The Project Gutenberg eBook, The People's Palace and the Religious World,

by A Layman



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INTRODUCTION.

DISAGREEMENT with the object and dislike of the tone of the incipient

agitation for preventing the concession of a Royal Charter to the Crystal

Palace Company, except upon the condition of its gates being closed on

Sunday—a desire to vindicate the consistency of many religious people,

whose silence might be construed into sympathy with the movement—and the

wish to offer a few thoughts on the impolicy, in a religious point of

view, of such attacks on the pleasures of the poor:—are, in brief, the

motives which have determined the printing of the following pages. The

Writer believes the ground traversed is firm and solid, though he is

unable to beguile the journey with those flowers of rhetoric and gleams

of warm fancy with which more gifted writers can brighten their course.

Though inexperience in book-making and pamphleteering is no excuse for

unsound conclusions, he hopes it may avail to disarm the severity of

criticism. Convinced that for the advantage of true religion, as well as

its professors, the ideas he has broached require to be freely, closely,

and sincerely discussed, he ventures to claim for them candid and

unprejudiced consideration. He hopes it is superfluous to state that he

has no pecuniary interest in, nor connexion with, the project in

question.

THE PEOPLE’S PALACE,

\_&c.\_ \_&c.\_

SHALL the new Crystal Palace be open on Sunday? This question is

exciting a good deal of attention—especially in the religious world, and

is likely to attract more, ere finally set at rest. It is a question of

magnitude, and possibly of political importance. It becomes, therefore,

the duty of all who feel interested in its solution, to ascertain clearly

the facts upon which it is based, the principles with which it is bound

up, and the consequences which will flow from its decision. The occasion

seems to have been seized upon by what may be called the Sabbatarian

party, to make a determined stand on behalf of the principle for which

they have often fought and been vanquished—the right of the religious

world to impose their notions of Sabbath observance upon the community at

large. The particular point at issue may be readily decided by any

unbiassed mind, on examination of the actual facts. But the Sabbatarians

refuse to be bound down to the case as it stands. They exaggerate and

pervert the facts; and, under cover of the smoke and excitement thus

created, advance to a general assault upon what they term “Sabbath

desecration.” The design of the next few pages is rather to point out

the impolicy, danger, and hopelessness of any public movement to prevent

the opening of this place of recreation on the Sunday, than to advocate

or defend that step.

Although the facts of the case are conveniently lost sight of by the

agitators in question, they are really so important to a right

understanding of its merits as to admit of re-statement. It appears,

then, that the New Crystal Palace at Sydenham is in the hands of a

joint-stock company, and is to be conducted on the same commercial

principles as all speculations of a like character. Their object is

familiar to every newspaper reader. In brief, they propose to provide

for the people recreation and instruction of a kind not now within their

reach. If the programme be faithfully carried out, the project will

unquestionably tend to improve the health, enlarge the knowledge, and

refine the taste of the public. The Company have applied for a Royal

Charter of Incorporation, the effect of which, as is well known, is to

confine the liability of individual shareholders to the amount of their

shares. In making their application to Lord Derby, the Directors, we are

told by the \_Times\_, communicated to his Lordship the terms upon which

they proposed to open the building and grounds on Sunday. “They were of

opinion that until after one o’clock no trains should run from London,

and the Crystal Palace itself should be strictly closed. After that hour

they proposed to throw open the park and the winter-garden, but not to

exhibit those departments of the building which will partake exclusively

of a manufacturing and commercial character, the intention being to

devote a certain portion of the space to specimens of manufacture, &c.,

which the public will be invited, upon certain conditions, to display.

In the third place, the Directors undertook that on Sunday no spirituous

liquors should be sold in their grounds.” After an interview with the

Directors, Lord Derby acquiesced in the stipulations proffered by the

Crystal Palace Company, suggested a few trifling variations, and promised

to grant the required Charter.

The announcement of this decision or promise—for it can scarcely be

regarded as a \_fait accompli\_—has excited not a little alarm amongst a

section of the religious world. The Lord’s Day Society have taken up the

matter very warmly—publishing pamphlets and holding public meetings in

condemnation of the arrangement. The Evangelical Alliance, a wide-spread

organization, at its recent Conference in Dublin, adopted a

strongly-worded resolution and memorial to the Prime Minister to the same

effect. These acts of organized bodies have been vigorously followed up

by journals representing respectively the Evangelical clergy of the

Establishment, Wesleyans, Free Churchmen, and a portion of the Dissenting

community; who call upon their readers, in every capacity, and by every

means, to resist the proposed “wholesale violation of the Lord’s Day.”

{6} The strength of this disapprobation and alarm may be gathered from

one or two quotations. A widely-circulated religious magazine denounces

the proposal as “sinful,” and calculated to “lead to sin on an extensive

and alarming scale,” and calls “upon all religious and moral men,

throughout the United Kingdom, to lift up their voices like a trumpet,

and to cause them to be heard on this great and vital question.” A very

influential newspaper in the North predicts that “the measure will have a

most fatal operation on the religious interests of the country,” and

urges a general expression of public opinion “to prevent the Minister

from persevering in his intention to grant a Charter containing

permission to open the Crystal Palace on Sunday.” A Clapham clergyman,

in a pamphlet very loosely put together, {7} says, “The projected

\_aggression of pleasure\_ in 1853, is to me a greater object of dread than

the \_aggression of Popery\_ in 1850, because it falls in with the taste of

the vast majority of mankind.” A metropolitan Dissenting journal speaks

of the question as one involving a principle “that would speedily extend

itself to other institutions,” and expresses its belief that the

recognition by the State that the Sabbath ends at one o’clock, would be

“a far deeper stab to public morality, and afford a greater triumph to

Popery and Infidelity, than any act of the British Government since the

days of James II.” Ministers of religion, of every denomination, are

therefore called upon to protest against the threatened evil, and

Sunday-school teachers to petition against a measure aiming a deadly blow

at those institutions. Another London paper is even more emphatic, not

to say intemperate, upon the subject, describing “this new guild of

Sunday traders as craving, through the sign-manual of the Sovereign,

license to open a gorgeous temple of rampant pleasure, and to filch, by

Royal authority, both coin and conscience from every unit of the