WILLIAM HOWELLS

IMAGINARY INTERVIEWS

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Содержание

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I
THE RESTORATION OF THE EASY CHAIR BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

It is not generally known that after forty-two years of constant use the aged and honored movable which now again finds itself put back in its old place in the rear of *Harper's Magazine* was stored in the warehouse of a certain safety-deposit company, in the winter of 1892. The event which had then vacated the chair is still so near as to be full of a pathos tenderly personal to all readers of that magazine, and may not be lightly mentioned in any travesty of the facts by one who was thought of for the empty place. He, before putting on the mask and mimic editorial robes – for it was never the real editor who sat in the Easy Chair, except for that brief hour when he took it to pay his deep-thought and deep-felt tribute to its last occupant – stood with bowed face and uncovered head in that bravest and gentlest presence which, while it abode with us here, men knew as George William Curtis.

It was, of course, in one of the best of the fireproof warehouses that the real editor had the Easy Chair stored, and when the unreal editor went to take it out of storage he found it without trouble in one of those vast rooms where the more valuable furniture and bric-à-brac are guarded in a special tutelage. If instinct had not taught him, he would have known it by its homely fashion, which the first unreal editor had suggested when he described it as an "old red-backed Easy Chair that has long been an ornament of our dingy office." That unreality was Mr. Donald G. Mitchell, the graceful and gracious Ik Marvel, dear to the old hearts that are still young for his *Dream Life* and his *Reveries of a Bachelor*, and never unreal in anything but his pretence of being the real editor of the magazine. In this disguise he feigned that he had "a way of throwing" himself back in the Easy Chair, "and indulging in an easy and careless overlook of the gossiping papers of the day, and in such chit-chat with chance visitors as kept him informed of the drift of the town talk, while it relieved greatly the monotony of his office hours." Not "bent on choosing mere gossip," he promised to be "on the watch for such topics or incidents as" seemed really important and suggestive, and to set them "down with all that gloss, and that happy lack of sequence, which make every-day talk so much better than every-day writing."

While the actual unreality stood thinking how perfectly the theory and practice of the Easy Chair for hard upon fifty years had been forecast in these words, and while the warehouse agent stood waiting his pleasure, the Easy Chair fetched a long, deep sigh. Sigh one must call the sound, but it was rather like that soft complaint of the woody fibres in a table which disembodied spirits are about to visit, and which continues to exhale from it till their peculiar vocabulary utters itself in a staccato of muffled taps. No one who has heard that sound can mistake it for another, and the unreal editor knew at once that he confronted in the Easy Chair an animate presence.

"How long have I been here?" it asked, like one wakened from a deep sleep.

"About eight years," said the unreal editor.

"Ah, I remember," the Easy Chair murmured, and, as the unreal editor bent forward to pluck away certain sprays of foliage that clung to its old red back, it demanded, "What is that?"

"Some bits of holly and mistletoe."

"Yes," the Easy Chair softly murmured again. "The last essay he wrote in me was about Christmas. I have not forgotten one word of it all: how it began, how it went on, and how it ended! 'In the very promise of the year appears the hectic of its decay… The question that we have to ask, forecasting in these summer days the coming of Christmas which already shines afar off, is this: whether while we praise Christmas as a day of general joy we take care to keep it so… Thackeray describes a little dinner at the Timminses'. A modest couple make themselves miserable and spend all their little earnings in order to give a dinner to people for whom they do not care, and who do not care for them… Christmas is made miserable to the Timminses because they feel that they must spend lavishly and buy gifts like their richer neighbors… You cannot buy Christmas at the shops, and a sign of friendly sympathy costs little… Should not the extravagance of Christmas cause every honest man and woman practically to protest by refusing to yield to the extravagance?' There!" the Easy Chair broke off from quoting, "that was Curtis! The kind and reasonable mood, the righteous conscience incarnate in the studied art, the charming literary allusion for the sake of the unliterary lesson, the genial philosophy —

'not too good
For human nature's daily food' —

the wisdom alike of the closet and the public square, the large patience and the undying hopefulness! Do you think," the Easy Chair said, with a searching severity one would not have expected of it, "that you are fit to take his place?"

In evasion of this hard question the unreal editor temporized with the effect of not having heard it. "I believe that he and Mr. Mitchell were the only writers of your papers till Mr. Alden wrote the last?"

The Easy Chair responded, dryly, "You forget Aldrich."

"If I do, I am the only pebble on the shore of time that does or will," retorted the unreal editor. "But he wrote you for only two months. I well remember what a pleasure he had in it. And he knew how to make his readers share his pleasure! Still, it was Mr. Mitchell who invented you, and it was Curtis who characterized you beyond all the rest."

"For a while," said the Easy Chair, with autobiographical relish, "they wrote me together, but it was not long before Mr. Mitchell left off, and Curtis kept on alone, and, as you say, he incomparably characterized me. He had his millennial hopes as well as you. In his youth he trusted in a time

'When the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law,'

and he never lost that faith. As he wrote in one of my best papers, the famous paper on Brook Farm, 'Bound fast by the brazen age, we can see that the way back to the age of gold lies through justice, which will substitute co-operation for competition.' He expected the world to be made over in the image of heaven some time, but meanwhile he was glad to help make it even a little better and pleasanter than he found it. He was ready to tighten a loose screw here and there, to pour a drop of oil on the rusty machinery, to mend a broken wheel. He was not above putting a patch on a rift where a whiff of infernal air came up from the Bottomless Pit – "

"And I also believe in alleviations," the unreal editor interrupted. "I love justice, but charity is far better than nothing; and it would be abominable not to do all we can because we cannot at once do everything. Let us have the expedients, the ameliorations, even the compromises, *en attendant* the millennium. Let us accept the provisional, the makeshift. He who came on Christmas Day, and whose mission, as every Christmas Day comes to remind us, was the brotherhood, the freedom, the equality of men, did not He warn us against hastily putting new wine into old bottles? To get the new

bottles ready is slow work: that kind of bottle must grow; it cannot be made; and in the mean time let us keep our latest vintages in the vat till we have some vessel proof against their fermentation. I know that the hope of any such vessel is usually mocked as mere optimism, but I think optimism is as wise and true as pessimism, or is at least as well founded; and since the one can no more establish itself as final truth than the other, it is better to have optimism. That was always the philosophy of the Easy Chair, and I do not know why that should be changed. The conditions are not changed."

There was a silence which neither the Easy Chair nor the unreal editor broke for a while. Then the Chair suggested, "I suppose that there is not much change in Christmas, at any rate?"

"No," said the unreal editor; "it goes on pretty much as it used. The Timminses, who give tiresome little dinners which they cannot afford to dull people who don't want them, are still alive and miserably bent on heaping reluctant beneficiaries with undesired favors, and spoiling the simple 'pleasure of the time' with the activities of their fatuous vanity. Or perhaps you think I ought to bring a hopeful mind even to the Timminses?"

"I don't see why not," said the Easy Chair. "They are not the architects of their own personalities."

"Ah, take care, take care!" cried the unreal editor. "You will be saying next that we are the creatures of our environment; that the Timminses would be wiser and better if the conditions were not idiotic and pernicious; and you know what *that* comes to!"

"No, I am in no danger of that," the Easy Chair retorted. "The Timminses are no such victims of the conditions. They are of that vast moderately moneyed class who can perfectly well behave with sense if they will. Nobody above them or below them asks them to be foolish and wasteful."

"And just now you were making excuses for them!"

"I said they were not the architects of their own personalities; but, nevertheless, they are masters of themselves. They are really free to leave off giving little dinners any day they think so. It should be the moralist's business to teach them to think so."

"And that was what Curtis gladly made his business," the unreal editor somewhat sadly confessed, with an unspoken regret for his own difference. More than once it had seemed to him in considering that rare nature that he differed from most reformers chiefly in loving the right rather than in hating the wrong; in fact, in not hating at all, but in pitying and accounting for the wrong as an ancient use corrupted into an abuse. Involuntarily the words of the real editor in that beautiful tribute to the high soul they were praising came to the unreal editor's lips, and he quoted aloud to the Easy Chair: "'His love of goodness was a passion. He would fain have seen all that was fair and good, and he strove to find it so; and, finding it otherwise, he strove to make it so… With no heart for satire, the discord that fell upon his sensitive ear made itself felt in his dauntless comment upon social shams and falsehoods… But he was a lover of peace, and, … as he was the ideal gentleman, the ideal citizen, he was also the ideal reformer, without eccentricity or exaggeration. However high his ideal, it never parted company with good sense. He never wanted better bread than could be made of wheat, but the wheat must be kept good and sound,' and I may add," the unreal editor broke off, "that he did not hurry the unripe grain to the hopper. He would not have sent all the horses at once to the abattoir because they made the city noisy and noisome, but would first have waited till there were automobiles enough to supply their place."

The Easy Chair caught at the word. "Automobiles?" it echoed.

"Ah, I forgot how long you have been stored," said the unreal editor, and he explained as well as he could the new mode of motion, and how already, with its soft rubber galoshes, the automobile had everywhere stolen a march upon the iron heels of the horses in the city avenues.

He fancied the Easy Chair did not understand, quite, from the intelligent air with which it eagerly quitted the subject.

"Well," it said at last, "this isn't such a bad time to live in, after all, it appears. But for a supreme test of your optimism, now, what good can you find to say of Christmas? What sermon could you

preach on that hackneyed theme which would please the fancy and gladden the heart of the readers of a Christmas number, where you should make your first appearance in the Easy Chair?"

To himself the unreal editor had to own that this was a poser. In his heart he was sick of Christmas: not of the dear and high event, the greatest in the memory of the world, which it records and embodies, but the stale and wearisome Christmas of the Christmas presents, purchased in rage and bestowed in despair; the Christmas of Christmas fiction; the Christmas of heavy Christmas dinners and indigestions; the Christmas of all superfluity and surfeit and sentimentality; the Christmas of the Timminses and the Tiny Tims. But while he thought of these, by operation of the divine law which renders all things sensible by their opposites, he thought of the other kinds of Christmas which can never weary or disgust: the Christmas of the little children and the simple-hearted and the poor; and suddenly he addressed himself to the Easy Chair with unexpected and surprising courage.

"Why should that be so very difficult?" he demanded. "If you look at it rightly, Christmas is always full of inspiration; and songs as well as sermons will flow from it till time shall be no more. The trouble with us is that we think it is for the pleasure of opulent and elderly people, for whom there can be no pleasures, but only habits. They are used to having everything, and as joy dwells in novelty it has ceased to be for them in Christmas gifts and giving and all manner of Christmas conventions. But for the young to whom these things are new, and for the poor to whom they are rare, Christmas and Christmasing are sources of perennial happiness. All that you have to do is to guard yourself from growing rich and from growing old, and then the delight of Christmas is yours forever. It is not difficult; it is very simple; for even if years and riches come upon you in a literal way, you can by a little trying keep yourself young and poor in spirit. Then you can always rejoice with the innocent and riot with the destitute.

"I once knew a father," the unreal editor continued, "a most doting and devoted father, who, when he bent over the beds of his children to bid them good-night, and found them 'high sorrowful and cloyed,' as the little ones are apt to be after a hard day's pleasure, used to bid them 'Think about Christmas.' If he offered this counsel on the night, say, of the 26th of December, and they had to look forward to a whole year before their hopes of consolation could possibly find fruition, they had (as they afterward confessed to him) a sense of fatuity if not of mocking in it. Even on the Fourth of July, after the last cracker had been fired and the last roman candle spent, they owned that they had never been able to think about Christmas to an extent that greatly assuaged their vague regrets. It was not till the following Thanksgiving that they succeeded in thinking about Christmas with anything like the entire cheerfulness expected of them."

"I don't see any application in this homily," said the Easy Chair, "or only an application disastrous to your imaginable postulate that Christmas is a beneficent and consolatory factor in our lives."

"That is because you have not allowed me to conclude," the unreal editor protested, when the Easy Chair cut in with,

"There is nothing I would so willingly allow you to do," and "laughed and shook" as if it had been "Rabelais's easy chair."

The unreal editor thought it best to ignore the untimely attempt at wit. "The difficulty in this case with both the father and the children was largely temperamental; but it was chiefly because of a defect in their way of thinking about Christmas. It was a very ancient error, by no means peculiar to this amiable family, and it consisted in thinking about Christmas with reference to one's self instead of others."

"Isn't that rather banal?" the Easy Chair asked.

"Not at all banal," said the unreal editor, resisting an impulse to do the Easy Chair some sort of violence. At the same time he made his reflection that if preachers were criticised in that way to their faces there would shortly be very few saints left in the pulpit. He gave himself a few moments to recover his temper, and then he went on: "If Christmas means anything at all, it means anything

but one's own pleasure. Up to the first Christmas Day the whole world had supposed that it could be happy selfishly, and its children still suppose so. But there is really no such thing as selfish, as personal happiness."

"Tolstoy," the Easy Chair noted.

"Yes, Tolstoy," the unreal editor retorted. "He more than any other has brought us back to the knowledge of this truth which came into the world with Christmas, perhaps because he, more than any other, has tried to think and to live Christianity. When once you have got this vital truth into your mind, the whole universe is luminously filled with the possibilities of impersonal, unselfish happiness. The joy of living is suddenly expanded to the dimensions of humanity, and you can go on taking your pleasure as long as there is one unfriended soul and body in the world.

"It is well to realize this at all times, but it is peculiarly fit to do so at Christmas-time, for it is in this truth that the worship of Christ begins. Now, too, is the best time to give the Divine Word form in deed, to translate love into charity. I do not mean only the material charity that expresses itself in turkeys and plum-puddings for the poor, but also that spiritual charity which takes thought how so to amend the sorrowful conditions of civilization that poverty, which is the antithesis of fraternity, shall abound less and less.

'Now is the time, now is the time,
Now is the hour of golden prime'

for asking one's self, not how much one has given in goods or moneys during the past year, but how much one has given in thought and will to remove forever the wrong and shame of hopeless need; and to consider what one may do in the coming year to help put the poor lastingly beyond the need of help.

"To despair of somehow, sometime doing this is to sin against the light of Christmas Day, to confess its ideal a delusion, its practice a failure. If on no other day of all the three hundred and sixty-five, we must on this day renew our faith in justice, which is the highest mercy."

The Easy Chair no longer interrupted, and the unreal editor, having made his point, went on after the manner of preachers, when they are also editors, to make it over again, and to repeat himself pitilessly, unsparingly. He did not observe that the Easy Chair had shrunk forward until all its leathern seat was wrinkled and its carven top was bent over its old red back. When he stopped at last, the warehouse agent asked in whisper,

"What do you want done with it, sir?"

"Oh," said the unreal editor, "send it back to Franklin Square"; and then, with a sudden realization of the fact, he softly added, "Don't wake it."

There in Franklin Square, still dreaming, it was set up in the rear of the magazine, where it has become not only the place, but the stuff of dreams such as men are made of. From month to month, ever since, its reveries, its illusions, which some may call deliverances, have gone on with more and more a disposition to dramatize themselves. It has seemed to the occupant of the Easy Chair, at times, as if he had suffered with it some sort of land-change from a sole entity to a multiple personality in which his several selves conversed with one another, and came and went unbidden. At first, after a moment of question whether his imagination was not frequented by the phantoms of delight which in the flesh had formerly filled his place, whether the spirits which haunted him in it were not those of Mitchell, of Curtis, of Aldrich, he became satisfied from their multitude and nature that they were the subdivisions of his own ego, and as such he has more and more frankly treated them.

II
A YEAR OF SPRING AND A LIFE OF YOUTH

On one of those fine days which the April of the other year meanly grudged us, a poet, flown with the acceptance of a quarter-page lyric by the real editor in the Study next door, came into the place where the Easy Chair sat rapt in the music of the elevated trains and the vision of the Brooklyn Bridge towers. "Era la stagione nella quale la rivestita terra, più che tutto l' altro anno, si mostra bella," he said, without other salutation, throwing his soft gray hat on a heap of magazines and newspapers in the corner, and finding what perch he could for himself on the window-sill.

"What is that?" he of the Easy Chair gruffly demanded; he knew perfectly well, but he liked marring the bloom on a fellow-creature's joy by a show of savage ignorance.

"It's the divine beginning of Boccaccio's 'Fiammetta,' it is the very soul of spring; and it is so inalienably of Boccaccio's own time and tongue and sun and air that there is no turning it into the language of another period or climate. What would you find to thrill you in, 'It was the season in which the reapparelled earth, more than in all the other year, shows herself fair'? The rhythm is lost; the flow, sweet as the first runnings of the maple where the woodpecker has tapped it, stiffens into sugar, the liquid form is solidified into the cake adulterated with glucose, and sold for a cent as the pure Vermont product."

As he of the Easy Chair could not deny this, he laughed recklessly. "I understood what your passage from Boccaccio meant, and why you came in here praising spring in its words. You are happy because you have sold a poem, probably for more than it is worth. But why do you praise spring? What do you fellows do it for? You know perfectly well that it is the most capricious, the most treacherous, the most delusive, deadly, slatternly, down-at-heels, milkmaid-handed season of the year, without decision of character or fixed principles, and with only the vaguest raw-girlish ideals, a red nose between crazy smiles and streaming eyes. If it did not come at the end of winter, when people are glad of any change, nobody could endure it, and it would be cast neck and crop out of the calendar. Fancy spring coming at the end of summer! It would not be tolerated for a moment, with the contrast of its crude, formless beauty and the ripe loveliness of August. Every satisfied sense of happiness, secure and established, would be insulted by its haphazard promises made only to be broken. 'Rather,' the outraged mortal would say, 'the last tender hours of autumn, the first deathful-thrilling snowfall, with all the thoughts of life wandering flake-like through the dim air – rather these than the recurrence of those impulses and pauses, those kisses frozen on the lips, those tender rays turning to the lash of sleet across the face of nature. No, the only advantage spring can claim over her sister seasons is her novelty, the only reason she can offer for being the spoiled child of the poets is that nobody but the poets could keep on fancying that there was any longer the least originality in her novelty."

The poet attempted to speak, in the little stop he of the Easy Chair made for taking breath, but he was not suffered to do so.

"Every atom of originality has been drained from the novelty of spring 'in the process of the suns,' and science is rapidly depriving her even of novelty. What was once supposed to be the spring grass has been found to be nothing but the fall grass, with the green stealing back into the withered blades. As for the spring lamb which used to crop the spring grass, it is now out of the cold-storage where the spring chicken and the new-laid eggs of yesteryear come from. It is said that there are no birds in last year's nests, but probably a careful examination would discover a plentiful hatch of nestlings which have hibernated in the habitations popularly supposed to be deserted the June before this. Early spring vegetables are in market throughout the twelvemonth, and spring flowers abound at the florists' in December and January. There is no reason why spring should not be absorbed into winter and summer by some such partition as took place politically in the case of Poland. Like that unhappy kingdom, she has abused her independence and become a molestation and discomfort to

the annual meteorology. As a season she is distinctly a failure, being neither one thing nor the other, neither hot nor cold, a very Laodicean. Her winds were once supposed to be very siccative, and peculiarly useful in drying the plaster in new houses; but now the contractors put in radiators as soon as the walls are up, and the work is done much better. As for the germinative force of her suns, in these days of intensive farming, when electricity is applied to the work once done by them, they can claim to have no virtue beyond the suns of July or August, which most seeds find effective enough. If spring were absorbed into summer, the heat of that season would be qualified, and its gentler warmth would be extended to autumn, which would be prolonged into the winter. The rigors of winter would be much abated, and the partition of spring among the other seasons would perform the mystic office of the Gulf Stream in ameliorating our climate, besides ridding us of a time of most tedious and annoying suspense. And what should we lose by it?"

The poet seemed not to be answering the Easy Chair directly, but only to be murmuring to himself, "Youth."

"Youth! Youth!" the Easy Chair repeated in exasperation. "And what is youth?"

"The best thing in the world."

"For whom is it the best thing?"

This question seemed to give the poet pause. "Well," he said, finally, with a not very forcible smile, "for itself."

"Ah, there you are!" he of the Easy Chair exclaimed; but he could not help a forgiving laugh. "In a way you are right. The world belongs to youth, and so it ought to be the best thing for itself in it. Youth is a very curious thing, and in that it is like spring, especially like the spring we have just been having, to our cost. It is the only period of life, as spring is the only season of the year, that has too much time on its hands. Yet it does not seem to waste time, as age does, as winter does; it keeps doing something all the while. The things it does are apparently very futile and superfluous, some of them, but in the end something has been accomplished. After a March of whimsical suns and snows, an April of quite fantastical frosts and thaws, and a May, at least partially, of cold mists and parching winds, the flowers, which the florists have been forcing for the purpose, are blooming in the park; the grass is green wherever it has not had the roots trodden out of it, and a filmy foliage, like the soft foulard tissues which the young girls are wearing, drips from the trees. You can say it is all very painty, the verdure; too painty; but you cannot reject the picture because of this little mannerism of the painter. To be sure, you miss the sheeted snows and the dreamy weft of leafless twigs against the hard, blue sky. Still, now it has come, you cannot deny that the spring is pretty, or that the fashionable colors which it has introduced are charming. It is said that these are so charming that a woman of the worst taste cannot choose amiss among them. In spite of her taste, her hat comes out a harmonic miracle; her gown, against all her endeavors, flows in an exquisite symphony of the tender audacities of tint with which nature mixes her palette; little notes of chiffon, of tulle, of feather, blow all about her. This is rather a medley of metaphors, to which several arts contribute, but you get my meaning?" In making this appeal, he of the Easy Chair saw in the fixed eye of the poet that remoteness of regard which denotes that your listener has been hearing very little of what you have been saying.

"Yes," the poet replied with a long breath, "you are right about that dreamy weft of leafless twigs against the hard, blue sky; and I wonder if we quite do justice to the beauty of winter, of age, we poets, when we are so glad to have the spring come."

"I don't know about winter," he of the Easy Chair said, "but in an opera which the English Lord Chamberlain provisionally suppressed, out of tenderness for an alliance not eventually or potentially to the advantage of these States, Mr. William Gilbert has done his duty to the decline of life, where he sings,

'There is beauty in extreme old age;
There's a fascination frantic

In a ruin that's romantic'

Or, at least no one else has said so much for 'that time of life,' which another librettist has stigmatized as

'Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.'"

"Yes, I know," the poet returned, clinging to the thread of thought on which he had cast himself loose. "But I believe a great deal more could be said for age by the poets if they really tried. I am not satisfied of Mr. Gilbert's earnestness in the passage you quote from the 'Mikado,' and I prefer Shakespeare's 'bare, ruined choirs.' I don't know but I prefer the hard, unflattering portrait which Hamlet mockingly draws for Polonius, and there is something almost caressing in the notion of 'the lean and slippered pantaloon.' The worst of it is that we old fellows look so plain to one another; I dare say young people don't find us so bad. I can remember from my own youth that I thought old men, and especially old women, rather attractive. I am not sure that we elders realize the charm of a perfectly bald head as it presents itself to the eye of youth. Yet, an infant's head is often quite bald."

"Yes, and so is an egg," the Easy Chair retorted, "but there is not the same winning appeal in the baldness of the superannuated bird which has evolved from it – eagle or nightingale, parrot or

Many-wintered crow that leads the clanging rookery home.

Tennyson has done his best in showing us venerable in his picture of

'the Ionian father of the rest:
A million wrinkles carved his silver skin,
A hundred winters snowed upon his breast.'

But who would not rather be Helen than Homer, her face launching a thousand ships and burning the topless tower of Ilion – fairer than the evening air and simply but effectively attired in the beauty of a thousand stars? What poet has ever said things like that of an old man, even of Methuselah?"

"Yes," the poet sighed. "I suppose you are partly right. Meteorology certainly has the advantage of humanity in some things. We cannot make much of age here, and hereafter we can only conceive of its being turned into youth. Fancy an eternity of sensibility!"

"No, I would rather not!" he of the Easy Chair returned, sharply. "Besides, it is you who are trying to make age out a tolerable, even a desirable thing."

"But I have given it up," the poet meekly replied. "The great thing would be some rearrangement of our mortal conditions so that once a year we could wake from our dream of winter and find ourselves young. Not merely younger, but *young*– the genuine article. A tree can do that, and does it every year, until after a hundred years, or three hundred, or a thousand, it dies. Why should not a man, or, much more importantly, a woman, do it? I think we are very much scanted in that respect."

"My dear fellow, if you begin fault-finding with creation, there will be no end to it. It might be answered that, in this case, you can walk about and a tree cannot; you can call upon me and a tree cannot. And other things. Come! the trees have not got it all their own way. Besides, imagine the discomforts of a human springtime, blowing hot and blowing cold, freezing, thawing, raining, and drouthing, and never being sure whether we are young or old, May or December. We should be such nuisances to one another that we should ask the gods to take back their gift, and you know very well they cannot."

"Our rejuvenescence would be a matter of temperament, not temperature," the poet said, searching the air hopefully for an idea. "I have noticed this spring that the isothermal line is as crooked as a railroad on the map of a rival. I have been down in New Hampshire since I saw you, and I found the spring temperamentally as far advanced there as here in New York. Of course not as far advanced as in Union Square, but quite as far as in Central Park. Between Boston and Portsmouth there were bits of railroad bank that were as green as the sward beside the Mall, and every now and then there was an enthusiastic maple in the wet lowlands that hung the air as full of color as any maple that reddened the flying landscape when I first got beyond the New York suburbs on my way north. At Portsmouth the birds were singing the same songs as in the Park. I could not make out the slightest difference."

"With the same note of nervous apprehension in them?"

"I did not observe that. But they were spring songs, certainly."

"Then," the Easy Chair said, "I would rather my winter were turned into summer, or early autumn, than spring, if there is going to be any change of the mortal conditions. I like settled weather, the calm of that time of life when the sins and follies have been committed, the passions burned themselves out, and the ambitions frustrated so that they do not bother, the aspirations defeated, the hopes brought low. Then you have some comfort. This turmoil of vernal striving makes me tired."

"Yes, I see what you mean," the poet assented. "But you cannot have the seasons out of their order in the rearrangement of the mortal conditions. You must have spring and you must have summer before you can have autumn."

"Are those the terms? Then I say, Winter at once! Winter is bad enough, but I would not go through spring again for any – In winter you can get away from the cold, with a good, warm book, or a sunny picture, or a cozy old song, or a new play; but in spring how will you escape the rawness if you have left off your flannels and let out the furnace? No, my dear friend, we could not stand going back to youth every year. The trees can, because they have been used to it from the beginning of time, but the men could not. Even the women – " At this moment a beatific presence made itself sensible, and the Easy Chair recognized the poet's Muse, who had come for him. The poet put the question to her. "Young?" she said. "Why, you and I are *always* young, silly boy! Get your hat, and come over to Long Island City with me, and see the pussy-willows along the railroad-banks. The mosquitoes are beginning to sing in the ditches already."

III
SCLEROSIS OF THE TASTES

The other day one of those convertible familiars of the Easy Chair, who

"Change and pass and come again,"

looked in upon it, after some months' absence, with the effect of having aged considerably in the interval. But this was only his latest avatar; he was no older, as he was no younger, than before; to support a fresh character, he had to put on an appropriate aspect, and having, at former interviews, been a poet, a novelist, a philosopher, a reformer, a moralist, he was now merely looking the part of a veteran observer, of a psychologist grown gray in divining the character of others from his own consciousness.

"Have you ever noticed," he began, "that the first things we get stiff in, as we advance in life, are our tastes? We suppose that it is our joints which feel the premonitions of age; and that because we no longer wish to dance or play ball or sprint in college races we are in the earliest stage of that sapless condition when the hinges of the body grind dryly upon one another, and we lose a good inch of our stature, through shrinkage, though the spine still holds us steadfastly upright."

"Well, isn't that so?" the Easy Chair asked, tranquilly.

"It may be so, or it may not be so," the veteran observer replied. "Ultimately, I dare say, it is so. But what I wish to enforce is the fact that before you begin to feel the faintest sense of stiffening joints you are allowing yourself to fall into that voluntary senescence which I call getting stiff in the tastes. It is something that I think we ought to guard ourselves against as a sort of mental sclerosis which must end fatally long before we have reached the patriarchal age which that unbelieving believer Metchnikoff says we can attain if we fight off physical sclerosis. He can only negatively teach us how to do this, but I maintain we can have each of us in our power the remedy against stiffening tastes."

"I don't see how," the Easy Chair said, more to provoke the sage to explanation than to express dissent.

"I will teach you how," he said, "if you will allow me to make it a personal matter, and use you in illustration."

"Why not use yourself?"

"Because that would be egotistical, and the prime ingredient of my specific against getting stiff in the tastes is that spiritual grace which is the very antidote, the very antithesis of egotism. Up to a certain point, a certain time, we are usefully employed in cultivating our tastes, in refining them, and in defining them. We cannot be too strenuous in defining them; and, as long as we are young, the catholicity of youth will preserve us from a bigoted narrowness. In æsthetic matters – and I imagine we both understand that we are dealing with these – the youngest youth has no tastes; it has merely appetites. All is fish that comes to its net; if anything, it prefers the gaudier of the finny tribes; it is only when it becomes sophisticated that its appetites turn into tastes, and it begins to appreciate the flavor of that diseased but pearl-bearing species of oyster which we call genius, because we have no accurate name for it. With the appreciation of this flavor comes the overpowering desire for it, the incessant and limitless search for it. To the desire for it whole literatures owe their continued existence, since, except for the universal genius-hunger of youth, the classics of almost all languages would have perished long ago. When indiscriminate and omnivorous youth has explored those vast and mostly lifeless seas, it has found that the diseased oyster which bears the pearls is the rarest object in nature. But having once formed the taste for it, youth will have no other flavor, and it is at this moment that its danger of hardening into premature age begins. The conceit of having recognized genius takes the form of a bigoted denial of its existence save in the instances recognized. This conceit

does not admit the possibility of error or omission in the search, and it does not allow that the diseased oyster can transmit its pearl-bearing qualities and its peculiar flavors; so that the attitude of aging youth, in the stiffening of its tastes, is one of rejection toward all new bivalves, or, not to be tediously metaphorical, books."

The veteran observer fell silent at this point, and the Easy Chair seized the occasion to remark: "Yes, there is something in what you say. But this stiffening of the tastes, this sclerosis of the mind, is hardly an infectious disease – "

"Ah, but it *is* infectious," the veteran observer exclaimed, rousing himself, "infectious as far as the victim can possibly make it so. He wishes nothing so much as to impart his opinions in all their rigidity to everybody else. Take your own case, for instance – "

"No, we would rather not," the Easy Chair interposed.

"But you must make the sacrifice," the veteran observer persisted. "You will allow that you are extremely opinionated?"

"Not at all."

"Well, then, that you are devoutly conscientious in the tenure of your æsthetic beliefs?"

"Something like that, yes."

"And you cannot deny that in times past you have tried your best to make others think with you?"

"It was our duty."

"Well, let it pass for that. It amounted to an effort to make your mental sclerosis infectious, and it was all the worse because, in you, the stiffening of the tastes had taken the form of aversions rather than preferences. You did not so much wish your readers to like your favorite authors as to hate all the others. At the time when there was a fad for making lists of The Hundred Best Authors, I always wondered that you didn't put forth some such schedule."

"We had the notion of doing something of the kind," the Easy Chair confessed, "but we could not think of more than ten or a dozen really first-rate authors, and if we had begun to compile a list of the best authors we should have had to leave out most of their works. Nearly all the classics would have gone by the board. What havoc we should have made with the British poets! The Elizabethan dramatists would mostly have fallen under the ban of our negation, to a play, if not to a man. Chaucer, but for a few poems, is impossible; Spenser's poetry is generally duller than the Presidents' messages before Mr. Roosevelt's time; Milton is a trial of the spirit in three-fourths of his verse; Wordsworth is only not so bad as Byron, who thought him so much worse; Shakespeare himself, when he is reverently supposed not to be Shakespeare, is reading for martyrs; Dante's science and politics outweigh his poetry a thousandfold, and so on through the whole catalogue. Among the novelists – "

"No, don't begin on the novelists! Every one knows your heresies there, and would like to burn you along with the romances which I've no doubt you would still commit to the flames. I see you are the Bourbon of criticism; you have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. But why don't you turn your adamantine immutability to some practical account, and give the world a list of The Hundred Worst Books?"

"Because a hundred books out of the worst would be a drop out of the sea; there would remain an immeasurable welter of badness, of which we are now happily ignorant, and from which we are safe, as long as our minds are not turned to it by examples."

"Ah," our visitor said, "I see that you are afraid to confess yourself the popular failure as a critic which you are. You are afraid that if you made a list of The Hundred Worst Books you would send the classes to buying them in the most expensive binding, and the masses to taking them out of all the public libraries."

"There is something in what you say," the Easy Chair confessed. "Our popular failure as a critic is notorious; it cannot be denied. The stamp of our disapproval at one time gave a whole order of fiction a currency that was not less than torrential. The flood of romantic novels which passed over

the land, and which is still to be traced in the tatters of the rag-doll heroes and heroines caught in the memories of readers along its course, was undoubtedly the effect of our adverse criticism. No, we could not in conscience compile and publish a list of The Hundred Worst Books; it would be contrary, for the reasons you give, to public morals."

"And don't you think," the observer said, with a Socratic subtlety that betrayed itself in his gleaming eye, in the joyous hope of seeing his victim fall into the pit that his own admissions had digged for him, "and don't you think that it would also bring to you the unpleasant consciousness of having stiffened in your tastes?"

"It might up to a certain point," we consented. "But we should prefer to call it confirmed in our convictions. Wherever we have liked or disliked in literature it has been upon grounds hardly distinguishable from moral grounds. Bad art is a vice; untruth to nature is the eighth of the seven deadly sins; a false school in literature is a seminary of crime. We are speaking largely, of course – "

"It certainly sounds rather tall," our friend sarcastically noted, "and it sounds very familiar."

"Yes," we went on, "all the ascertained veracities are immutable. One holds to them, or, rather, they hold to one, with an indissoluble tenacity. But convictions are in the region of character and are of remote origin. In their safety one indulges one's self in expectations, in tolerances, and these rather increase with the lapse of time. We should say that your theory of the stiffening tastes is applicable to the earlier rather than the later middle life. We should say that the tastes if they stiffen at the one period limber at the other; their forbidding rigidity is succeeded by an acquiescent suppleness. One is aware of an involuntary hospitality toward a good many authors whom one would once have turned destitute from the door, or with a dole of Organized Charity meal-tickets at the best. But in that maturer time one hesitates, and possibly ends by asking the stranger in, especially if he is young, or even if he is merely new, and setting before him the cold potato of a qualified approval. One says to him: 'You know I don't think you are the real thing quite, but taking you on your own ground you are not so bad. Come, you shall have a night's lodging at least, and if you improve, if you show a tendency to change in the right direction, there is no telling but you may be allowed to stay the week. But you must not presume; you must not take this frosty welcome for an effect of fire from the hearth where we sit with our chosen friends.' Ten to one the stranger does not like this sort of talk, and goes his way – the wrong way. But, at any rate, one has shown an open mind, a liberal spirit; one has proved that one has not stiffened in one's tastes; that one can make hopeful allowances in hopeful cases."

"Such as?" the observer insinuated.

"Such as do not fit the point exactly. Very likely the case may be that of an old or elderly author. It has been only within a year or two that we have formed the taste for an English writer, no longer living, save in his charming books. James Payn was a favorite with many in the middle Victorian period, but it is proof of the flexibility of our tastes that we have only just come to him. After shunning Anthony Trollope for fifty years, we came to him, almost as with a rush, long after our half-century was past. Now, James Payn is the solace of our autumnal equinox, and Anthony Trollope we read with a constancy and a recurrence surpassed only by our devotion to the truth as it is in the fiction of the Divine Jane; and Jane Austen herself was not an idol of our first or even our second youth, but became the cult of a time when if our tastes had stiffened we could have cared only for the most modern of the naturalists, and those preferably of the Russian and Spanish schools. A signal proof of their continued suppleness came but the other day when we acquainted ourselves with the work of the English novelist, Mr. Percy White, and it was the more signal because we perceived that he had formed himself upon a method of Thackeray's, which recalled that master, as the occasional aberrations of Payn and Trollope recall a manner of him. But it is Thackeray's most artistic method which Mr. White recalls in his studies of scamps and snobs; he allows them, as Thackeray allows Barry Lyndon and the rest, to tell their own stories, and in their unconsciousness of their own natures he finds play for an irony as keen and graphic as anything in fiction. He deals with the actual English world, and the pleasure he gave us was such as to make us resolve to return to Thackeray's vision of

his own contemporaneous English world at the first opportunity. We have not done so yet; but after we have fortified ourselves with a course of Scott and Dickens, we are confident of being able to bear up under the heaviest-handed satire of *Vanity Fair*. As for *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* and *The Yellowplush Papers*, and such like, they have never ceased to have their prime delight for us. But their proportion is quite large enough to survive from any author for any reader; as we are often saying, it is only in bits that authors survive; their resurrection is not by the whole body, but here and there a perfecter fragment. Most of our present likes and dislikes are of the period when you say people begin to stiffen in their tastes. We could count the authors by the score who have become our favorites in that period, and those we have dropped are almost as many. It is not necessary to say who they all are, but we may remark that we still read, and read, and read again the poetry of Keats, and that we no longer read the poetry of Alexander Smith. But it is through the growth of the truly great upon his mature perception that the aging reader finds novel excellences in them. It was only the other day that we picked up Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, and realized in it, from a chance page or two, a sardonic quality of insurpassable subtlety and reach. This was something quite new to us in it. We had known the terrible pathos of the story, its immeasurable tragedy, but that deadly, quiet, pitiless, freezing irony of a witness holding himself aloof from its course, and losing, for that page or two, the moralist in the mere observer, was a revelation that had come to that time of life in us when you think the tastes stiffen and one refuses new pleasures because they are new."

Our visitor yawned visibly, audibly. "And what is all this you have been saying? You have made yourself out an extraordinary example of what may be done by guarding against the stiffening of the tastes after the end of second youth. But have you proved that there is no such danger? Or was your idea simply to celebrate yourself? At moments I fancied something like that."

We owned the stroke with an indulgent smile. "No, not exactly that. The truth is we have been very much interested by your notion – if it was yours, which is not altogether probable – and we have been turning its light upon our own experience, in what we should not so much call self-celebration as self-exploitation. One uses one's self as the stuff for knowledge of others, or for the solution of any given problem. There is no other way of getting at the answers to the questions."

"And what is your conclusion as to my notion, if it is mine?" the veteran observer asked, with superiority.

"That there is nothing in it. The fact is that the tastes are never so tolerant, so liberal, so generous, so supple as they are at that time of life when they begin, according to your notion, to stiffen, to harden, to contract. We have in this very period formed a new taste – or taken a new lease of an old one – for reading history, which had been dormant all through our first and second youth. We expect to see the time when we shall read the Elizabethan dramatists with avidity. We may not improbably find a delight in statistics; there must be a hidden charm in them. We may even form a relish for the vagaries of pseudo-psychology – "

At this point we perceived the veteran observer had vanished and that we were talking to ourselves.

IV
THE PRACTICES AND PRECEPTS OF VAUDEVILLE

A Friend of the Easy Chair came in the other day after a frost from the magazine editor which had nipped a tender manuscript in its bloom, and was received with the easy hospitality we are able to show the rejected from a function involving neither power nor responsibility.

"Ah!" we breathed, sadly, at the sight of the wilted offering in the hands of our friend. "What is it he won't take *now*?"

"Wait till I get my second wind," the victim of unrequited literature answered, dropping into the Easy Chair, from which the occupant had risen; and he sighed, pensively, "I felt so sure I had got him this time." He closed his eyes, and leaned his head back against the uncomfortably carven top of the Easy Chair. It was perhaps his failure to find rest in it that restored him to animation. "It is a little thing," he murmured, "on the decline of the vaudeville."

"The decline of the vaudeville?" we repeated, wrinkling our forehead in grave misgiving. Then, for want of something better, we asked, "Do you think that is a very dignified subject for the magazine?"

"Why, bless my soul!" the rejected one cried, starting somewhat violently forward, "what is your magazine itself but vaudeville, with your contributors all doing their stunts of fiction, or poetry, or travel, or sketches of life, or articles of popular science and sociological interest, and I don't know what all! What are your illustrations but the moving pictures of the kalatechnoscope! Why," he said, with inspiration, "what are you yourself but a species of Chaser that comes at the end of the show, and helps clear the ground for the next month's performance by tiring out the lingering readers?"

"You don't think," we suggested, "you're being rather unpleasant?"

Our friend laughed harshly, and we were glad to see him restored to so much cheerfulness, at any rate. "I think the notion is a pretty good fit, though if you don't like to wear it I don't insist. Why should you object to being likened to those poor fellows who come last on the programme at the vaudeville? Very often they are as good as the others, and sometimes, when I have determined to get my five hours' enjoyment to the last moment before six o'clock, I have had my reward in something unexpectedly delightful in the work of the Chasers. I have got into close human relations with them, I and the half-dozen brave spirits who have stuck it out with me, while the ushers went impatiently about, clacking the seats back, and picking up the programmes and lost articles under them. I have had the same sense of kindly comradery with you, and now and then my patience has been rewarded by you, just as it has been by the Chasers at the vaudeville, and I've said so to people. I've said: 'You're wrong to put down the magazine the way most of you do before you get to those departments at the end. Sometimes there are quite good things in them.'"

"Really," said the unreal editor, "you seem to have had these remarks left over from your visit to the real editor. We advise you to go back and repeat them. They may cause him to revise his opinion of your contribution."

"It's no use my going back. I read finality in his eye before I left him, and I feel that no compliment, the most fulsome, would move him. Don't turn me out! I take it all back about your being a Chaser. You are the first act on the bill for me. I read the magazine like a Chinese book – from the back. I always begin with the Easy Chair."

"Ah, now you are talking," we said, and we thought it no more than human to ask, "What is it you have been saying about the vaudeville, anyway?"

The rejected one instantly unfolded his manuscript. "I will just read – "

"No, no!" we interposed. "Tell us about it – give us the general drift. We never can follow anything read to us."

The other looked incredulous, but he was not master of the situation, and he resigned himself to the secondary pleasure of sketching the paper he would so much rather have read.

"Why, you know what an inveterate vaudeville-goer I have always been?"

We nodded. "We know how you are always trying to get us to neglect the masterpieces of our undying modern dramatists, on the legitimate stage, and go with you to see the ridiculous stunts you delight in."

"Well, it comes to the same thing. I am an inveterate vaudeville-goer, for the simple reason that I find better acting in the vaudeville, and better drama, on the whole, than you ever get, or you generally get, on your legitimate stage. I don't know why it is so very legitimate. I have no doubt but the vaudeville, or continuous variety performance, is the older, the more authentic form of histrionic art. Before the Greek dramatists, or the longer-winded Sanskrit playwrights, or the exquisitely conventionalized Chinese and Japanese and Javanese were heard of, it is probable that there were companies of vaudeville artists going about the country and doing the turns that they had invented themselves, and getting and giving the joy that comes of voluntary and original work, just as they are now. And in the palmiest days of the Greek tragedy or the Roman comedy, there were, of course, variety shows all over Athens and Rome where you could have got twice the amusement for half the money that you would at the regular theatres. While the openly wretched and secretly rebellious actors whom Euripides and Terence had cast for their parts were going through rôles they would never have chosen themselves, the wilding heirs of art at the vaudeville were giving things of their own imagination, which they had worked up from some vague inspiration into a sketch of artistic effect. No manager had foisted upon them his ideals of 'what the people wanted,' none had shaped their performance according to his own notion of histrionics. They had each come to him with his or her little specialty, that would play fifteen or twenty minutes, and had, after trying it before him, had it rejected or accepted in its entirety. Then, author and actor in one, they had each made his or her appeal to the public."

"There were no hers on the stage in those days," we interposed.

"No matter," the rejected contributor retorted. "There are now, and that is the important matter. I am coming to the very instant of actuality, to the show which I saw yesterday, and which I should have brought my paper down to mention if it had been accepted." He drew a long breath, and said, with a dreamy air of retrospect: "It is all of a charming unity, a tradition unbroken from the dawn of civilization. When I go to a variety show, and drop my ticket into the chopping-box at the door, and fastidiously choose my unreserved seat in the best place I can get, away from interposing posts and persons, and settle down to a long afternoon's delight, I like to fancy myself a far-fetched phantom of the past, who used to do the same thing at Thebes or Nineveh as many thousand years ago as you please. I like to think that I too am an unbroken tradition, and my pleasure will be such as shaped smiles immemorially gone to dust."

We made our reflection that this passage was probably out of the rejected contribution, but we did not say anything, and our visitor went on.

"And what a lot of pleasure I did get, yesterday, for my fifty cents! There were twelve stunts on the bill, not counting the kalatechnoscope, and I got in before the first was over, so that I had the immediate advantage of seeing a gifted fellow-creature lightly swinging himself between two chairs which had their outer legs balanced on the tops of caraffes full of water, and making no more of the feat than if it were a walk in the Park or down Fifth Avenue. How I respected that man! What study had gone to the perfection of that act, and the others that he equally made nothing of! He was simply billed as 'Equilibrist,' when his name ought to have been blazoned in letters a foot high if they were in any wise to match his merit. He was followed by 'Twin Sisters,' who, as 'Refined Singers and Dancers,' appeared in sweeping confections of white silk, with deeply drooping, widely spreading white hats, and long-fringed white parasols heaped with artificial roses, and sang a little tropical romance, whose burden was

'Under the bámboo-trée,'

brought in at unexpected intervals. They also danced this romance with languid undulations, and before you could tell how or why, they had disappeared and reappeared in short green skirts, and then shorter white skirts, with steps and stops appropriate to their costumes, but always, I am bound to say, of the refinement promised. I can't tell you in what their refinement consisted, but I am sure it was there, just as I am sure of the humor of the two brothers who next appeared as 'Singing and Dancing Comedians' of the coon type. I know that they sang and they danced, and worked sable pleasantries upon one another with the help of the pianist, who often helps out the dialogue of the stage in vaudeville. They were not so good as the next people, a jealous husband and a pretty wife, who seized every occasion in the slight drama of 'The Singing Lesson,' and turned it to account in giving their favorite airs. I like to have a husband disguise himself as a German maestro, and musically make out why his wife is so zealous in studying with him, and I do not mind in the least having the sketch close without reason: it leaves something to my imagination. Two of 'America's Leading Banjoists' charmed me next, for, after all, there is nothing like the banjo. If one does not one's self rejoice in its plunking, there are others who do, and that is enough for my altruistic spirit. Besides, it is America's leading instrument, and those who excel upon it appeal to the patriotism which is never really dormant in us. Its close association with color in our civilization seemed to render it the fitting prelude of the next act, which consisted of 'Monologue and Songs' by a divine creature in lampblack, a shirt-waist worn outside his trousers, and an exaggerated development of stomach. What did he say, what did he sing? I don't know; I only know that it rested the soul and brain, that it soothed the conscience, and appeased the hungerings of ambition. Just to sit there and listen to that unalloyed nonsense was better than to 'sport with Amaryllis in the shade, or with the tangles of Neæra's hair,' or to be the object of a votive dinner, or to be forgiven one's sins; there is no such complete purgation of care as one gets from the real Afro-American when he is unreal, and lures one completely away from life, while professing to give his impressions of it. You, with your brute preferences for literality, will not understand this, and I suppose you would say I ought to have got a purer and higher joy out of the little passage of drama, which followed, and I don't know but I did. It was nothing but the notion of a hapless, half-grown girl, who has run away from the poorhouse for a half-holiday, and brings up in the dooryard of an old farmer of the codger type, who knew her father and mother. She at once sings, one doesn't know why, 'Oh, dear, what can the matter be,' and she takes out of her poor little carpet-bag a rag-doll, and puts it to sleep with 'By low, baby,' and the old codger puts the other dolls to sleep, nodding his head, and kicking his foot out in time, and he ends by offering that poor thing a home with him. If he had not done it, I do not know how I could have borne it, for my heart was in my throat with pity, and the tears were in my eyes. Good heavens! What simple instruments we men are! The falsest note in all Hamlet is in those words of his to Guildenstern: 'You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass… 'S blood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?' Guildenstern ought to have said: 'Much, my lord! Here is an actor who has been summering in the country, and has caught a glimpse of pathetic fact commoner than the dust in the road, and has built it up in a bit of drama as artless as a child would fancy, and yet it swells your heart and makes you cry. Your mystery? You have no mystery to an honest man. It is only fakes and frauds who do not understand the soul. The simplest willow whistle is an instrument more complex than man.' That is what I should have said in Guildenstern's place if I had had Hamlet with me there at the vaudeville show.

"In the pretty language of the playbill," the contributor went on, "this piece was called 'A Pastoral Playlet,' and I should have been willing to see 'Mandy Hawkins' over again, instead of the 'Seals and Sea Lions,' next placarded at the sides of the curtain immediately lifted on them. Perhaps

I have seen too much of seals, but I find the range of their accomplishments limited, and their impatience for fish and lump sugar too frankly greedy before and after each act. Their banjo-playing is of a most casual and irrelevant sort; they ring bells, to be sure; in extreme cases they fire small cannon; and their feat of balancing large and little balls on their noses is beyond praise. But it may be that the difficulties overcome are too obvious in their instances; I find myself holding my breath, and helping them along too strenuously for my comfort. I am always glad when the curtain goes down on them; their mere flumping about the stage makes me unhappy; but they are not so bad, after all, as trained dogs. They were followed by three 'Artistic European Acrobats,' who compensated and consoled me for the seals, by the exquisite ease with which they wrought the impossibilities of their art, in the familiar sack-coats and top-coats of every day. I really prefer tights and spangles, but I will not refuse impossibilities simply because they are performed, as our diplomats are instructed to appear at European courts, in the ordinary dress of a gentleman; it may even add a poignancy to the pleasure I own so reluctantly.

"There came another pair of 'Singers and Dancers,' and then a 'Trick Cyclist,' but really I cannot stand trick cycling, now that plain cycling, glory be! has so nearly gone out. As soon as the cyclist began to make his wheel rear up on its hind leg and carry him round the stage in that posture, I went away. But I had had enough without counting him, though I left the kalatechnoscope, with its shivering and shimmering unseen. I had had my fill of pleasure, rich and pure, such as I could have got at no legitimate theatre in town, and I came away opulently content."

We reflected awhile before we remarked: "Then I don't see what you have to complain of or to write of. Where does the decline of the vaudeville come in?"

"Oh," the rejected contributor said, with a laugh, "I forgot that. It's still so good, when compared with the mechanical drama of the legitimate theatre, that I don't know whether I can make out a case against it now. But I think I can, both in quality and quantity. I think the change began insidiously to steal upon the variety show with the increasing predominance of short plays. Since they were short, I should not have minded them so much, but they were always so bad! Still, I could go out, when they came on, and return for the tramp magician, or the comic musician, who played upon joints of stovepipe and the legs of reception-chairs and the like, and scratched matches on his two days' beard, and smoked a plaintive air on a cigarette. But when the 'playlets' began following one another in unbroken succession, I did not know what to do. Almost before I was aware of their purpose three of the leading vaudeville houses threw off the mask, and gave plays that took up the whole afternoon; and though they professed to intersperse the acts with what they called 'big vaudeville,' I could not be deceived, and I simply stopped going. When I want to see a four-act play, I will go to the legitimate theatre, and see something that I can smell, too. The influence of the vaudeville has, on the whole, been so elevating and refining that its audiences cannot stand either the impurity or the imbecility of the fashionable drama. But now the vaudeville itself is beginning to decline in quality as well as quantity."

"Not toward immodesty?"

"No, not so much that. But the fine intellectual superiority of the continuous performance is beginning to suffer contamination from the plays where there are waits between the acts. I spoke just now of the tramp magician, but I see him no longer at the variety houses. The comic musician is of the rarest occurrence; during the whole season I have as yet heard no cornet solo on a revolver or a rolling-pin. The most dangerous acts of the trapeze have been withdrawn. The acrobats still abound, but it is three long years since I looked upon a coon act with real Afro-Americans in it, or saw a citizen of Cincinnati in a fur overcoat keeping a silk hat, an open umbrella, and a small wad of paper in the air with one hand. It is true that the conquest of the vaudeville houses by the full-fledged drama has revived the old-fashioned stock companies in many cases, and has so far worked for good, but it is a doubtful advantage when compared with the loss of the direct inspiration of the artists who created and performed their stunts."

"Delightful word!" we dreamily noted. "How did it originate?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's probably a perversion of stint, a task or part, which is also to be found in the dictionary as stent. What does it matter? There is the word, and there is the thing, and both are charming. I approve of the stunt because it is always the stuntist's own. He imagined it, he made it, and he loves it. He seems never to be tired of it, even when it is bad, and when nobody in the house lends him a hand with it. Of course, when it comes to that, it has to go, and he with it. It has to go when it is good, after it has had its day, though I don't see why it should go; for my part there are stunts I could see endlessly over again, and not weary of them. Can you say as much of any play?"

"Gilbert and Sullivan's operas," we suggested.

"That is true. But without the music? And even with the music, the public won't have them any longer. I would like to see the stunt fully developed. I should like to have that lovely wilding growth delicately nurtured into drama as limitless and lawless as life itself, owing no allegiance to plot, submitting to no rule or canon, but going gayly on to nothingness as human existence does, full of gleaming lights, and dark with inconsequent glooms, musical, merry, melancholy, mad, but never-ending as the race itself."

"You would like a good deal more than you are ever likely to get," we said; and here we thought it was time to bring our visitor to book again. "But about the decline of vaudeville?"

"Well, it isn't grovelling yet in the mire with popular fiction, but it is standing still, and whatever is standing still is going backward, or at least other things are passing it. To hold its own, the vaudeville must grab something more than its own. It must venture into regions yet unexplored. It must seize not only the fleeting moments, but the enduring moments of experience; it should be wise not only to the whims and moods, but the passions, the feelings, the natures of men; for it appeals to a public not sophisticated by mistaken ideals of art, but instantly responsive to representations of life. Nothing is lost upon the vaudeville audience, not the lightest touch, not the airiest shadow of meaning. Compared with the ordinary audience at the legitimate theatres – "

"Then what you wish," we concluded, "is to elevate the vaudeville."

The visitor got himself out of the Easy Chair, with something between a groan and a growl. "You mean to kill it."

V
INTIMATIONS OF ITALIAN OPERA

Whether pleasure of the first experience is more truly pleasure than that which comes rich in associations from pleasures of the past is a doubt that no hedonistic philosopher seems to have solved yet. We should, in fact, be sorry if any had, for in that case we should be without such small occasion as we now have to suggest it in the forefront of a paper which will not finally pass beyond the suggestion. When the reader has arrived at our last word we can safely promise him he will still have the misgiving we set out with, and will be confirmed in it by the reflection that no pleasure, either of the earliest or the latest experience, can be unmixed with pain. One will be fresher than the other; that is all; but it is not certain that the surprise will have less of disappointment in it than the unsurprise. In the one case, the case of youth, say, there will be the racial disappointment to count with, and in the other, the case of age, there will be the personal disappointment, which is probably a lighter thing. The racial disappointment is expressed in what used to be called, somewhat untranslatably, *Weltschmerz*. This was peculiarly the appanage of youth, being the anticipative melancholy, the pensive foreboding, distilled from the blighted hopes of former generations of youth. Mixed with the effervescent blood of the young heart, it acted like a subtle poison, and eventuated in more or less rhythmical deliriums, in cynical excesses of sentiment, in extravagances of behavior, in effects which commonly passed when the subject himself became ancestor, and transmitted his inherited burden of *Weltschmerz* to his posterity. The old are sometimes sad, on account of the sins and follies they have personally committed and know they will commit again, but for pure gloom – gloom positive, absolute, all but palpable – you must go to youth. That is not merely the time of disappointment, it is in itself disappointment; it is not what it expected to be; and it finds nothing which confronts it quite, if at all, responsive to the inward vision. The greatest, the loveliest things in the world lose their iridescence or dwindle before it. The old come to things measurably prepared to see them as they are, take them for what they are worth; but the young are the prey of impassioned prepossessions which can never be the true measures.

The disadvantage of an opening like this is that it holds the same quality, if not quantity, of disappointment as those other sublime things, and we earnestly entreat the reader to guard himself against expecting anything considerable from it. Probably the inexperienced reader has imagined from our weighty prologue something of signal importance to follow; but the reader who has been our reader through thick and thin for many years will have known from the first that we were not going to deal with anything more vital, say, than a few emotions and memories, prompted, one night of the other winter, by hearing one of the old-fashioned Italian operas which a more than commonly inspired management had been purveying to an over-Wagnered public. In fact, we had a sense that this sort of reader was there with us the night we saw "L'Elisir d'Amore," and that it was in his personality we felt and remembered many things which we could have fancied personal only to ourselves.

He began to take the affair out of our keeping from the first moment, when, after passing through the crowd arriving from the snowy street, we found our way through the distracted vestibule of the opera-house into the concentred auditorium and hushed ourselves in the presence of the glowing spectacle of the stage. "Ah, this is the real thing," he whispered, and he would not let us, at any moment when we could have done so without molesting our neighbors, censure the introduction of Alpine architecture in the entourage of an Italian village piazza. "It is a village at the foot of the Alps probably," he said, "and if not, no matter. It is as really the thing as all the rest: as the chorus of peasants and soldiers, of men and women who impartially accompany the orchestra in the differing sentiments of the occasion; as the rivals who vie with one another in recitative and aria; as the heroine who holds them both in a passion of suspense while she weaves the enchantment of her trills and runs about them; as the whole circumstance of the divinely impossible thing which defies nature

and triumphs over prostrate probability. What does a little Swiss Gothic matter? The thing is always opera, and it is always Italy. I was thinking, as we crowded in there from the outside, with our lives in our hands, through all those trolleys and autos and carriages and cabs and sidewalk ticket-brokers, of the first time I saw this piece. It was in Venice, forty-odd years ago, and I arrived at the theatre in a gondola, slipping to the water-gate with a waft of the gondolier's oar that was both impulse and arrest, and I was helped up the sea-weedy, slippery steps by a beggar whom age and sorrow had bowed to just the right angle for supporting my hand on the shoulder he lent it. The blackness of the tide was pierced with the red plunge of a few lamps, and it gurgled and chuckled as my gondola lurched off and gave way to another; and when I got to my box – a box was two florins, but I could afford it – I looked down on just this scene, over a pit full of Austrian officers and soldiers, and round on a few Venetians darkling in the other boxes and half-heartedly enjoying the music. It was the most hopeless hour of the Austrian occupation, and the air was heavy with its oppression and tobacco, for the officers smoked between the acts. It was only the more intensely Italian for that; but it was not more Italian than this; and when I see those impossible people on the stage, and hear them sing, I breathe an atmosphere that is like the ether beyond the pull of our planet, and is as far from all its laws and limitations."

Our friend continued to talk pretty well through the whole interval between the first and second acts; and we were careful not to interrupt him, for from the literary quality of his diction we fancied him talking for publication, and we wished to take note of every turn of his phrase.

"It's astonishing," he said, "how little art needs in order to give the effect of life. A touch here and there is enough; but art is so conditioned that it has to work against time and space, and is obliged to fill up and round out its own body with much stuff that gives no sense of life. The realists," he went on, "were only half right."

"Isn't it better to be half right than wrong altogether?" we interposed.

"I'm not sure. What I wanted to express is that every now and then I find in very defective art of all kinds that mere *look* of the real thing which suffices. A few words of poetry glance from the prose body of verse and make us forget the prose. A moment of dramatic motive carries hours of heavy comic or tragic performance. Is any piece of sculpture or painting altogether good? Or isn't the spectator held in the same glamour which involved the artist before he began the work, and which it is his supreme achievement to impart, so that it shall hide all defects? When I read what you wrote the other month, or the other year, about the vaudeville shows – ?

"Hush!" we entreated. "Don't bring those low associations into this high presence."

"Why not? It is all the same thing. There is no inequality in the region of art; and I have seen things on the vaudeville stage which were graced with touches of truth so exquisite, so ideally fine, that I might have believed I was getting them at first hand and pure from the street-corner. Of course, the poor fellows who had caught them from life had done their worst to imprison them in false terms, to labor them out of shape, and build them up in acts where anything less precious would have been lost; but they survived all that and gladdened the soul. I realized that I should have been making a mistake if I had required any 'stunt' which embodied them to be altogether composed of touches of truth, of moments of life. We can stand only a very little radium; the captured sunshine burns with the fires that heat the summers of the farthest planets; and we cannot handle the miraculous substance as if it were mere mineral. A touch of truth is perhaps not only all we need, but all we can endure in any one example of art."

"You are lucky if you get so much," we said, "even at a vaudeville show."

"Or at an opera," he returned, and then the curtain rose on the second act. When it fell again, he resumed, as if he had been interrupted in the middle of a sentence. "What should you say was the supreme moment of this thing, or was the radioactive property, the very soul? Of course, it is there where Nemorino drinks the elixir and finds himself freed from Adina; when he bursts into the joyous song of liberation and gives that delightful caper

'Which signifies indifference, indifference,
Which signifies indifference,'

and which not uncommonly results from a philter composed entirely of claret. When Adina advances in the midst of his indifference and breaks into the lyrical lament

'Neppur mi guarda!'

she expresses the mystery of the sex which can be best provoked to love by the sense of loss, and the vital spark of the opera is kindled. The rest is mere incorporative material. It has to be. In other conditions the soul may be disembodied, and we may have knowledge of it without the interposition of anything material; but if there are spiritual bodies as there are material bodies, still the soul may wrap itself from other souls and emit itself only in gleams. But putting all that aside, I should like to bet that the germ, the vital spark of the opera, felt itself life, felt itself flame, first of all in that exquisite moment of release which Nemorino's caper conveys. Till then it must have been rather blind groping, with nothing better in hand than that old, worn-out notion of a love-philter. What will you bet?"

"We never bet," we virtuously replied. "We are principled against it in all cases where we feel sure of losing; though in this case we could never settle it, for both composer and librettist are dead."

"Yes, isn't it sad that spirits so gay should be gone from a world that needs gayety so much? That is probably the worst of death; it is so indiscriminate," the reader thoughtfully observed.

"But aren't you," we asked, "getting rather far away from the question whether the pleasure of experience isn't greater than the pleasure of inexperience – whether later operas don't give more joy than the first?"

"Was that the question?" he returned. "I thought it was whether Italian opera was not as much at home in exile as in its native land."

"Well, make it that," we responded, tolerantly.

"Oh no," he met us half-way. "But it naturalizes itself everywhere. They have it in St. Petersburg and in Irkutsk, for all I know, and certainly in Calcutta and Australia, the same as in Milan and Venice and Naples, or as here in New York, where everything is so much at home, or so little. It's the most universal form of art."

"Is it? Why more so than sculpture or painting or architecture?"

Our demand gave the reader pause. Then he said: "I think it is more immediately universal than the other forms of art. These all want time to denationalize themselves. It is their nationality which first authorizes them to be; but it takes decades, centuries sometimes, for them to begin their universal life. It seems different with operas. 'Cavalleria Rusticana' was as much at home with us in its first year as 'L'Elisir d'Amore' is now in its sixtieth or seventieth."

"But it isn't," we protested, "denationalized. What can be more intensely Italian than an Italian opera is anywhere?"

"You're right," the reader owned, as the reader always must, if honest, in dealing with the writer. "It is the operatic audience, not the opera, which is denationalized when the opera becomes universal. We are all Italians here to-night. I only wish we were in our native land, listening to this musical peal of ghostly laughter from the past."

The reader was silent a moment while the vast house buzzed and murmured and babbled from floor to roof. Perhaps the general note of the conversation, if it could have been tested, would have been found voluntary rather than spontaneous; but the sound was gay, and there could be no question of the splendor of the sight. We may decry our own almost as much as we please, but there is a point where we must cease to depreciate ourselves; even for the sake of evincing our superiority to our possessions, we must not undervalue some of them. One of these is the Metropolitan Opera House,

where the pride of wealth, the vanity of fashion, the beauty of youth, and the taste and love of music fill its mighty cup to the brim in the proportions that they bear to one another in the community. Wherever else we fail of our ideal, there we surely realize it on terms peculiarly our own. Subjectively the scene is intensely responsive to the New York spirit, and objectively it is most expressive of the American character in that certain surface effect of thin brilliancy which remains with the spectator the most memorable expression of its physiognomy.

No doubt something like this was in the reader's mind when he resumed, with a sigh: "It's rather pathetic how much more magnificently Italian opera has always been circumstanced in exile than at home. It had to emigrate in order to better its fortunes; it could soon be better seen if not heard outside of Italy than in its native country. It was only where it could be purely conventional as well as ideal that it could achieve its greatest triumphs. It had to make a hard fight for its primacy among the amusements that flatter the pride as well as charm the sense. You remember how the correspondents of Mr. Spectator wrote to him in scorn of the affected taste of 'the town' when the town in London first began to forsake the theatre and to go to the opera?"

"Yes, they were very severe on the town for pretending to a pleasure imparted in a language it could not understand a word of. They had all the reason on their side, and they needed it; but the opera is independent of reason, and the town felt that for its own part it could dispense with reason, too. The town can always do that. It would not go seriously or constantly to English opera, though ever so much invited to do so, for all the reasons, especially the patriotic reasons. Isn't it strange, by-the-way, how English opera is a fashion, while Italian opera remains a passion? We had it at its best, didn't we, in the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, which were the most charming things in the world; but they charmed only for a while, and it may be doubted whether they ever greatly charmed the town. The manager of the Metropolitan replaces German with Italian opera, and finds his account in it, but could he find his account in it if he put on 'The Mikado' instead of 'L'Elisir d'Amore'? If he did so, the town would not be here. Why?"

The reader did not try to answer at once. He seemed to be thinking, but perhaps he was not; other readers may judge from his reply, which, when it came, was this: "There seems to be something eternally as well as universally pleasing in Italian opera; but what the thing is, or how much of a thing it is, I wouldn't undertake to say. Possibly the fault of English opera is its actuality. It seizes upon a contemporaneous mood or fad, and satirizes it; but the Italian opera at its lightest deals with a principle of human nature, and it is never satirical; it needn't be, for it is as independent of the morals as of the reasons. It isn't obliged, by the terms of its existence, to teach, any more than it is obliged to convince. It's the most absolute thing in the world; and from its unnatural height it can stoop at will in moments of enrapturing naturalness without ever losing poise. Wasn't that delightful where Caruso hesitated about his encore, and then, with a shrug and a waft of his left hand to the house, went off in order to come back and give his aria with more effect? That was a touch of naturalness not in the scheme of the opera."

"Yes, but it was more racial, more personal, than natural. It was delicious, but we are not sure we approved of it."

"Ah, in Italian opera you're not asked to approve; you're only desired to enjoy!"

"Well, then that bit of racial personality was of the effect of actuality, and it jarred."

"Perhaps you're right," the reader sighed, but he added: "It was charming; yes, it made itself part of the piece. Nemorino would have done just as Caruso did."

At the last fall of the curtain the reader and the writer rose in unison, a drop of that full tide of life which ebbed by many channels out of the vast auditorium, and in two or three minutes left it dry. They stayed in their duplex personality to glance at the silken evanescences from the boxes, and then, being in the mood for the best society, they joined the shining presences in the vestibule where these waited for their carriages and automobiles. Of this company the interlocutors felt themselves

so inseparably part that they could with difficulty externate themselves so far as to observe that it was of the quality of "the town" which had gone to Italian opera from the first.

In Mr. Spectator's time the town would have been lighted by the smoky torches of linkboys to its chairs; now it was called to its electric autos in the blaze of a hundred incandescent bulbs; but the difference was not enough to break the tradition. There was something in the aspect of that patrician throng, as it waited the turn of each, which struck the reader and writer jointly as a novel effect from any American crowd, but which the writer scarcely dares intimate to the general reader, for the general reader is much more than generally a woman, and she may not like it. Perhaps we can keep it from offending by supposing that the fact can be true only of the most elect socially, but in any case the fact seemed to be that the men were handsomer than the women. They were not only handsomer, but they were sweller (if we may use a comparative hitherto unachieved) in look, and even in dress.

How this could have happened in a civilization so peculiarly devoted as ours to the evolution of female beauty and style is a question which must be referred to scientific inquiry. It does not affect the vast average of woman's loveliness and taste among us in ranks below the very highest; this remains unquestioned and unquestionable; and perhaps, in the given instance, it was an appearance and not a fact, or perhaps the joint spectator was deceived as to the supreme social value of those rapidly dwindling and dissolving groups.

The reader and the writer were some time in finding their true level, when they issued into the common life of the street, and they walked home as much like driving home as they could. On the way the reader, who was so remotely lost in thought that the writer could scarcely find him, made himself heard in a musing suspiration: "There was something missing. Can you think what it was?"

"Yes, certainly; there was no ballet."

"Ah, to be sure: no ballet! And there used always to be a ballet! You remember," the reader said, "how beatific it always was to have the minor coryphees subside in nebulous ranks on either side of the stage, and have the great planetary splendor of the *prima ballerina* come swiftly floating down the centre to the very footlights, beaming right and left? Ah, there's nothing in life now like that radiant moment! But even that was eclipsed when she rose on tiptoe and stubbed it down the scene on the points of her slippers, with the soles of her feet showing vertical in the act. Why couldn't we have had that to-night? Yes, we have been cruelly wronged."

"But you don't give the true measure of our injury. You forget that supreme instant when the master-spirit of the ballet comes skipping suddenly forward, and leaping into the air with calves that exchange a shimmer of kisses, and catches the *prima ballerina* at the waist, and tosses her aloft, and when she comes down supports her as she bends this way and that way, and all at once stiffens for her bow to the house. Think of our having been defrauded of that!"

"Yes, we have been wickedly defrauded." The reader was silent for a while, and then he said: "I wonder if anybody except the choreographic composer ever knew what the story of any ballet was? Were you ever able to follow it?"

"Certainly not. It is bad enough following the opera. All that one wishes to do in one case is to look, just as in the other case all one wishes to do is to listen. We would as lief try to think out the full meaning of a Browning poem in the pleasure it gave us, as to mix our joy in the opera or the ballet with any severe question of their purport."

VI
THE SUPERIORITY OF OUR INFERIORS

The satirical reader introduced himself with a gleam in his eye which kindled apprehension in the unreal editor's breast, and perhaps roused in him a certain guilty self-consciousness.

"I didn't know," the reader said, "that you were such a well-appointed *arbiter elegantiarum*."

"Meaning our little discourse last month on the proper form of addressing letters?" the editor boldly grappled with the insinuation. "Oh yes; etiquette is part of our function. We merely hadn't got round to the matter before. You liked our remarks?"

"Very much," our visitor said, with the fine irony characteristic of him. "All the more because I hadn't expected that sort of thing of you. What I have expected of you hitherto was something more of the major morality."

"But the large-sized morals did not enter into that scheme. We deal at times with the minor morality, too, if the occasion demands, as we have suggested. You should not have been surprised to find politeness, as well as righteousness, advocated or applauded here. Naturally, of course, we prefer the larger-sized morals as questions for discussion. Had you one of the larger-sized questions of morality to present?"

"I was thinking it was a larger-sized question of manners."

"For example."

"The experience of one of those transatlantic celebrities who seem to be rather multiplying upon us of late, and who come here with a proclamation of their worship of American women ready to present, as if in print, to the swarming interviewers on the pier, and who then proceed to find fault with our civilization on every other point, almost before they drive up to their hotels."

"But isn't that rather an old story?"

"I suppose it is rather old, but it always interests us; we are never free from that longing for a flattered appearance in the eyes of others which we so seldom achieve. This last, or next to last, celebrity – in the early winter it is impossible to fix their swift succession – seems to have suffered amaze at the rude behavior of some dairymaids in the milk-room of the lady who was showing the celebrity over her premises. I didn't understand the situation very clearly. The lady must have been a lady farmer, in order to have a milk-room with dairymaids in it; but in any case the fact is that when the lady entered with the celebrity the maids remained seated, where they were grouped together, instead of rising and standing in the presence of their superiors, as they would have done in the hemisphere that the celebrity came from."

"Well, what came of it?"

"Oh, nothing. It was explained to the celebrity that the maids did not rise because they felt themselves as good as their mistress and her guest, and saw no reason for showing them a servile deference: that this was the American ideal."

"In the minds of those Swedish, Irish, English, Polish, German, or Bohemian dairymaids," we murmured, dreamily, and when our reader roused us from our muse with a sharp "What?" we explained, "Of course they were not American dairymaids, for it stands to reason that if they were dairymaids they could not be Americans, or if Americans they could not be dairymaids."

"True," our friend assented, "but all the same you admit that they were behaving from an American ideal?"

"Yes."

"Well, that ideal is what the celebrity objects to. The celebrity doesn't like it – on very high grounds."

"The grounds of social inequality, the inferiority of those who work to those who pay, and the right of the superiors to the respect of the inferiors?"

"No, the politeness due from one class to another."

"Such as lives between classes in Europe, we suppose. Well, that is very interesting. Is it of record that the lady and her guest, on going into the milk-room where the dairymaids remained rudely seated, bowed or nodded to them or said, 'Good-day, young ladies'?"

"No, that is not of record."

"Their human quality, their human equality, being altogether out of the question, was probably in no wise recognized. Why, then, should they have recognized the human quality of their visitors?" Our satirical reader was silent, and we went on. "There is something very droll in all that. We suppose you have often been vexed, or even outraged, by the ingratitude of the waiter whom you had given a handsome tip, over and above the extortionate charge of the house, and who gathered up your quarter or half-dollar and slipped it into his pocket without a word, or even an inarticulate murmur, of thanks?"

"Often. Outraged is no word for it."

"Yes," we assented, feeling our way delicately. "Has it ever happened that in the exceptional case where the waiter has said, 'Thank you very much,' or the like, you have responded with a cordial, 'You're welcome,' or, 'Not at all'?"

"Certainly not."

"Why not?"

"Because – because – those are terms of politeness between – "

Our friend hesitated, and we interrogatively supplied the word, "Equals? There are always difficulties between unequals. But try this, some day, and see what a real gratitude you will get from the waiter. It isn't infallible, but the chances are he will feel that you have treated him like a man, and will do or say something to show his feeling: he will give a twitch to your under-coat when he has helped you on with your top-coat, which will almost pull you over. We have even tried saying 'You are welcome' to a beggar. It's astonishing how they like it. By-the-way, have you the habit of looking at your waiter when he comes to take your order; or do you let him stand facing you, without giving him a glance above the lower button of his poor, greasy waistcoat?"

"No, the theory is that he is part of the mechanism of the establishment."

"That is the theory. But it has its inconveniences. We ourselves used to act upon it, but often, when we found him long in bringing our order, we were at a loss which waiter to ask whether it would be ready some time during the evening; and occasionally we have blown up the wrong waiter, who did not fail to bring us to shame for our error."

"They do look so confoundedly alike," our visitor said, thoughtfully.

"We others look confoundedly alike to them, no doubt. If they studied us as little as we study them, if they ignored us as contemptuously as we do them, upon the theory that we, too, are part of the mechanism, the next man would be as likely as we to get our dinner."

"They are paid to study us," our visitor urged.

"Ah, *paid*! The intercourse of unequals is a commercial transaction, but when the inferiors propose to make it purely so the superiors object: they want something to boot, something thrown in, some show of respect, some appearance of gratitude. Perhaps those dairymaids did not consider that they were paid to stand up when their employer and the visiting celebrity came into the milk-room, and so, unless they were civilly recognized – we don't say they weren't in this case – they thought they would do some of the ignoring, too. It is surprising how much the superiors think they ought to get for their money from the inferiors in that commercial transaction. For instance, they think they buy the right to call their inferiors by their first names, but they don't think they sell a similar right with regard to themselves. They call them Mary and John, but they would be surprised and hurt if the butler and waitress addressed them as Mary and John. Yet there is no *reason* for their surprise. Do you remember in that entrancing and edifying comedy of 'Arms and the Man' – Mr. Bernard Shaw's very best, as we think – the wild Bulgarian maid calls the daughter of the house by her Christian

name? 'But you mustn't do that,' the mother of the house instructs her. 'Why not?' the girl demands. '*She calls me Louka.*'"

"Capital!" our friend agreed. "But, of course, Shaw doesn't mean it."

"You never can tell whether he means a thing or not. We think he meant in this case, as Ibsen means in all cases, that you shall look where you stand."

Our satirist seemed to have lost something of his gayety. "Aren't you taking the matter a little too seriously?"

"Perhaps. But we thought you wanted us to be more serious than we were about addressing letters properly. This is the larger-sized morality, the real No. 11 sort, and you don't like it, though you said you expected it of us."

"Oh, but I do like it, though just at present I hadn't expected it. But if you're in earnest you must admit that the lower classes with us are abominably rude. Now, I have the fancy – perhaps from living on the Continent a good deal in early life, where I formed the habit – of saying good-morning to the maid or the butler when I come down. But they never seem to like it, and I can't get a good-morning back unless I dig it out of them. I don't want them to treat me as a superior; I only ask to be treated as an equal."

"We have heard something like that before, but we doubt it. What you really want is to have your condescension recognized; they *feel* that, if they don't *know* it. Besides, their manners have been formed by people who don't ask good-morning from them; they are so used to being treated as if they were not there that they cannot realize they *are* there. We have heard city people complain of the wane of civility among country people when they went to them in the summer to get the good of their country air. They say that the natives no longer salute them in meeting, but we never heard that this happened when they first saluted the natives. Try passing the time of day with the next farmer you meet on a load of wood, and you will find that the old-fashioned civility is still to be had for the asking. But it won't be offered without the asking; the American who thinks from your dress and address that you don't regard him as an equal will not treat you as one at the risk of a snub; and he is right. As for domestics – or servants, as we insolently call them – their manners are formed on their masters', and are often very bad. But they are not always bad. We, too, have had that fancy of yours for saying good-morning when we come down; it doesn't always work, but it oftener works than not. A friend of ours has tried some such civility at others' houses: at his host's house when the door was opened to him, arriving for dinner, and he was gloomily offered a tiny envelope with the name of the lady he was to take out. At first it surprised, but when it was imagined to be well meant it was apparently liked; in extreme cases it led to note of the weather; the second or third time at the same house it established something that would have passed, with the hopeful spectator, for a human relation. Of course, you can't carry this sort of thing too far. You can be kind, but you must not give the notion that you do not know your place."

"Ah! You draw the line," our friend exulted. "I thought so. But where?"

"At the point where you might have the impression that you respected butlers, when you merely loved your fellow-men. You see the difference?"

"But isn't loving your fellow-men enough? Why should you respect butlers?"

"To be sure. But come to think of it, why shouldn't you? What is it in domestic employ that degrades, that makes us stigmatize it as 'service'? As soon as you get out-of-doors the case changes. You must often have seen ladies fearfully snubbed by their coachmen; and as for chauffeurs, who may kill you or somebody else at any moment, the mental attitude of the average automobilaire toward them must be one of abject deference. But there have been some really heroic, some almost seraphic, efforts to readjust the terms of a relation that seems to have something essentially odious in it. In the old times, the times of the simple life now passed forever, when the daughter of one family 'lived out' in another, she ate with the family and shared alike with them. She was their help, but she became their hindrance when she insisted upon the primitive custom after 'waiting at table' had passed the

stage when the dishes were all set down, and the commensals 'did their own stretching.' Heroes and seraphs did their utmost to sweeten and soften the situation, but the unkind tendency could not be stayed. The daughter of the neighbor who 'lived out' became 'the hired girl,' and then she became the waitress, especially when she was of neighbors beyond seas; and then the game was up. Those who thought humanely of the predicament and wished to live humanely in it tried one thing and tried another. That great soul of H.D.L., one of the noblest and wisest of our economic reformers, now gone to the account which any might envy him, had a usage which he practised with all guests who came to his table. Before they sat down he or his wife said, looking at the maid who was to serve the dinner, 'This is our friend, Miss Murphy'; and then the guests were obliged in some sort to join the host and hostess in recognizing the human quality of the attendant. It was going rather far, but we never heard that any harm came of it. Some thought it rather odd, but most people thought it rather nice."

"And you advocate the general adoption of such a custom?" our friend asked, getting back to the sarcasm of his opening note. "Suppose a larger dinner, a fashionable dinner, with half a dozen men waiters? That sort of thing might do at the table of a reformer, which only the more advanced were invited to; but it wouldn't work with the average retarded society woman or clubman."

"What good thing works with *them*?" we retorted, spiritedly. "But no, the custom would not be readily adopted even among enlightened thinkers. We do not insist upon it; the men and the maids might object; they might not like knowing the kind of people who are sometimes asked to quite good houses. To be sure, they are not obliged to recognize them out of the house."

"But what," our friend asked, "has all this got to do with the question of 'the decent respect' due from domestics, as you prefer to call them, to their employers?"

"As in that case of the dairymaids which we began with? But why was any show of respect due from them? Was it nominated in the bond that for their four or five dollars a week they were to stand up when their 'mistress' and her 'company' entered the room? Why, in fine, should any human being respect another, seeing what human beings generally are? We may love one another, but *respect*! No, those maids might, and probably did, love their mistress; but they felt that they could show their love as well sitting down as standing up. They would not stand up to show their love for one another."

"Then you think there is some love lost between the master and man or mistress and maid nowadays," our beaten antagonist feebly sneered.

"The masters and mistresses may not, but the men and maids may, have whole treasures of affection ready to lavish at the first sign of a desire for it; they do not say so, for they are not very articulate. In the mean time the masters and mistresses want more than they have paid for. They want honor as well as obedience, respect as well as love, the sort of thing that money used to buy when it was worth more than it is now. Well, they won't get it. They will get it less and less as time goes on. Whatever the good new times may bring, they won't bring back the hypocritical servility of the good old times. They – "

We looked round for our visiting reader, but he had faded back into the millions of readers whom we are always addressing in print.

VII
UNIMPORTANCE OF WOMEN IN REPUBLICS

A visitor of the Easy Chair who seemed to have no conception of his frequency, and who was able to supply from his imagination the welcome which his host did not always hurry to offer him, found a place for himself on the window-sill among the mistaken MSS. sent in the delusion that the editor of the Chair was the editor of the magazine.

"I have got a subject for you," he said.

"Have you ever heard," we retorted, "of carrying coals to Newcastle? What made you think we wanted a subject?"

"Merely that perfunctory air of so many of your disquisitions. I should think you would feel the want yourself. Your readers all feel it for you."

"Well, we can tell you," we said, "that there could be no greater mistake. We are turning away subjects from these premises every day. They come here, hat in hand, from morning till night, asking to be treated; and after dark they form a Topic Line at our door, begging for the merest pittance of a notice, for the slightest allusion, for the most cursory mention. Do you know that there are at least two hundred thousand subjects in this town out of a job now? If you have got a subject, you had better take it to the country press; the New York magazines and reviews are overstocked with them; the newspapers, morning and evening, are simply inundated with subjects; subjects are turned down every Sunday in the pulpits; they cannot get standing-room in the theatres. Why, we have just this moment dismissed a subject of the first interest. Have you heard how at a late suffrage meeting one lady friend of votes for women declared herself an admirer of monarchies because they always gave women more recognition, more honor, than republics?"

"No, I haven't," our visitor said.

"Well, it happened," we affirmed. "But every nook and cranny of our brain was so full of subjects that we simply could not give this a moment's consideration, and we see that all the other editors in New York were obliged to turn the cold shoulder to it, though they must have felt, as we did, that it was of prime importance."

From a position of lounging ease our visitor sat up, and began to nurse one of his knees between his clasped hands. "But if," he asked, "you had been able to consider the subject, what should you have said?"

"There are a great many ways of considering a subject like that," we replied. "We might have taken the serious attitude, and inquired how far the female mind, through the increasing number of Anglo-American marriages in our international high life, has become honeycombed with monarchism. We might have held that the inevitable effect of such marriages was to undermine the republican ideal at the very source of the commonwealth's existence, and by corrupting the heart of American motherhood must have weakened the fibre of our future citizenship to the point of supinely accepting any usurpation that promised ranks and titles and the splendor of court life."

"Wouldn't you have been rather mixing your metaphors?" our visitor asked, with an air of having followed us over a difficult country.

"In a cause like that, no patriotic publicist would have minded mixing his metaphors. He would have felt that the great thing was to keep his motives pure; and in treating such a subject our motives would have remained the purest, whatever became of our metaphors. At the same time this would not have prevented our doing justice to the position taken by that friend of votes for women. We should have frankly acknowledged that there was a great deal to be said for it, and that republics had hitherto been remiss in not officially acknowledging the social primacy of woman, but, in fact, distinctly inviting her to a back seat in public affairs. We should then have appealed to our thoughtful readers to give the matter their most earnest attention, and with the conservatism of all serious inquirers we

should have urged them to beware of bestowing the suffrage on a class of the community disposed so boldly to own its love of the splendors of the state. Would it be sage, would it be safe, to indulge with democratic equality a sex which already had its eyes on the flattering inequality of monarchy? Perhaps at this point we should digress a little and mention Montesquieu, whose delightful *Spirit of Laws* we have lately been reading. We should remind the reader, who would like to think he had read him too, how Montesquieu distinguishes between the principles on which the three sorts of government are founded: civic virtue being the base of a republic, honor the ruling motive in the subjects of a monarchy, and fear the dominant passion in the slaves of a despotism. Then we should ask whether men were prepared to intrust the reins of government to women when they had received this timely intimation that women were more eager to arrive splendidly than to bring the car of state in safety to the goal. How long would it be, we should poignantly demand, before in passing from the love of civic virtue to the ambition of honor, we should sink in the dread of power?"

Our visitor was apparently not so deeply impressed by the treatment of the subject here outlined as we had been intending and expecting he should be. He asked, after a moment, "Don't you think that would be rather a heavy-handed way of dealing with the matter?"

"Oh," we returned, "we have light methods of treating the weightiest questions. There is the semi-ironical vein, for instance, which you must have noticed a good deal in us, and perhaps it would be better suited to the occasion."

"Yes?" our visitor suggested.

"Yes," we repeated. "In that vein we should question at the start whether any such praise of monarchy had been spoken, and then we should suppose it had, and begin playfully to consider what the honors and distinctions were that women had enjoyed under monarchy. We should make a merit at the start of throwing up the sponge for republics. We should own they had never done the statesmanlike qualities of women justice. We should glance, but always a little mockingly, at the position of woman in the Greek republics, and contrast, greatly to the republican disadvantage, her place in the democracy of Athens with that she held in the monarchy of Sparta. We should touch upon the fact that the Athenian women were not only not in politics, but were not even in society, except a class which could be only fugitively mentioned, and we should freely admit that the Spartan women were the heroic inspiration of the men in all the virtues of patriotism at home as well as in the field. We should recognize the sort of middle station women held in the Roman republic, where they were not shut up in the almost Oriental seclusion of Athenian wives, nor invited to a share in competitive athletics like the Spartan daughters. We should note that if a Spartan mother had the habit of bidding her son return with his shield or on it, a Roman mother expressed a finer sense of her importance in the state when she intimated that it was enough for her to be the parent of the Gracchi. But we should not insist upon our point, which, after all, would not prove that the decorative quality of women in public life was recognized in Rome as it always has been in monarchies, and we should recur to the fact that this was the point which had been made against all republics. Coming down to the Italian republics, we should have to own that Venice, with her ducal figurehead, had practically a court at which women shone as they do in monarchies; while in Florence, till the Medici established themselves in sovereign rule, women played scarcely a greater part than in Athens. It was only with the Medici that we began to hear of such distinguished ladies as Bianca Cappello; and in the long, commonplace annals of the Swiss commonwealth we should be able to recall no female name that lent lustre to any epoch. We should contrast this poverty with the riches of the French monarchy, adorned with the memories of Agnes Sorel, of Diane de Poitiers, of Madame de Montespan, of Madame de Pompadour, following one another in brilliant succession, and sharing not only the glory but the authority of the line of princes whose affections they ruled. Of course, we should have to use an ironical gravity in concealing their real quality and the character of the courts where they flourished; and in comparing the womanless obscurity of the English Commonwealth

with the feminine effulgence of the Restoration, we should seek a greater effect in our true aim by concealing the name and nature of the ladies who illustrated the court of Charles II."

"And what would your true aim be?" our visitor pressed, with an unseemly eagerness which we chose to snub by ignoring it.

"As for the position of women in despotisms," we continued, "we should confess that it seemed to be as ignobly subordinate as that of women in republics. They were scarcely more conspicuous than the Citizenesses who succeeded in the twilight of the One and Indivisible the marquises and comtesses and duchesses of the Ancien Régime, unless they happened, as they sometimes did, to be the head of the state. Without going back to the semi-mythical Semiramis, we should glance at the characters of Cleopatra and certain Byzantine usurpresses, and with a look askance at the two empresses of Russia, should arrive at her late imperial majesty of China. The poor, bad Isabella of Spain would concern us no more than the great, good Victoria of England, for they were the heads of monarchies and not of despotisms; but we should subtly insinuate that the reigns of female sovereigns were nowhere adorned by ladies of the distinction so common as hardly to be distinction in the annals of kings and emperors. What famous beauty embellished the court of Elizabeth or either Mary? Even Anne's Mrs. Masham was not a shining personality, and her Sarah of Marlborough was only a brilliant shrew.

"At this point we should digress a little, but we should pursue our inquiry in the same satirical tenor. We hope we are not of those moralists who assume a merit in denouncing the international marriages which have brought our women, some to think tolerantly and some to think favorably of a monarchy as affording greater scope for their social genius. But we should ask, with the mock-seriousness befitting such a psychological study, how it was that, while American girls married baronets and viscounts and earls and dukes, almost none, if any, of their brothers married the sisters or daughters of such noblemen. It could not be that they were not equally rich and therefore equally acceptable, and could it be that they made it a matter of conscience not to marry ladies of title? Were our men, then, more patriotic than our women? Were men naturally more republican than women?

"This question would bring us to the pass where we should more or less drop the mocking mask. We should picture a state of things in which we had actually arrived at a monarchy of our own, with a real sovereign and a nobility and a court, and the rest of the tradition. With a sudden severity we should ask where, since they could not all be of the highest rank, our women would consent to strike the procession of precedence? How, with their inborn and inbred notions of the deference due their sex, with that pride of womanhood which our republican chivalry has cherished in them, they would like, when they went to court, to stand, for hours perhaps, while a strong young man, or a fat old man, or a robust man in the prime of life, remained seated in the midst of them? Would it flatter their hopes of distinction to find the worst scenes of trolley-car or subway transit repeated at the highest social function in the land, with not even a hanging-strap to support their weariness, their weakness, or, if we must say it, their declining years? Would the glory of being part of a spectacle testifying in our time to the meanness and rudeness of the past be a compensation for the aching legs and breaking backs under the trailing robes and the nodding plumes of a court dress?"

"That would be a telling stroke," our visitor said, "but wouldn't it be a stroke retold? It doesn't seem to me very new."

"No matter," we said. "The question is not what a thing is, but how it is done. You asked how we should treat a given subject, and we have answered."

"And is that all you could make of it?"

"By no means. As subjects are never exhausted, so no subject is ever exhausted. We could go on with this indefinitely. We could point out that the trouble was, with us, not too much democracy, but too little; that women's civic equality with men was perhaps the next step, and not the social inequality among persons of both sexes. Without feeling that it affected our position, we would acknowledge that there was now greater justice for women in a monarchy like Great Britain than in a republic like the United States; with shame we would acknowledge it; but we would never admit that it was so because

of the monarchism of the first or the republicanism of the last. We should finally be very earnest with this phase of our subject, and we should urge our fair readers to realize that citizenship was a duty as well as a right. We should ask them before accepting the suffrage to consider its responsibilities and to study them in the self-sacrificing attitude of their husbands and fathers, or the brothers of one another, toward the state. We should make them observe that the actual citizen was not immediately concerned with the pomps and glories of public life; that parties and constituencies were not made up of one's fellow-aristocrats, but were mostly composed of plebeians very jealous of any show of distinction, and that, in spite of the displeasures of political association with them, there was no present disposition in American men to escape to monarchy from them. We cannot, we should remind them, all be of good family; that takes time, or has taken it; and without good family the chances of social eminence, or even prominence, are small at courts. Distinction is more evenly distributed in a democracy like ours; everybody has a chance at it. To be sure, it is not the shining honor bestowed by kings, but when we remember how often the royal hand needs washing we must feel that the honor from it may have the shimmer of putrescence. This is, of course, the extreme view of the case; and the condition of the royal hand is seldom scrutinized by those who receive or those who witness the honor bestowed. But the honor won from one's fellow-citizens is something worth having, though it is not expressed in a ribbon or a title. Such honor, it seems probable, will soon be the reward of civic virtue in women as well as men, and we hope women will not misprize it. The great end to be achieved for them by the suffrage is self-government, but with this goes the government of others, and that is very pleasant. The head of our state may be a woman, chosen at no far-distant election; and though it now seems droll to think of a woman being president, it will come in due time to seem no more so than for a woman to be a queen or an empress. At any rate, we must habituate our minds to the idea; we must realize it with the hope it implies that no woman will then care socially to outshine her sister; at the most she will be emulous of her in civic virtue, the peculiar grace and glory of republics. We understand that this is already the case in New Zealand and Colorado and Wyoming. It is too soon, perhaps, to look for the effect of suffrage on the female character in Denmark; it may be mixed, because there the case is complicated by the existence of a king, which may contaminate that civic virtue by the honor which is the moving principle in a monarchy. And now," we turned lightly to our visitor, "what is the topic you wish us to treat?"

"Oh," he said, rising, "you have put it quite out of my head; I've been so absorbed in what you were saying. But may I ask just where in your treatment of the theme your irony ends?"

"Where yours begins," we neatly responded.

VIII
HAVING JUST GOT HOME

The air of having just got home from Europe was very evident in the friend who came to interview himself with us the other day. It was not, of course, so distinguishing as it would have been in an age of less transatlantic travel, but still, as we say, it was evident, and it lent him a superiority which he could not wholly conceal. His superiority, so involuntary, would, if he had wished to dissemble, have affirmed itself in the English cut of his clothes and in the habit of his top-hat, which was so newly from a London shop as not yet to have lost the whiteness of its sweat-band. But his difference from ourselves appeared most in a certain consciousness of novel impressions, which presently escaped from him in the critical tone of his remarks.

"Well," we said, with our accustomed subtlety, "how do you find your fellow-savages on returning to them after a three months' absence?"

"Don't ask me yet," he answered, laying his hat down on a pile of rejected MSS., delicately, so as not to dim the lustre of its nap. "I am trying to get used to them, and I have no doubt I shall succeed in time. But I would rather not be hurried in my opinions."

"You find some relief from the summer's accumulation of sky-scrapers amid the aching void of our manners?" we suggested.

"Oh, the fresh sky-scrapers are not so bad. You won't find the English objecting to them half so much as some of our own fellows. But you are all right about the aching void of manners. That is truly the bottomless pit with us."

"You think we get worse?"

"I don't say that, exactly. How could we?"

"It might be difficult."

"I will tell you what," he said, after a moment's muse. "There does not seem to be so much an increase of bad manners, or no manners, as a diffusion. The foreigners who come to us in hordes, but tolerably civil hordes, soon catch the native unmannerliness, and are as rude as the best of us, especially the younger generations. The older people, Italians, Czechs, Poles, Greeks, Assyrians, or whatever nationalities now compose those hordes, remain somewhat in the tradition of their home civility; but their children, their grandchildren, pick up our impoliteness with the first words of our language, or our slang, which they make their adoptive mother-tongue long before they realize that it is slang. When they do realize it, they still like it better than language, and as no manners are easier than manners, they prefer the impoliteness they find waiting them here. I have no doubt that their morals improve; we have morals and to spare. They learn to carry pistols instead of knives; they shoot instead of stabbing."

"Have you been attacked with any particular type of revolver since your return?" we inquired, caustically.

"I have been careful not to give offence."

"Then why are you so severe upon your fellow-savages, especially the minors of foreign extraction?"

"I was giving the instances which I supposed I was asked for; and I am only saying that I have found our manners merely worse quantitatively, or in the proportion of our increasing population. But this prompt succession of the new Americans to the heritage of the old Americans is truly grievous. They must so soon outnumber us, three to one, ten to one, twenty, fifty, and they must multiply our incivilities in geometrical ratio. At Boston, where I landed – "

"Oh, you landed at Boston!" we exclaimed, as if this accounted for everything; but we were really only trying to gain time. "If you had landed at New York, do you think your sensibilities would

have suffered in the same degree?" We added, inconsequently enough, "We always supposed that Boston was exemplary in the matters you are complaining of."

"And when you interrupted me, with a want of breeding which is no doubt national rather than individual, I was going on to say that I found much alleviation from a source whose abundant sweetness I had forgotten. I moan the sort of caressing irony which has come to be the most characteristic expression of our native kindliness. There can be no doubt of our kindliness. Whatever we Americans of the old race-suicidal stock are not, we are kind; and I think that our expression of our most national mood has acquired a fineness, a delicacy, with our people of all degrees, unknown to any other irony in the world. Do you remember *The House with the Green Shutters*– I can never think of the book without a pang of personal grief for the too-early death of the author – how the bitter, ironical temper of the Scotch villagers is realized? Well, our ironical temper is just the antithesis of that. It is all sweetness, but it is of the same origin as that of those terrible villagers: it comes from that perfect, that familiar understanding, that penetrating reciprocal intelligence, of people who have lived intimately in one another's lives, as people in small communities do. We are a small community thrown up large, as they say of photographs; we are not so much a nation as a family; we each of us know just what any other, or all others, of us intend to the finest shade of meaning, by the lightest hint."

"Ah!" we breathed, quite as if we were a character in a novel which had inspired the author with a new phrase. "Now you are becoming interesting. Should you mind giving a few instances?"

"Well, that is not so easy. But I may say that the friendly ironies began for us as soon as we were out of the more single-minded keeping of the ship's stewards, who had brought our hand-baggage ashore, and, after extracting the last shilling of tip from us, had delivered us over to the keeping of the customs officers. It began with the joking tone of the inspectors, who surmised that we were not trying to smuggle a great value into the country, and with their apologetic regrets for bothering us to open so many trunks. They implied that it was all a piece of burlesque, which we were bound mutually to carry out for the gratification of a Government which enjoyed that kind of thing. They indulged this whim so far as to lift out the trays, to let the Government see that there was nothing dutiable underneath, where they touched or lifted the contents with a mocking hand, and at times carried the joke so far as to have some of the things removed. But they helped put them back with a smile for the odd taste of the Government. I do not suppose that an exasperating duty was ever so inexasperatingly fulfilled."

"Aren't you rather straining to make out a case? We have heard of travellers who had a very different experience."

"At New York, yes, where we are infected with the foreign singleness more than at Boston. Perhaps a still livelier illustration of our ironical temperament was given me once before when I brought some things into Boston. There were some Swiss pewters, which the officers joined me for a moment in trying to make out were more than two hundred years old; but failing, jocosely levied thirty per cent. ad valorem on them; and then in the same gay spirit taxed me twenty per cent. on a medallion of myself done by an American sculptor, who had forgotten to verify an invoice of it before the American consul at the port of shipment."

"It seems to us," we suggested, "that this was a piece of dead earnest."

"The fact was earnest," our friend maintained, "but the spirit in which it was realized was that of a brotherly persuasion that I would see the affair in its true light, as a joke that was on me. It was a joke that cost me thirty dollars."

"Still, we fail to see the irony of the transaction."

"Possibly," our friend said, after a moment's muse, "I am letting my sense of another incident color the general event too widely. But before I come to that I wish to allege some proofs of the national irony which I received on two occasions when landing in New York. On the first of these occasions the commissioner who came aboard the steamer, to take the sworn declaration of the passengers that they were not smugglers, recognized my name as that of a well-known financier who

had been abroad for a much-needed rest, and personally welcomed me home in such terms that I felt sure of complete exemption from the duties levied on others. When we landed I found that this good friend had looked out for me to the extent of getting me the first inspector, and he had guarded my integrity to the extent of committing me to a statement in severalty of the things my family had bought abroad, so that I had to pay twenty-eight dollars on my daughter's excess of the hundred dollars allowed free, although my wife was bringing in only seventy-five dollars' value, and I less than fifty."

"You mean that you had meant to lump the imports and escape the tax altogether?" we asked.

"Something like that."

"And the officer's idea of caressing irony was to let you think you could escape equally well by being perfectly candid?"

"Something like that."

"And what was the other occasion?"

"Oh, it was when I had a letter to the customs officer, and he said it would be all right, and then furnished me an inspector who opened every piece of my baggage just as if I had been one of the wicked."

We could not help laughing, and our friend grinned appreciatively. "And what was that supreme instance of caressing irony which you experienced in Boston?" we pursued.

"Ah, *there* is something I don't think you can question. But I didn't experience it; I merely observed it. We were coming down the stairs to take our hack at the foot of the pier, and an elderly lady who was coming down with us found the footing a little insecure. The man in charge bade her be careful, and then she turned upon him in severe reproof, and scolded him well. She told him that he ought to have those stairs looked after, for otherwise somebody would be killed one of these days. 'Well, ma'am,' he said, 'I shouldn't like that. I was in a railroad accident once. But I tell you what you do. The next time you come over here, you just telephone me, and I'll have these steps fixed. Or, I'll tell you: you just write me a letter and let me know exactly how you want 'em fixed, and I'll see to it myself.'"

"That was charming," we had to own, "and it was of an irony truly caressing, as you say. Do you think it was exactly respectful?"

"It was affectionate, and I think the lady liked it as much as any of us, or as the humorist himself."

"Yes, it was just so her own son might have joked her," we assented. "But tell us, Crœsus," we continued, in the form of Socratic dialogue, "did you find at Boston that multiple unmannerliness which you say is apparent from the vast increase of adoptive citizens? We have been in the habit of going to Boston when we wished to refresh our impression that we had a native country; when we wished to find ourselves in the midst of the good old American faces, which were sometimes rather arraigning in their expression, but not too severe for the welfare of a person imaginably demoralized by a New York sojourn."

Our friend allowed himself time for reflection. "I don't think you could do that now with any great hope of success. I should say that the predominant face in Boston now was some type of Irish face. You know that the civic affairs of Boston are now in the hands of the Irish. And with reason, if the Irish are in the majority."

"In New York it has long been the same without the reason," we dreamily suggested.

"In Boston," our friend went on, without regarding us, "the Catholics outvote the Protestants, and not because they vote oftener, but because there are more of them."

"And the heavens do not fall?"

"It is not a question of that; it is a question of whether the Irish are as amiable and civil as the Americans, now they are on top."

"We always supposed they were one of the most amiable and civil of the human races. Surely you found them so?"

"I did at Queenstown, but at Boston I had not the courage to test the fact. I would not have liked to try a joke with one of them as I would at Queenstown, or as I would at Boston with an American. Their faces did not arraign me, but they forbade me. It was very curious, and I may have misread them."

"Oh, probably not," we lightly mocked. "They were taking it out of you for ages of English oppression; they were making you stand for the Black Cromwell."

"Oh, very likely," our friend said, in acceptance of our irony, because he liked irony so much. "But, all the same, I thought it a pity, as I think it a pity when I meet a surly Italian here, who at home would be so sweet and gentle. It is somehow our own fault. We have spoiled them by our rudeness; they think it is American to be as rude as the Americans. They mistake our incivility for our liberty."

"There is something in what you say," we agreed, "if you will allow us to be serious. They are here in our large, free air, without the parasites that kept them in bounds in their own original habitat. We must invent some sort of culture which shall be constructive and not destructive, and will supply the eventual good without the provisional evil."

"Then we must go a great way back, and begin with our grandfathers, with the ancestors who freed us from Great Britain, but did not free themselves from the illusion that equality resides in incivility and honesty in bluntness. That was something they transmitted to us intact, so that we are now not only the best-hearted but the worst-mannered of mankind. If our habitual carriage were not rubber-tired by irony, we should be an intolerable offence, if not to the rest of the world, at least to ourselves. By-the-way, since I came back I have been reading a curious old book by James Fenimore Cooper, which I understand made a great stir in its day. Do you know it? —*Home as Found?*"

"We know it as one may know a book which one has not read. It pretty nearly made an end of James Fenimore Cooper, we believe. His fellow-countrymen fell on him, tooth and nail. We didn't take so kindly to criticism in those days as we do now, when it merely tickles the fat on our ribs, and we respond with the ironic laughter you profess to like so much. What is the drift of the book besides the general censure?"

"Oh, it is the plain, dull tale of an American family returning home after a long sojourn in Europe so high-bred that you want to kill them, and so superior to their home-keeping countrymen that, vulgarity for vulgarity, you much prefer the vulgarity of the Americans who have not been away. The author's unconsciousness of the vulgarity of his exemplary people is not the only amusing thing in the book. They arrive for a short stay in New York before they go to their country-seat somewhere up the State, and the sketches of New York society as it was in the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century are certainly delightful: society was then so exactly like what it is now in spirit. Of course, it was very provincial, but society is always and everywhere provincial. One thing about it then was different from what it is now: I mean the attitude of the stay-at-homes toward the been-abroads. They revered them and deferred to them, and they called them Hajii, or travellers, in a cant which must have been very common, since George William Curtis used the same Oriental term for his *Howadji in Syria* and his *Nile Notes of a Howadji*."

"We must read it," we said, with the readiness of one who never intends to read the book referred to. "What you say of it is certainly very suggestive. But how do you account for the decay of the reverence and deference in which the Hajii were once held?"

"Well, they may have overworked their superiority."

"Or?" we prompted.

"The stay-at-homes may have got onto the been-abroads in a point where we all fail, unless we have guarded ourselves very scrupulously."

"And that is?"

"There is something very vulgarizing for Americans in the European atmosphere, so that we are apt to come back worse-mannered than we went away, and vulgarer than the untravelled, in so far as it is impoliter to criticise than to be criticised."

"And is that why your tone has been one of universal praise for your countrymen in the present interview?"

Our friend reached for his hat, smoothed a ruffled edge of the crown, and blew a speck of dust from it. "One reasons to a conclusion," he said, "not from it."

IX
NEW YORK TO THE HOME-COMER'S EYE

Our friend came in with challenge in his eye, and though a month had passed, we knew, as well as if it were only a day, that he had come to require of us the meaning in that saying of ours that New York derived her inspiration from the future, or would derive it, if she ever got it.

"Well," he said, "have you cleared your mind yet sufficiently to 'pour the day' on mine? Or hadn't you any meaning in what you said? I've sometimes suspected it."

The truth is that we had not had very much meaning of the sort that you stand and deliver, though we were aware of a large, vague wisdom in our words. But we perceived that our friend had no intention of helping us out, and on the whole we thought it best to temporize.

"In the first place," we said, "we should like to know what impression New York made on you when you arrived here, if there was any room left on your soul-surface after the image of Boston had been imprinted there."

No man is unwilling to expatiate concerning himself, even when he is trying to corner a fellow-man. This principle of human nature perhaps accounts for the frequent failure of thieves to catch thieves, in spite of the proverb; the pursuit suggests somehow the pleasures of autobiography, and while they are reminded of this and that the suspects escape the detectives. Our friend gladly paused to reply:

"I wish I could say! It was as unbeautiful as it could be, but it was wonderful! Has anybody else ever said that there is no place like it? On some accounts I am glad there isn't; one place of the kind is enough; but what I mean is that I went about all the next day after arriving from Boston, with Europe still in my brain, and tried for something suggestive of some other metropolis, and failed. There was no question of Boston, of course; that was clean out of it after my first glimpse of Fifth Avenue in taxicabbing hotelward from the Grand Central Station. But I tried with Berlin, and found it a drearier Boston; with Paris, and found it a blonder and blither Boston; with London, and found it sombrely irrelevant and incomparable. New York is like London only in not being like any other place, and it is next to London in magnitude. So far, so good; but the resemblance ends there, though New York is oftener rolled in smoke, or mist, than we willingly allow to Londoners. Both, however, have an admirable quality which is not beauty. One might call the quality picturesque immensity in London, and in New York one might call it – "

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.