when you want to get to the core,

you find nothing but a cloudy complaint of general ill-will, or a

universal run of untoward circumstances with which you cannot grapple.

To cut off the hydra's heads was difficult enough; but could even

Hercules have decapitated the Djinn who rose in a volume of smoke from

the fisherman's jar?

It is the same in matters of health. Only medical men know to the full

the difficulty of dealing with vague people when it is necessary that

these should be precise. They can localize no pain, define no

sensations. If the doctor thinks he has caught hold of one leading

symptom, it fades away as he tries to examine it; and, probe as he

may, he comes to nothing more definite than a pervading sense of

discomfort, which he must resolve into its causes as he best can. So

with their suspicions; and vague people are often strangely suspicious

and distrustful. They tell you in a loose kind of way that such or

such a man is a rogue, such or such a woman no better than she should

be. You ask them for their data--they have none; you suggest that they

are mistaken, or at least that they should hold themselves as mistaken

until they can prove the contrary, and you offer your version of the

reputations aspersed--your vague friends listen to you amiably, then

go back on their charge and say, 'I am sure of it'--which ends the

conversation. They rely on their impression as other people rely on

known facts; and a foggy belief is to them what a mathematical

demonstration is to the exact.

In business matters they are simply maddening. They never have the

necessary papers; they do not answer letters; they confuse your

questions and reply at random or not at all; and they forget all dates

and details. When they go to their lawyer on business they leave

certificates and drafts behind them locked up where no one can get at

them; or if they send directions and the keys, they tell the servant

to look for an oblong blue envelope in the right-hand drawer, when

they ought to have said a square white parcel in the left. They give

you vague commissions to execute; and you have to find your way in the

fog to the best of your ability. They say they want something like

something else you have never seen, and they cannot give an address

more exact than 'somewhere in Oxford Street.' They think the man's

name is Baker, or something like that. Perhaps it is Flower; but the

suggestion of ideas ought to be intelligible to you, and is quite near

enough for them. They ask you to meet them when they come up to

London, but they do not give you either the station or the train. You

have to make a guess as near as you can; and when you reproach them,

they pay you the compliment of saying you are so clever, it was not

necessary for them to explain.

If they have any friends out in Australia or India, they inquire of

you, just returned, if you happened to meet them? When you ask, Where

were they stationed?--they say they do not know; and when you suggest

that Madras and Calcutta are not in the same Presidencies, that India

is a large place and Australia not quite like an English county, they

look helpless and bewildered, and drift away into the vague geography

familiar to them, 'somewhere in India,' 'somewhere in Australia,' and

'I thought you might have met them.' For geography, like history, is

one of the branches of the tree of knowledge they have never climbed,

and the fruits thereof are as though they were not.

But apart from the personal discomforts to which vague people subject

themselves, and the absurdities of which they are guilty, one cannot

help speculating on the spiritual state of folks to whom nothing is

precise, nothing definite, and no question of faith clearly thought

out. To be sure they may be great in the realm of conviction; but so

is the African savage when he hears the ghosts of his ancestors pass

howling in the woods; so is the Assassin of the Mountain, when he sees

heaven open as he throws himself on the spears of his enemies in an

ecstacy of faith, to be realized by slaughter and suicide. Convictions

based on imagination, unsupported by facts or proofs, are as worthless

in a moral as in a logical point of view; but the vague have nothing

better; and whether as politicians or as pietists, though they are

warm partizans they are but feeble advocates, fond of flourishing

about large generalities, but impossible to be pinned to any point and

unable to defend any position. To those who must have something

absolute and precise, however limited--one inch of firmly-laid

foundation on which to build up the superstructure--it is a matter of

more wonder than envy how the vague are content to live for ever in a

haze which has no clearness of outline, no definiteness of detail, and

how they can make themselves happy in a name--calling their fog faith,

and therewith counting themselves blessed.