

THE UGLIFYING PROCESS.

A good deal is written and said from time to time on the connection between dress and art; and all those who lament the unnecessary ugliness with which fashion invests often every-day life, acknowledge the difficulty of finding a remedy. Where grave interests are concerned, the heroic spirit of propagandism is not wanting; but such as persons of artistic nature may be shocked by conventional absurdities of costume, they seldom feel strongly enough on the subject to propose and carry out innovations. It seems worth while to brave ridicule and opposition for the sake of an idea or a political opinion, whereas an inconvenient or unhealthy fashion of dress appears more in the light of a personal grievance. Good taste is so often outraged by other domestic fashions, that to run amuck against this one would by no means solve the vexed question. The architecture of our streets and the appointments of our houses, the love of display exhibited in our entertainments, the snobbishness of many of our social usages—all these things fret a sensitive mind, and would attain greater prominence but for more engrossing interests. We naturally submit ourselves to a host of social tyrannies on a small scale, rather than spend our strength in struggling with inferior enemies. We suffer a domination as disagreeable as it is illogical, because we give out so much force in combating less bearable evils.

But when we have accused fashion of robbing dress of picturesqueness and beauty, of turning every-day hospitalities into formal and repressive things, of filling our dining-rooms with costly, unwholesome, unwholesome, of imposing upon us trains of over-paid, over-fed, noxious domestic servants, we have not nearly made out the bill of attainder. Greatly as we may deplore the aesthetic bearings of this excessive love of display, its moral bearings are still more deplorable. For neither with bodily nor with mental discomforts do the evils of artificial civilization begin and end. This inordinate craving for the sort of equality bestowed by the vulgar upon outward appearance is as incompatible with peace of mind as with dignity of character. The result of the effort to put the frivillous away of energies on matters essentially trivial, the daily mortifications that are sure to wait upon a foolish ambition, the vexations of a spirit absorbed by selfish aims, have a very small margin indeed for the sort of repose without which life must be unsatisfactory and undignified. We can understand the restlessness of a really noble nature disquieted by questions of immense range and importance. The restlessness of minds bent upon small social successes is quite another thing. Easily then, is explained the ashamed, pitiful, worn-out type of physiognomy so sadly common among us. The worship of fashion is an uglifying process. Not only is character deteriorated by an increasing desire for what is in itself contemptible—however falsely estimated by the majority, but health is undermined, and if health goes, beauty is not slow to follow. We contend, then, that we are not only making ourselves older and gloomier, but uglier, by this never-ending struggle with society. Just as pain or avarice, or any strong emotion constantly called into play, leaves its indelible stamp on the features, so do petty passions obliterate whatever of greatness or singleness of purpose may once have been written there, and inscribe their own story instead. When existence is a hand-to-hand struggle with unworthy circumstances, when the motives for living are turned into selfish channels, when young and old are inflated with a passion for luxury, it is little wonder that the beauty of expression which invariably accompanies elevation of thought and completeness of character, moral and intellectual, should be wanting. We are uglified by over-civilization, or rather we allow over-civilization to uglify us. In large cities a man finds himself burdened with a wife and increasing family, not because he cannot earn the wherewithal for their support, but because he cannot find the wherewithal for their superfluities. The young women of the better ranks of society are brought up to dress according to the last dicta of Parisian milliners, with little regard to consequences. The young men are brought up to expect to have money for their amusements. The little ones in the nursery do not go without their juvenile parties, ball dresses, and abundance of new books—each annual supply being more costly and unobtainable than the last. Every year the appointments of even a modest household become more and more costly. Every year the so-called necessities of life increase. What renders that care-worn, harassed look of English men and women the rule, and a calm contented expression the exception? People who live in sunny climates, where civilization lags and existence is comparatively easy, attribute the prevailing melancholy to over-feeding and grey hairs; but in this our fair, it comes not from either. We want, as freedom from care and a general habit of repose. Whilst social life is encumbered with all kinds of frivolities, and a conventional agreement with prevailing custom seems to both ought the first duty of rational beings, repose is the portion of the few and not of the many. In season and out of season, culture is preached, and undoubtedly intellectual education spreads wider and wider; but culture and education generally are of little use so long as they remain a theory. A single protest made against fashionable extravagance, whether in dress, etiquette, or domestic economy, does more service than the most telling æsthetic discourse. Arguments carry little weight when the very persons who proclaim what is highest and best in theory make no stand against what is unworthy and irrational in practice. Of course there are not wanting men and women who boldly refuse all compromise with usages alike inexpedient and unreasonable, who retain peace of mind, health, and a large capacity for enjoyment, in spite of the examples by which they are surrounded, who suffer themselves to be condemned by the world rather than by their consciences. But how few! Year by year the chimerical good—call it position, appearance, fashion, what you will—is sought after more greedily and sacrificed to more unscrupulously. An increasing tale of expenditure necessitates an increased expenditure of force, physical and mental; excess of work and excess of anxiety induce premature age, brain disease, and that utter want of hilarity which foreigners not untruly attribute to us.

What wonder that the typical physiognomy of the so-called "poverty-stricken rich" is pinched and worn and often unnecessarily unbecomingly? With due respect for hygiene, physical training, and other adjuncts of health, we are inclined to think that the well-being of the next generation depends almost as much on a revolution in ideas as well as in a disarray of facts. Our children may get better built houses, eat more scientifically cooked food, be subjected to a more

advanced medical treatment, enjoy the benefits of physical training; but unless these views of life submit to an equally enlightened modification, all these improvements will be insufficient. At present the relative value of things seems wholly misunderstood; what is essentially trivial and unimportant holds a first place; while, on the other hand, what ought to be valued before it is neglected or followed with lukewarmness. And, as personal beauty is often a mere reflex of personal character, there can be no question that the largest, happier, more sympathetic life would set its seal on the countenance as much as the narrow, ungenerous and more complicated one must be admitted to do. To gain a little capability of enjoyment, a good deal of charity, and to lose an infinity of petty cares, is something; and to make a stand against fashion means much more than this. It means the independent use of taste and faculties, without which self-respect and the amiable condition of a mind at ease with itself are unattainable. It means the bringing up of children in an atmosphere of truth and plain dealing with facts as they are, and not as they seem. It means, in a word, that unfeigned exercise of individual judgment in social matters, with the spread of liberal opinion according more and more in questions of religion, politics, and scientific inquiry.

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