The Grindwell Governing Machine

Anonymous

Table of Contents

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On the other side of the Atlantic there is a populous city called Grandville. It is, as its name indicates, a great city, — but it is said that it thinks itself a good deal greater than it really is. I meant to say that Grandville was its original name, and the name by which even at the present day it is called by its own citizens. But there are certain wits, or it may be, vulgar people, who by some process have converted this name into Grindwell.

I may be able, in the course of this sketch, to give a reason why so sounding and aristocratic a name as Grandville has been changed into the plebeian one of Grindwell. I might account for it by adducing similar instances of changes in the names of cities through the bad pronunciation and spelling of foreigners. For instance, the English nickname Livorno Leghorn, the Germans insist on calling Venice Venedig, and the French convert Washington into the Chinese word Voss−Hang−Tong. And so it may be that the name Grindwell has originated among us Americans simply from miscalling or misspelling the foreign name of Grandville.

I incline to think, however, that there is a better reason for the name.

For a good many years Grandville has been famous for a great machine, of a very curious construction, which is said to regulate the movements of the whole city, and almost to convert the men, women, and children into cranks, wheels, and pinions. As a model of this machine does not exist in our Patent Office at Washington, I shall beg the reader's indulgence while I attempt to give some account of it. It may be thought a very curious affair, though I believe there is little about it that is original or new. The idea of it was handed down from remote generations.

In America I know that many persons may consider the Grindwell Governing Machine a humbug, — an obsolete, absurd, and tyrannous institution, wholly unfitted to the nineteenth century. A machine that proposes to think and act for the whole people, and which is rigidly opposed to the people's thinking and acting for themselves, is likely to find little favor among us. With us the doctrine is, that each one should think for himself, — be an individual mind and will, and not the spoke of a wheel. Every American voter or votress is allowed to keep his or her little intellectual wind−mill, coffee−mill, pepper−mill, loom, steam−engine, hand−organ, or whatever moral manufacturing or grinding apparatus he or she likes. Each one may be his own Church or his own State, and yet be none the less a good and useful citizen, and the union of the States be in none the more danger. But it is not so in Grindwell. The rules of the Grindwell machine allow no one to do his own grinding, unless his mill−wheel is turned by the central governing power. He must allow the big State machine to do everything, — he paying for it, of course. A regular programme prescribes what he shall believe and say and do; and any departure from this order is considered a violation of the laws, or at least a reprehensible invasion of the time−honored customs of the city.

The Grindwell Governing Machine (though a patent has been taken out for it in Europe, and it is thought everything of by royal heads and the gilded flies that buzz about them) is really an old machine, nearly worn out, and every now and then patched up and painted and varnished anew. If a committee of our knowing Yankees were sent over to gain information with regard to its actual condition, I am inclined to think they would bring back a curious and not very favorable report. It wouldn't astonish me, if they should pronounce the whole apparatus of the State rotten from top to bottom, and only kept from falling to pieces by all sorts of ingenious

contrivances of an external and temporary nature, — here a wheel, or pivot, or spring to be replaced, — there a prop or buttress to be set up, — here a pipe choked up, — there a boiler burst, — and so on, from one end of the works to the other. However, the machine keeps a−going, and many persons think it works beautifully.

Everything is reduced to such perfect system in its operations, that the necessity for individual opinion is almost superseded, and even private consciences are laid upon the shelf, — just as people lay by an antiquated timepiece that no winding−up or shaking can persuade into marking the hours, — for have they not the clock on the Government railroad station opposite, which they can at any time consult by stepping to the window? For instance, individual honesty is set aside and replaced by a system of rewards and punishments. Honesty is an old−fashioned coat. The police, like a great sponge, absorbs the private virtue. It says to conscience, "Stay there, — don't trouble yourself, — I will act for you."

You drop your purse in the street. A rogue picks it up. In his private conscience he says, "Honesty is a very good thing, perhaps, but it is by no means the best policy, — it is simply no policy at all, — it is sheer stupidity. What can be more politic than for me to pocket this windfall and turn the corner quick?" — So preacheth his crooked fag−end of a conscience, that very, very small still voice, in very husky tones; but he knows that a policeman, walking behind him, saw him pick up the purse, which alters the case, — which, in fact, completely sets aside his fag−end of a husky−voiced conscience, and makes virtue his necessity, and necessity his virtue. External morality is hastily drawn on as a decent overcoat to hide the tag−rags of his roguishness, while he magnanimously restores the purse to the owner.

Jones left his umbrella in a cab one night. Discovering that he hadn't it under his arm, he rushed after the cabman; but he was gone. Jones had his number, however, and with it proceeded the next day to the police−office, feeling sure that he would find his umbrella there. And there, in a closet appropriated to articles left in hackney−coaches, — a perfect limbo of canes, parasols, shawls, pocket−books, and what−not, − − he found it, ticketed and awaiting its lawful owner. The explanation of which mystery is, that the cabmen in Grindwell are strictly amenable to the police for any departure from the system which provides for the security of private property, and a yearly reward is given to those of the coach−driving fraternity who prove to be the most faithful restorers of articles left in their carriages. Surely, the result of system can no farther go than this, — that Monsieur Vaurien's moral sense, like his opinions, should be absorbed and overruled by the governing powers.

What a capital thing it is to have the great governmental head and heart thinking and feeling for us! Why, even the little boys, on winter afternoons, are restricted by the policemen from sliding on the ice in the streets, for fear the impetuous little fellows should break or dislocate some of their bones, and the hospital might have the expense of setting them; so patriarchal a regard has the machine for its young friends!

I might allude here to a special department of the machine, which once had great power in overruling the thoughts and consciences of the people, and which is still considered by some as not altogether powerless. I refer to the Ecclesiastic department of the Grindwell works. This was formerly the greatest laborsaving machinery ever invented. But however powerful the operation of the Church machinery upon the grandmothers and grandfathers of the modern Grindwellites, it has certainly fallen greatly into disuse, and is kept a−going now more for the sake of appearances than for any real efficacy. The most knowing ones think it rather old− fashioned and cumbrous, — at any rate, not comparable to the State machinery, either in its design or its mode of operation. And as in these days of percussion−caps and Minie rifles we lay by an old matchlock or crossbow, using it only to ornament our walls, — or as the powdered postilion with his horn and his boots is superseded by the locomotive and the electric telegraph, — so the old rusty Church wheels are removed into buildings apart from the daily life of the people, where they seem to revolve harmlessly and without any necessary connection with the State wheels.

Not that I mean to say that it works smoothly and well at all times, — this Grindwell machine. How can such an old patched and crumbling apparatus be expected always to work well? And how can you hope to find, even in the most enslaved or routine−ridden community, entire obedience to the will of the monarch and his satellites?

Unfortunately for the cause of order and quiet, there will always be found certain tough lumps, in the shape of rebellious or non−conformist men, which refuse to be melted in the strong solvents or ground up in the swift mills of Absolutism. Government must look after these impediments. If they are positively dangerous, they must be destroyed or removed. If only suspected, or known to be powerless or inactive, they must at least be watched.

And here, again, the machine of government shows a remarkable ingenuity of organization.

For instance, it is said that there are pipes laid all along the streets, like hose, leading from a central reservoir. Nobody knows exactly what they are for; but if any one steps upon them, up spirts something like a stream of gas, and takes the form of a gendarme, — and the unlucky street−walker must pay dear for his carelessness. Telegraph wires radiate like cobwebs from the chamber of the main−spring, and carry intelligence of all that is going on in the houses and streets. Man−traps are laid under the pavements, — sometimes they are secretly introduced under your very table or bed, — and if anything is said against that piece of machinery called the main−spring, or against the head engineer, the trap will nab you and fly away with you, like the spider that carried off Margery Mopp. If a number of people get together to discuss the meaning of and the reasons for the existence of the main−spring, or any of the big wheels immediately connected therewith, the ground under them will sometimes give way, and they will suddenly find themselves in unfurnished apartments not to their liking. And if any one should be so rash as to put his hand on the wheels, he is cut to pieces or strangled by the silent, incessant, fatal whirl of the engine.

The head engineer keeps his machine, and the city on which it acts, as much in the dark as possible. He has a special horror of sunshine. He seems to think that the sky is one great burning lens, and his machine−rooms and the city a vast powder−magazine.

There are certain articles thought to be especially dangerous. Newspapers are strictly forbidden, — unless first steeped in a tincture of asbestos of a very dull color, expressly manufactured and supplied by the Governing Machine. When properly saturated with the essence of dulness and death, and brought down from a glaring white and black to a decidedly ashy−gray neutral color, a few small newspapers are permitted to be circulated, but with the greatest caution. They sometimes take fire, it is said, — these journals, — when brought too near any brain overcharged with electricity. Two or three times, it is said, the Governing Machine has been put out of order by the newspapers and their readers bringing too much electro−magnetism (or something like it) to bear on parts of the works; — the machine had even taken fire and been nearly burnt up, and the head engineer got so singed that he never dared to take the management of the works again.

So it is thought that nothing is so unfavorable to the working of the wheels as light, heat, electricity, magnetism, and, generally, all the imponderable and uncatchable essences that float about in the air; and these, it is thought, are generated and diffused by these villanous newspapers. Certain kinds of books are also forbidden, as being electric conductors. Most of the books allowed in the city of Grindwell are so heavy, that they are thought to be usually non−conductors, and therefore quite safe in the hands of the people.

It is at the city gates that most vigilance is required with regard to the prohibited articles. There the poor fellows who keep the gates have no rest night or day, — so many suspicious−looking boxes, bundles, bales, and barrels claim admittance. Quantities of articles are arrested and prevented from entering. Nothing that can in any way interfere with the great machine can come in. Newspapers and books from other countries are torn and burnt up. Speaking−trumpets, ear−trumpets, spectacles, microscopes, spy− glasses, telescopes, and, generally, all instruments and contrivances for extending the sphere of ordinary knowledge, are very narrowly examined before they are admitted. The only trumpets freely allowed are of a musical sort, fit to amuse the people, — the only spectacles, green goggles to keep out the glare of truth's sunshine, — the magnifying−glasses, those which exaggerate the proportions of the imperial governor of the machinery. All sorts of moral lightning−rods and telegraph−wires are arrested, and lie in great piles outside the city walls.

But in spite of the utmost vigilance and care of the officers at the gates and the sentinels on the thick walls, dangerous articles and dangerous people will pass in. A man like Kossuth or Mazzini going through would produce such a current of the electric fluid, that the machine would be in great danger of combustion. Remonstrances were sometimes sent to neighboring cities, to the effect that they should keep their light and heat to themselves, and not be throwing such strong reflections into the weak eyes of the Grindwellites, and putting in danger the governmental powder−magazine, — as the machine−offices were sometimes called. An inundation or bad harvest, producing a famine among the poor, causes great alarm, and the governmental officers have a time of it, running about distributing alms, or raising money to keep down the price of bread. Thousands of servants in livery, armed with terrific instruments for the destruction of life, are kept standing on and around the walls of the city, ready at a moment's notice to shoot down any one who makes any movement or demonstration in a direction contrary to the laws of the machine. And to support this great crowd of liveried lackeys, the people are squeezed like sponges, till they furnish the necessary money.

The respectable editors of the daily papers go about somewhat as the dogs do in August, with muzzles on their mouths. They are prohibited from printing more than a hundred words a day. Any reference to the sunshine, or to any of the subtile and imponderable substances before mentioned, is considered contrary to the order of the machines; to compensate for which, there is great show of gaslight (under glass covers) throughout the city. Gas and moonshine are the staple subjects of conversation. Besides lighting the streets and shops, the chief use of fire seems to be for cooking, lighting pipes and cigars, and fireworks to amuse the working classes.

Great attention is paid to polishing and beautifying the outer case of the machine, and the outer surface generally of the city of Grindwell. Where any portion of the framework has fallen into dilapidation and decay, the gaunt skeleton bones of the ruined structure are decked and covered with leaves and flowers. Old rusty boilers that are on the verge of bursting are newly painted, varnished, and labelled with letters of gold. The main− spring, which has grown old and weak, is said to be helped by the secret application of steam, — and the fires are fed with huge bundles of worthless bank−bills and other paper promises. The noise of the clanking piston and wheels is drowned by orchestras of music; the roofs and sides of the machine buildings are covered all over with roses; and the smell of smoke and machine oil is prevented by scattering delicious perfumes. The minds of the populace are turned from the precarious condition of things by all sorts of public amusements, such as mask balls, theatres, operas, public gardens, etc.

But all this does not preserve some persons from the continual apprehension that there will be one day a great and terrific explosion. Some say the city is sleeping over volcanic fires, which will sooner or later burst up from below and destroy or change the whole upper surface. The actual state of things might be represented on canvas by a gaping, laughing crowd pressing around a Punch−and−Judy exhibition in the street, beneath a great ruined palace in the process of repairing, where the rickety scaffolding, the loose stones and mortar, and in fact the whole rotten building, may at any moment topple down upon their heads.

But while such grave thoughts are passing in the minds of some people, I must relate one or two amusing scenes which lately occurred at the city gates.

Travellers are not prohibited from going and coming; but on entering, it is necessary to be sure that they bring with their passports and baggage no prohibited or dangerous articles. A young man from our side of the Atlantic, engaged in commerce, had been annoyed a good deal by the gate−officers opening and searching his baggage. The next time he went to Grindwell, he brought, besides his usual trunks and carpet−bags, a rather large and very mysterious−looking box. After going through with the trunks and bags, the officers took hold of this box.

"Gentlemen," said the young practical joker, "I have great objections to having that box opened. Yet it contains, I assure you, nothing contraband, nothing dangerous to the peace of the Grindwell government or people. It is simply a toy I am taking to a friend's house as a Christmas present to his little boy. If I open it, I fear I shall have difficulty in arranging it again as neatly as I wish, — and it would be a great disappointment to my little friend

Auguste Henri, if he should not find it neatly packed. It would show at once that it had been opened; and children like to have their presents done up nicely, just as they issued from the shop. Gentlemen, I shall take it as a great favor, if you will let it pass."

"Sir," said the head officer, "it is impossible to grant the favor you ask. The government is very strict. Many prohibited articles have lately found their way in. We are determined to put a stop to it."

"Gentlemen," said the young man, "take hold of that box, — lift it. You see how light it is; you see that there can be no contraband goods there, — still less, anything dangerous. I pray you to let it pass."

"Impossible, Sir!" said the officer. "How do I know that there is nothing dangerous there? The weight is nothing. Its lightness rather makes it the more suspicious. Boxes like this are usually heavy. This is something out of the usual course. I'm afraid there's electricity here. Gentlemen officers, proceed to do your duty!"

So a crowd of custom−house officers gathered around the suspected box, with their noses bent down over the lid, awaiting the opening. One of them was about to proceed with hammer and chisel.

"Stop," said the young merchant, "I can save you a great deal of trouble. I can open it in an instant. Allow me — by touching a little spring here" —

As he said this, he pressed a secret spring on the side of the box. No sooner was it done than the lid was thrown back with sudden and tremendous violence, as if by some living force, and up jumped a hideous and shaggy monster which knocked the six custom− house officers flat on their backs. It was an enormous Punchinello on springs, who had been confined in the box like the Genie in the Arabian story, and by the broad grin on his face he seemed delighted with his liberty and his triumph over his inquisitors. The six officers lay stunned by the blow; and while others ran up to see what was the matter, the young traveller persuaded Mr. Punch back again into his box, and, shutting him down, took advantage of the confusion to carry it off with the rest of his baggage, and reach a cab in safety. When the officers recovered their senses, the practical joker had escaped into the crowded city. They could give no clear account of what had happened; but I verily believe they thought that Lucifer himself had knocked them down, and was now let loose in the city of Grindwell.

Another amusing incident occurred afterwards at the city gates. An American lady, who was a great lover of Art, had purchased a bronze bust of Plato somewhere on the Continent. She had it carefully boxed, and took it along with her baggage. She got on very well until she reached the city of Grindwell. Here she was stopped, of course, and her baggage examined. Finding nothing contraband, they were about to let her pass, when they came to the box containing the ancient philosopher's head.

"What's this?" they asked. "What's in this box, so heavy?"

"A bust," said the lady.

"A bust? so heavy? a bust in a lady's baggage? — Impossible!"

"I assure you, it is nothing but a bust."

"Pray, whose bust may it be, Madam?"

"The bust of Plato."

"Plato? Plato? Who is Plato? Is he an Italian?"

"He was a Greek philosopher."

"Why is it so heavy?"

"It is a bronze bust."

"We beg your pardon, Madam; but we fear there's something wrong here. This Plato may be a conspirator, — a Carbonaro, — a member of some secret society, — a red−republican, — a conductor of the electric fluid. How can we answer for this Plato? We don't like this heavy box; — these very heavy boxes are suspicious. Suppose it should be some infernal−machine. Madam, we have our doubts. This box must be detained till full inquiries are made."

There was no help for it. The box was detained. "It must be so, Plato!" After waiting several hours, it was brought forward in presence of the entire company of inquisitors, and cautiously opened. Seeing no Plato, but only some sawdust, they grew still more suspicious. Having placed the box on the ground, they all retired to a safe distance, as if awaiting some explosion. They evidently took it for an infernal−machine. In their eyes everything was a machine of some sort or other. After waiting some time, and finding that it didn't burst, nor emit even a smell of sulphur, the boldest man of the party approached it very cautiously, and upset it with his foot and ran.

All this while the lady and her friends stood by, silent spectators of this farce. The only danger of explosion was on their part, with laughter at the whole scene. They contrived, however, to keep their countenances, though less rigidly than the Greek philosopher in the box did his.

When the custom−house officials found, that, though the box was upset, nothing occurred, they grew more bold, and, approaching, saw a piece of the bronze head peering above the sawdust. Then, for the first time, they began to feel ashamed of themselves. So replacing the sawdust and the cover, they allowed the box to pass into the city, and tried, by avoiding to speak of the affair among themselves to forget what donkeys they had been.

The Grindwell government has many such alarms, and never appears entirely at its ease. It is fully aware of the combustible nature of the component parts of the Governing Machine. There is consequently great outlay of means to insure its safety. An immense number of public spies and functionaries are constantly employed in looking after the fires and lights about the city. Heavy restrictions are laid on all substances containing electricity, and great care is taken lest this subtile fluid should condense in spots and take the form of lightning. Fortunately, the unclouded sunshine seldom comes into Grindwell, else there would be the same fears with regard to light.

So long as this perpetual surveillance is kept up, the machine seems to work on well enough in the main; but the moment there is any remissness on the part of the police, — bang! goes a small explosion somewhere, — or, crack! a bit of the machinery, — and out rush the engineers with their bags of cotton−wool or tow to stop up the chinks, or their bundles of paper money to keep up the steam, or their buckets of oil and soft soap to pour upon the wheels.

One eccentric gentleman of my acquaintance persists in predicting that any day there may be a general blow−up, and the whole concern, engineers, financiers, priests, soldiers, and flunkies, all go to smash. He evidently wishes to see it; though, as far as personal comfort goes, one would rather be out of the way at such a time.

Most people seem to think, that, considering all things, the present head engineer is about the best man that could be found for the post he occupies. There are, however, a number of the Grindwell people — I can't say how many, for they are afraid to speak — who feel more and more that they are living in a stifled and altogether abnormal condition, and wish for an indefinite supply of the light, heat, air, and electricity which they see some of the neighboring cities enjoying.

What the result is to be no one can yet tell. We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with — a crust; some say, a very thin crust, such as might be got up by a skilful patissier, and over which gilded court−flies, and even scarabaei, may crawl with safety, but which must inevitably cave in beneath the boot−heels of a real, true, thinking man. We cannot forget that there are measureless catacombs and caverns yawning beneath the streets and houses of modern Grindwell.