The Simple Life

By CHARLES WAGNER

Translated From the French by Mary Louise Hendee

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CHAPTER X.

THE WORLD AND THE LIFE OF THE HOME.

IN the time of the second empire, in one of our pleasantest subprefectures of the provinces, a little way from some baths frequented by the emperor, there was a mayor, a very worthy man and intelligent, too, whose head was suddenly turned by the thought that his sovereign might one day descend upon his home. Up to this time he had lived in the house of his fathers, a son respectful of the slightest family traditions. But when once the all absorbing idea of receiving the emperor had taken possession of his brain he became another man. In this new light what had before seemed sufficient for his needs, even enjoyable, all this simplicity that his ancestors had loved, appeared poor, ugly, ridiculous. Out of the question to ask an emperor to climb this wooden staircase, sit in these old armchairs, walk over such superannuated carpets. So the mayor called architect and masons; pickaxes attacked walls and demolished partitions, and a drawing room was made out of all proportion to the rest of the house in size and splendor. He and his family retired into close quarters, where people and furniture incommoded each other generally. Then, having emptied his purse and upset his household by this stroke of genius, he awaited the royal guest. Alas, he soon saw the end of the empire arrive, but the emperor never.

The folly of this poor man is not so rare. As mad as he are all those who sacrifice their home life to the demands of the world. And the danger in such a sacrifice is most menacing in times of unrest. Our contemporaries are constantly exposed to it and constantly succumbing. How many family treasures have they literally thrown away to satisfy worldly ambitions and conventions, but the happiness upon which they thought to come through these impious immolations always eludes them.

To give up the ancestral hearth, to let the family traditions fall into desuetude, to abandon the simple domestic customs, for whatever return is to make a fool's bargain, and such is the place in society of family life that if this be impoverished the trouble is felt throughout the whole social organism. To enjoy a normal development this organism has need of well tried individuals, each having his own value, his own hall mark. Otherwise society becomes a flock, and sometimes a flock without a shepherd. But whence does the individual draw his originality, this unique something which, joined to the distinctive qualities of others, constitutes the wealth and strength of a community? He can draw it only from his own family. Destroy the assemblage of memories and practices whence emanates for each home an atmosphere in miniature, and you dry up the sources of character, sap the strength of public spirit.

It concerns the country that each home be a world, profound, respected, communicating to its members an ineffaceable moral imprint. But before pursuing the subject further let us rid ourselves of a misunderstanding. Family feeling, like all beautiful things, has its caricature, which is family egoism. Some families are like barred and bolted citadels, their members organized for the exploitation of the whole world. Everything that does not directly concern them is indifferent to them. They live like colonists—I had almost said intruders—in the society around them. Their particularism is pushed to such an excess that they make enemies of the whole human race. In their small way they resemble those powerful societies formed from time to time through the ages which possess themselves of universal rule and for which no one outside their own community counts. This is the spirit that has sometimes made the family seem a retreat of egoism which it was necessary to destroy for the public safety. But as patriotism and jingoism are as far apart as the east from the west, so are family feeling and clannishness.

Here we are talking of right family feeling, and nothing else in the world can take its place, for in it lie in germ all those fine and simple virtues which assure the strength and duration of social institutions. And the very base of family feeling is respect for the past, for the best possessions of a family are its common memories. An intangible, indivisible and inalienable capital, these souvenirs constitute a sacred fund that each member of a family ought to consider more precious than anything else he possesses. They exist in a dual form, in idea and in fact. They show themselves in language, habits of thought, sentiments, even instincts, and one sees them materialized in portraits, furniture, buildings, dress, songs. To profane eyes they are nothing; to the eyes of those who know how to appreciate the things of the family they are relics with which one should not part at any price.

But what generally happens in our day? Worldliness wars upon the sentiment of family, and I know of no strife more impassioned. By great means and small, by all sorts of new customs, requirements and pretensions, the spirit of the world breaks into the domestic sanctuary. What are this stranger's rights, its titles? Upon what does it rest its peremptory claims? This is what people too often neglect to inquire. They make a mistake. We treat the invader as very poor and simple people do a pompous visitor. For this incommoding guest of a day they pillage their garden, bully their children and servants and neglect their work. Such conduct is not only wrong; it is impolitic. One should have the courage to remain what he is in the face of all comers.

The worldly spirit is full of impertinences. Here is a home which has formed characters of mark and is forming them yet. The people, the furnishings, the customs are all in harmony. By marriage or through relations of business or pleasure the worldly spirit enters. It finds everything out of date, awkward, too simple, lacking the modern touch. At first it restricts itself to criticism and light raillery. But this is the dangerous moment. Look out for yourself—here is the enemy! If you so much as listen to his reasonings, tomorrow you will sacrifice a piece of furniture, the next day a good old tradition, and so one by one the family heirlooms dear to the heart will go to the bric-a-brac dealer—and filial piety with them.

In the midst of your new habits and in the changed atmosphere your friends of other days, your old relatives, will be expatriated. Your next step will be to lay them aside in their turn. The worldly spirit leaves the old out of consideration. At last, established in an absolutely transformed setting, even you will view yourself with amazement. Nothing will be familiar, but surely it will be correct—at least the world will be satisfied. Ah, that is where you are mistaken! After having made you cast out pure treasure as so much junk it will find that your borrowed livery fits you ill and will hasten to make you sensible of the ridiculousness of the situation. Much better have had from the beginning the courage of your convictions and have defended your home.

Many young people when they marry listen to this voice of the world. Their parents have given them the example of a modest life, but the new generation thinks it affirms its rights to existence and liberty by repudiating ways in its eyes too patriarchal. So these young folks make efforts to set themselves up lavishly in the latest fashion and rid themselves of useless property at dirt cheap prices. Instead of filling their houses with objects which say, "Remember!" they garnish them with quite new furnishings that as yet have no meaning. Wait, I am wrong; these things are often symbols, as it were, of a facile and superficial existence. In their midst one breathes a certain heady vapor of mundanity. They recall the life outside, the turmoil, the rush. And were one sometimes disposed to forget this life they would call back his wandering thought and say, "Remember!" In another sense, do not forget your appointment at the club, the play, the races. The home then becomes a sort of halfway house where one comes to rest a little between two prolonged absences. It isn't a good place to stay. As it has no soul, it does not speak to yours. Time to eat and sleep, and then off again! Otherwise you become as dull as a hermit.

We are all acquainted with people who have a rage for being abroad, who think the world would no longer go round if they didn't figure on all sides of it. To stay at home is penal. There they cease to be in view. A horror of home life possesses them to such a degree that they would rather pay to be bored outside than be amused gratuitously within.

In this way society slowly gravitates toward life in herds, which must not be confounded with public life. The life in herds is somewhat like that of swarms of flies in the sun. Nothing so much resembles the worldly life of a man as the worldly life of another man. And this universal banality destroys the very essence of public spirit. One need not journey far to discover the ravages made in modern society by the spirit of worldliness, and if we have so little foundation, so little equilibrium, calm good sense and initiative, one of the chief reasons lies in the undermining of the home life. The masses have timed their pace by that of people of fashion. They, too, have become worldly. Nothing can be more so than to quit one's own hearth for the life of saloons. The squalor and misery of the homes are not enough to explain the current which carries each man away from his own. Why does the peasant desert for the inn the house that his father and grandfather found so comfortable? It has remained the same. There is the same fire in the same chimney. Whence comes it that it lights only an incomplete circle when in olden times young and old sat shoulder to shoulder? Something has changed in the minds of men. Yielding to dangerous impulses, they have broken with simplicity. The fathers have quitted their post of honor, the wives grow dull beside the solitary hearth, and the children quarrel while waiting their turn to go abroad, each after his own fancy.

We must learn again to live the home life, to value our domestic traditions. A pious care has preserved certain monuments of the past. So antique dress, provincial dialects, old folk songs, have found appreciative hands to gather them up before they should disappear from the earth. What a good deed, to guard these crumbs of a great past, these vestiges of the souls of our ancestors! Let us do the same for our family traditions, save and guard as much as possible of the patriarchal, whatever its form.

But not every one has traditions to keep; all the more reason for redoubling the effort to constitute and foster a family life. And to do this there is need neither of numbers nor a rich establishment. To create a home you must have the spirit of home. Just as the smallest village may have its history, its moral stamp, so the smallest home may have its soul. Oh, the spirit of places, the atmosphere which surrounds us in human dwellings! What a world of mystery! Here, even on the threshold, the cold begins to penetrate; you are ill at ease; something intangible repulses you. There no sooner does the door shut you in than friendliness and good humor envelop you. It is said that walls have ears. They have also voices, a mute eloquence. Everything that a dwelling contains is bathed in an ether of personality. And I find proof of its quality even in the apartments of bachelors and solitary women. What an abyss between one room and another room! Here all is dead, indifferent, commonplace; the device of the owner is written all over it, even in his fashion of arranging his photographs and books. All is the same to me. There one breathes in animation, a contagious joy in life. The visitor hears repeated in countless fashions: "Whoever you are, guest of an hour, I wish you well. Peace be with you."

Words can do little justice to the subject of home, tell little about the effect of a favorite flower in the window or the charm of an old armchair where the grandfather used to sit, offering his wrinkled hands to the kisses of chubby children. Poor moderns, always moving or remodeling! We who from transforming our cities, our houses, our customs and creeds have no longer where to lay our heads, let us not add to the pathos and emptiness of our changeful existence by abandoning the life of the home. Let us light again the flame put out on our hearths, make sanctuaries for ourselves, warm nests where the children may grow into men, where love may find privacy, old age repose, prayer an altar and the fatherland a cult.

CHAPTER XI.

SIMPLE BEAUTY.

SOME one may protest against the nature of the simple life in the name of aesthetics or oppose to ours the theory of the service of luxury, that providence of business, fostering mother of arts and grace of civilized society. We shall try briefly to anticipate these objections.

It will no doubt have been evident that the spirit which animates these pages is not utilitarian. It would be an error to suppose that the simplicity we seek has anything in common with that which misers impose upon themselves through cupidity or narrow minded people through false austerity. To the former the simple life is the one that costs least; to the latter it is a flat and colorless existence, whose merit lies in depriving oneself of everything bright, smiling, seductive.

It displeases us not a whit that people of large means should put their fortune into circulation instead of hoarding it, so giving life to commerce and the fine arts. That is using one's privileges to good advantage. What we would combat is foolish prodigality, the selfish use of wealth and, above all, the quest of the superfluous on the part of those who have the greatest need of taking thought for the necessary. The lavishness of a Maecenas could not have the same effect in a society as that of a common spendthrift who astonishes his contemporaries by the magnificence of his life and the folly of his waste. In these two cases the same term means very different things. To scatter money broadcast does not say it at all. There are ways of doing it which ennoble men and others which degrade them. Besides, to scatter money supposes that one is well provided with it. When the love of sumptuous living takes possession of those whose means are limited the matter becomes strangely altered. And a very striking characteristic of our time is the rage for scattering broadcast which the very people have who ought to husband their resources. Munificence is a benefit to society; that we grant willingly. Let us even allow that the prodigality of certain rich men is a safety valve for the escape of the superabundant. We shall not attempt to gainsay it. Our contention is that too many people meddle with the safety valve when to practice economy is the part of both their interest and their duty. Their extravagance is a private misfortune and a public danger.

So much for the utility of luxury.

We now wish to explain ourselves upon the question of aesthetics—oh, very modestly and without trespassing on the ground of the specialists. Through a too common illusion simplicity and beauty are considered as rivals. But simple is not synonymous with ugly any more than sumptuous, stylish and costly are synonymous with beautiful. Our eyes are wounded by the crying spectacle of gaudy ornament, venal art and senseless and graceless luxury. Wealth coupled with bad taste sometimes makes us regret that so much money is in circulation to provoke the creation of such a prodigality of horrors. Our contemporary art suffers as much from the want of simplicity as does our literature—too much in it that is irrelevant, overwrought, falsely imagined. Rarely is it given us to contemplate in line, form or color that simplicity allied to perfection which commands the eyes as evidence does the mind. We need to be rebaptized in the ideal purity of immortal beauty which puts its seal on the masterpieces. One shaft of its radiance is worth more than all our pompous exhibitions.

Yet what we now have most at heart is to speak of the ordinary aesthetics of life, of the care one should bestow upon the adornment of his dwelling and his person, giving to existence that luster without which it lacks charm. For it is not a matter of indifference whether man pays attention to these superfluous necessities or whether he does not; it is by them that we know whether he puts soul into his work. Far from considering it as wasteful to give time and thought to the perfecting, beautifying and poetizing of forms, I think we should spend as much as we can upon them. Nature gives us her example, and the man who should affect contempt for the ephemeral splendor of beauty with which we garnish our brief days would lose sight of the intentions of him who has put the same care and love into the painting of the lily of an hour and the eternal hills.

But we must not fall into the gross error of confounding true beauty with that which has only the name. The beauty and poetry of existence lie in the understanding we have of it. Our home, our table, our dress, should be the interpreters of intentions. That these intentions be so expressed it is first necessary to have them, and he who possesses them makes them evident through the simplest means. One need not be rich to give grace and charm to his habit and his habitation. It suffices to have good taste and good will. We come here to a point very important to everybody, but perhaps of more interest to women than to men.

Those who would have women conceal themselves in coarse garments of the shapeless uniformity of bags violate nature in her very heart and misunderstand completely the spirit of things. If dress were only a precaution to shelter us from cold or rain a piece of sacking or the skin of a beast would answer. But it is vastly more than this. Man puts himself entire into all that he does. He transforms into types the things that serve him. The dress is not simply a covering; it is a symbol. I call to witness the rich flowering of national and provincial costumes and those worn by our early corporations. A woman's toilet, too, has something to say to us. The more meaning there is in it the greater its worth. To be truly beautiful it must tell us of beautiful things, things personal and veritable. Spend all the money you possess upon it; if its form is determined by chance or custom, if it has no relation to her who wears it, it is only toggery, a domino. Ultra fashionable dress, which completely masks feminine personality under designs of pure convention, despoils it of its principal attraction. From this abuse it comes about that many things which women admire do as much wrong to their beauty as to the purses of their husbands and fathers. What would you say of a young girl who expressed her thoughts in terms very choice indeed, but taken word for word from a phrase book? What charm could you find in this borrowed language? The effect of toilets well designed in themselves, but seen again and again on all women indiscriminately, is precisely the same.

I cannot resist citing here a passage from Camille Lemonnier that harmonizes with my idea:

"Nature has given to the fingers of woman a charming art, which she knows by instinct and which is peculiarly her own, as silk to the worm and lacework to the swift and subtle spider. She is the poet, the interpreter of her own grace and ingeniousness, the spinner of the mystery in which her wish to please arrays itself. All the talent she expends in her effort to equal man in the other arts is never worth the spirit and conception wrought out through a bit of stuff in her skillful hands.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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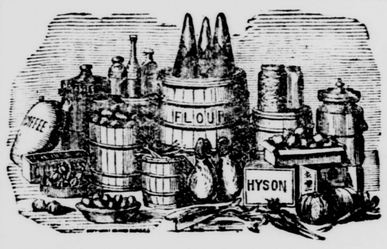

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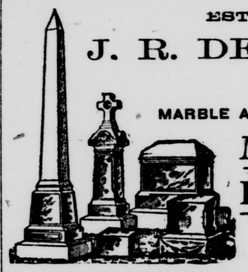

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