

# OUR NATIONAL PHYSIQUE.

## Prospects of the British Race.

### Are We Degenerating?

[By Francis Galton. F.R.S.]

The alleged deterioration of our race through town life and other insanitary conditions is indeed worthy of serious inquiry by a Royal Commission or otherwise, but the points which a Commission is likely to consider can only be part of a much larger object that well deserves to be kept in evidence before the public. A strong consensus of educated opinion in this larger sense is needed to stimulate the inquirers to their utmost, and to prepare the public to accept the measures that the Commissioners may eventually think fit to propose, even though they be unexpectedly drastic. In the following remarks I propose to deal with the subject on these wider lines, and shall not confine myself to what relates only to the wastrels and to the slums. The questions I keep before me are whether or no the British race as a whole is, or is not, equal to its Imperial responsibilities, and again, how far it is feasible to make it more capable of the high destinies that are within its reach if it possesses the will and power to pursue them. I wish that each one of us should stand aloof from ourselves as a whole, and should watch the condition and doings of our race, much as an authority of the Royal Agricultural Society might criticise the stock of his neighbour over the hedge. If we do so we may learn in what ways our own stock and its rearing are open to improvement, and we may perhaps ensue it.

There is no question that the pick of the British race are as capable human animals as the world can at present produce. Their defects lie chiefly in the graceful and sympathetic sides of their nature, but they are strong in mind and body, truthful and purposive, excellent leaders of the people of lower races. I speak more particularly of those who are selected to go abroad in various high capacities, whether by Government or by firms, to carry out large undertakings under circumstances when they will have to depend much upon themselves. The lower middle-class of Britons are quite as efficient by nature, probably they are more so than men of other races, but they are of a coarser fibre than the Latins. Our average holiday-maker and cheap-excursion tourist is proverbially unprepossessing. He probably admits of high polish, but the process is far too costly for his means, so he stands on a conspicuously lower social level than those of his compatriots who have been more favoured in their fortunes. His manners are noisy and vulgar, "they have not the repose that marks the caste of Vere de Vere," which men of many other races have. As regards the physique of Britons, I think we brag, or have bragged, more than is right. Moreover, we are not as well formed as might be. It is difficult to get opportunities of studying the nude figures of our countrymen in mass, but I have often watched crowds bathe, as in the Serpentine, with a critical eye, and always came to the conclusion that they were less shapely than many of the dark-coloured peoples whom I have seen.

There was a curious exhibition not very long ago at the Albert Hall of men selected for strength, which, so far as I saw, attracted less attention from the newspapers than it deserved, so I will mention my own impressions. If I am inaccurate through writing from memory alone the faults will, I am sure, be in details of secondary importance. Sandow, the well-known athlete, has established schools of instruction in places variously scattered over England, and he arranged two or three years ago to give no less than £1,000 in prizes to the three best-made men among the numerous pupils in his many classes. During a tour of inspection he selected from each class the three whom he considered the best, and in due time the whole body of selected competitors were assembled in Albert Hall at a public meeting. They were dressed alike in tight trousers, which showed the shape, and each had a scarf thrown jauntily over his otherwise nude shoulders. Ten solid pedestals stood in front of the organ; electric light was in readiness, and a brass band occupied a corner of the orchestra. I will not dwell on the many and very pretty gymnastic feats that were shown, but shall speak only of what is now to the point. The candidates, about eighty in number, marched in a phalanx, ten men abreast. The first row detached itself, went nimbly to the ten pedestals, where each man threw off his scarf and mounted upon one of them. The electric light was flashed on the ten standing figures. Three judges (of whom Sir Conan Doyle was one) walked round them, note-books in hand, criticising and appraising. Sandow was in readiness to act as referee if called upon. Then the best man of the ten was selected by the judges, and he stepped apart. The same was done to each row in succession until all were gone through. Then the twice-selected competitors (I think there were eight of them) mounted the pedestals side by side. They were scrutinised even more closely than before, just as prize cattle. At length the final selections were made, and the victor was handed down the Hall, to the tune of "See the conquering hero" from the brass band, and received his magnificent award of a gold trophy amidst the plaudits of all; the second similarly received a silver replica of it, and the third a bronze one. I studied the whole of the proceedings carefully through an opera glass, and had by my own judgment fixed upon two of the three during the preliminary stages. I should say that the first of all had not been one of these, but I fully recognised the justice of that award in the end. Now as to my conclusions. I did not think these best specimens of the British race to be ideally well made men. They did not bear comparison with Greek statues of Hercules and of other athletes, being somewhat ill-proportioned and too heavily built. I must say that I was disappointed with them from the æsthetic point of view, though in respect to muscular power they seemed prodigies. Sandow afterwards exhibited himself in a pose that brought out his chest and arms to full advantage, and in that statuesque posture I placed him as far superior to all the competitors.

I therefore doubt if a stock-breeder could make very much out of the British race in respect to physical beauty of the trunk and limbs. Subject to this small reservation, the imaginary critic above mentioned could emphatically affirm with justice that the whole of a race which was able to furnish the large supply that is produced in Great Britain of men who are sound in body, capable in mind, energetic and of high character, has the capacity (speaking as a rearer of stock) of being raised to at least that same high level. How to do this is a question of both Nature and Nurture. I shall not reiterate here what I have on more than one occasion urged in respect to the former of these two great influences, further than to repeat my conclusions, which were, first, that if a strong and intelligent public opinion should ever become aroused in favour of improving the breed of our race, influences are in existence which even now operate in a small way in entire conformity with sentiment and law, and which are capable by development of producing great results. Individually their power is small, but in co-operation they would wield a practically overwhelming force. The second conclusion was that we have a great deal yet to learn on matters bearing

upon race-improvement, which lies within the plain province of anthropology, before it would be justifiable to attempt a crusade. Otherwise great mistakes would arise, efforts would be wasted, the results would not agree with anticipations, and the movement would become discredited and collapse. My attitude, which has usually been misrepresented, is to urge serious inquiry into specific matters which still require investigation in the well-justified hope that a material improvement in our British breed is not so Utopian an object as it may seem, but is probably quite feasible under the conditions I have just named. But whatever agencies may be brought to bear on the improvement of the British stock, whether it be in its Nature or in its Nurture, they will be costly, and it cannot be too strongly hammered into popular recognition that a well-developed human being, capable in body and mind, is an expensive animal to rear. It would be bad economy to spend more on him than can subsequently be got back, while it is equally bad economy to starve him into weakness. A horse must be well fed in order that the value of his work shall bear the highest possible ratio to the cost of his food. It was remarked by an eminent contractor that in all lands the wage and the amount of work done for it bore a curiously constant proportion, low wages producing little, high wages much. It is, of course, a matter of careful inquiry to learn the limits within which this alleged law holds good. The most appropriate amount of feed for horses is known well enough.

When considering how to deal most economically with the masses, a question arises which seems to me of much importance, but which has never to my knowledge been put, and which I trust that the Commission will entertain. It may be phrased in this form. A certain small dose is available for each child to help his rearing; at what age would that exceptional and temporary assistance be most effective? Is it in childhood, or at about the time of most rapid growth? The immense improvement in the physique of previously ill-fed recruits, after a year's good feeding with an out-of-doors life, is well known, but much irremediable mischief may have been done before that age is reached. Would it be better to begin earlier and to leave off sooner? In short, a careful inquiry should be made as to the maximum of good effect on the physique that might on the average be produced, through the extra expenditure of a given sum of moderate amount, paying especial regard to the ages at which that sum would have to be expended.



