ГЕРБЕРТ УЭЛЛС

CERTAIN PERSONAL MATTERS

Герберт Джордж Уэллс
Certain Personal Matters

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25559980
Certain Personal Matters:

Содержание

H. G. Wells
Certain Personal Matters

THOUGHTS ON CHEAPNESS AND MY AUNT CHARLOTTE

The world mends. In my younger days people believed in mahogany; some of my readers will remember it – a heavy, shining substance, having a singularly close resemblance to raw liver, exceedingly heavy to move, and esteemed on one or other count the noblest of all woods. Such of us as were very poor and had no mahogany pretended to have mahogany; and the proper hepatite tint was got by veneering. That makes one incline to think it was the colour that pleased people. In those days there was a word "trashy," now almost lost to the world. My dear Aunt Charlotte used that epithet when, in her feminine way, she swore at people she did not like. "Trashy" and "paltry" and "Brummagem" was the very worst she could say of them. And she had, I remember, an intense aversion to plated goods and bronze halfpence. The halfpence of her youth had been vast and corpulent red-brown discs, which it was folly to speak of as small change. They were fine handsome coins, and almost as inconvenient as crown-pieces. I remember she corrected me

once when I was very young. "Don't call a penny a copper, dear," she said; "copper is a metal. The pennies they have nowadays are bronze." It is odd how our childish impressions cling to us. I still regard bronze as a kind of upstart intruder, a mere trashy pretender among metals.

All my Aunt Charlotte's furniture was thoroughly good, and most of it extremely uncomfortable; there was not a thing for a little boy to break and escape damnation in the household. Her china was the only thing with a touch of beauty in it – at least I remember nothing else – and each of her blessed plates was worth the happiness of a mortal for days together. And they dressed me in a Nessus suit of valuable garments. I learned the value of thoroughly good things only too early. I knew the equivalent of a teacup to the very last scowl, and I have hated good, handsome property ever since. For my part I love cheap things, trashy things, things made of the commonest rubbish that money can possibly buy; things as vulgar as primroses, and as transitory as a morning's frost.

Think of all the advantages of a cheap possession – cheap and nasty, if you will – compared with some valuable substitute. Suppose you need this or that. "Get a good one," advises Aunt Charlotte; "one that will last." You do – and it does last. It lasts like a family curse. These great plain valuable things, as plain as good women, as complacently assured of their intrinsic worth – who does not know them? My Aunt Charlotte scarcely had a new thing in her life. Her mahogany was avuncular; her china

remotely ancestral; her feather beds and her bedsteads! – they were haunted; the births, marriages, and deaths associated with the best one was the history of our race for three generations. There was more in her house than the tombstone rectitude of the chair-backs to remind me of the graveyard. I can still remember the sombre aisles of that house, the vault-like shadows, the magnificent window curtains that blotted out the windows. Life was too trivial for such things. She never knew she tired of them, but she did. That was the secret of her temper, I think; they engendered her sombre Calvinism, her perception of the trashy quality of human life. The pretence that they were the accessories to human life was too transparent. *We* were the accessories; we minded them for a little while, and then we passed away. They wore us out and cast us aside. We were the changing scenery; they were the actors who played on through the piece. It was even so with clothing. We buried my other maternal aunt – Aunt Adelaide – and wept, and partly forgot her; but her wonderful silk dresses – they would stand alone – still went rustling cheerfully about an ephemeral world.

All that offended my sense of proportion, my feeling of what is due to human life, even when I was a little boy. I want things of my own, things I can break without breaking my heart; and, since one can live but once, I want some change in my life – to have this kind of thing and then that. I never valued Aunt Charlotte's good old things until I sold them. They sold remarkably well: those chairs like nether millstones for the grinding away of men; the

fragile china – an incessant anxiety until accident broke it, and the spell of it at the same time; those silver spoons, by virtue of which Aunt Charlotte went in fear of burglary for six-and-fifty years; the bed from which I alone of all my kindred had escaped; the wonderful old, erect, high-shouldered, silver-faced clock.

But, as I say, our ideas are changing – mahogany has gone, and repp curtains. Articles are made for man, nowadays, and not man, by careful early training, for articles. I feel myself to be in many respects a link with the past. Commodities come like the spring flowers, and vanish again. "Who steals my watch steals trash," as some poet has remarked; the thing is made of I know not what metal, and if I leave it on the mantel for a day or so it goes a deep blackish purple that delights me exceedingly. My grandfather's hat – I understood when I was a little boy that I was to have that some day. But now I get a hat for ten shillings, or less, two or three times a year. In the old days buying clothes was well-nigh as irrevocable as marriage. Our flat is furnished with glittering things – wanton arm-chairs just strong enough not to collapse under you, books in gay covers, carpets you are free to drop lighted fusees upon; you may scratch what you like, upset your coffee, cast your cigar ash to the four quarters of heaven. Our guests, at anyrate, are not snubbed by our furniture. It knows its place.

But it is in the case of art and adornment that cheapness is most delightful. The only thing that betrayed a care for beauty on the part of my aunt was her dear old flower garden, and even

there she was not above suspicion. Her favourite flowers were tulips, rigid tulips with opulent crimson streaks. She despised wildings. Her ornaments were simply displays of the precious metal. Had she known the price of platinum she would have worn that by preference. Her chains and brooches and rings were bought by weight. She would have turned her back on Benvenuto Cellini if he was not 22 carats fine. She despised water-colour art; her conception of a picture was a vast domain of oily brown by an Old Master. The Babbages at the Hall had a display of gold plate swaggering in the corner of the dining-room; and the visitor (restrained by a plush rope from examining the workmanship) was told the value, and so passed on. I like my art unadorned: thought and skill, and the other strange quality that is added thereto, to make things beautiful – and nothing more. A farthing's worth of paint and paper, and, behold! a thing of beauty! – as they do in Japan. And if it should fall into the fire – well, it has gone like yesterday's sunset, and to-morrow there will be another.

These Japanese are indeed the apostles of cheapness. The Greeks lived to teach the world beauty, the Hebrews to teach it morality, and now the Japanese are hammering in the lesson that men may be honourable, daily life delightful, and a nation great without either freestone houses, marble mantelpieces, or mahogany sideboards. I have sometimes wished that my Aunt Charlotte could have travelled among the Japanese nation. She would, I know, have called it a "parcel of trash." Their use of paper – paper suits, paper pocket-handkerchiefs – would have

made her rigid with contempt. I have tried, but I cannot imagine my Aunt Charlotte in paper underclothing. Her aversion to paper was extraordinary. Her Book of Beauty was printed on satin, and all her books were bound in leather, the boards regulated rather than decorated with a severe oblong. Her proper sphere was among the ancient Babylonians, among which massive populace even the newspapers were built of brick. She would have compared with the King's daughter whose raiment was of wrought gold. When I was a little boy I used to think she had a mahogany skeleton. However, she is gone, poor old lady, and at least she left me her furniture. Her ghost was torn in pieces after the sale – must have been. Even the old china went this way and that. I took what was perhaps a mean revenge of her for the innumerable black-holeings, bread-and-water dinners, summary chastisements, and impossible tasks she inflicted upon me for offences against her too solid possessions. You will see it at Woking. It is a light and graceful cross. It is a mere speck of white between the monstrous granite paperweights that oppress the dead on either side of her. Sometimes I am half sorry for that. When the end comes I shall not care to look her in the face – she will be so humiliated.

THE TROUBLE OF LIFE

I do not know whether this will awaken a sympathetic lassitude in, say, fifty per cent. of its readers, or whether my experience is unique and my testimony simply curious. At anyrate, it is as true as I can make it. Whether this is a mere mood, and a certain flagrant exhilaration my true attitude towards things, or this is my true attitude and the exuberant phase a lapse from it, I cannot say. Probably it does not matter. The thing is that I find life an extremely troublesome affair. I do not want to make any railing accusations against life; it is – to my taste – neither very sad nor very horrible. At times it is distinctly amusing. Indeed, I know nothing in the same line that can quite compare with it. But there is a difference between general appreciation and uncritical acceptance. At times I find life a Bother.

The kind of thing that I object to is, as a good example, all the troublesome things one has to do every morning in getting up. There is washing. This is an age of unsolicited personal confidences, and I will frankly confess that if it were not for Euphemia I do not think I should wash at all. There is a vast amount of humbug about washing. Vulgar people not only profess a passion for the practice, but a physical horror of being unwashed. It is a sort of cant. I can understand a sponge bath being a novelty the first time and exhilarating the second and third. But day after day, week after week, month after month,

and nothing to show at the end of it all! Then there is shaving. I have to get shaved because Euphemia hates me with a blue jowl, and I will admit I hate myself. Yet, if I were left alone, I do not think my personal taste would affect my decision; I will say that for myself. Either I hack about with a blunt razor – my razors are always blunt – until I am a kind of Whitechapel Horror, and with hair in tufts upon my chin like the top of a Bosjesman's head, or else I have to spend all the morning being dabbed about the face by a barber with damp hands. In either case it is a repulsive thing to have, eating into one's time when one might be living; and I have calculated that all the hair I have lost in this way, put end to end, would reach to Berlin. All that vital energy thrown away! However, "Thorns and bristles shall it bring forth to thee." I suppose it is part of the primal curse, and I try and stand it like a man. But the thing is a bother all the same.

Then after shaving comes the hunt for the collar-stud. Of all idiotic inventions the modern collar is the worst. A man who has to write things for such readers as mine cannot think over-night of where he puts his collar-stud; he has to keep his mind at an altogether higher level. Consequently he walks about the bedroom, thinking hard, and dropping things about: here a vest and there a collar, and sowing a bitter harvest against the morning. Or he sits on the edge of the bed jerking his garments this way and that. "I shot a slipper in the air," as the poet sings, and in the morning it turns up in the most impossible quarters, and where you least expect it. And, talking of going to

bed, before Euphemia took the responsibility over, I was always forgetting to wind my watch. But now that is one of the things she neglects.

Then, after getting up, there is breakfast. Autolycus of the *Pall Mall Gazette* may find heaven there, but I am differently constituted. There is, to begin with the essence of the offence – the stuff that has to be eaten somehow. Then there is the paper. Unless it is the face of a fashionable beauty, I know of nothing more absolutely uninteresting than a morning paper. You always expect to find something in it, and never do. It wastes half my morning sometimes, going over and over the thing, and trying to find out why they publish it. If I edited a daily I think I should do like my father does when he writes to me. "Things much the same," he writes; "the usual fussing about the curate's red socks" – a long letter for him. The rest margin. And, by the bye, there are letters every morning at breakfast, too!

Now I do not grumble at letters. You can read them instead of getting on with your breakfast. They are entertaining in a way, and you can tear them up at the end, and in that respect at least they are better than people who come to see you. Usually, too, you need not make a reply. But sometimes Euphemia gets hold of some still untorn, and says in her dictatorial way that they *have* to be answered – insists – says I *must*. Yet she knows that nothing fills me with a livelier horror than having to answer letters. It paralyses me. I waste whole days sometimes mourning over the time that I shall have to throw away presently, answering some

needless impertinence – requests for me to return books lent to me; reminders from the London Library that my subscription is overdue; proposals for me to renew my ticket at the stores – Euphemia's business really; invitations for me to go and be abashed before impertinent distinguished people: all kinds of bothering things.

And speaking of letters and invitations brings me round to friends. I dislike most people; in London they get in one's way in the street and fill up railway carriages, and in the country they stare at you – but I *hate* my friends. Yet Euphemia says I *must* "keep up" my friends. They would be all very well if they were really true friends and respected my feelings and left me alone, just to sit quiet. But they come wearing shiny clothes, and mop and mow at me and expect me to answer their gibberings. Polite conversation always appears to me to be a wicked perversion of the blessed gift of speech, which, I take it, was given us to season our lives rather than to make them insipid. New friends are the worst in this respect. With old friends one is more at home; you give them something to eat or drink, or look at, or something – whatever they seem to want – and just turn round and go on smoking quietly. But every now and then Euphemia or Destiny inflicts a new human being upon me. I do not mean a baby, though the sentence has got that turn somehow, but an introduction; and the wretched thing, all angles and offence, keeps bobbing about me and discovering new ways of worrying me, trying, I believe, to find out what topics interest me, though

the fact is no topics interest me. Once or twice, of course, I have met human beings I think I could have got on with very well, after a time; but in this mood, at least, I doubt if any human being is quite worth the bother of a new acquaintance.

These are just sample bothers – shaving, washing, answering letters, talking to people. I could specify hundreds more. Indeed, in my sadder moments, it seems to me life is all compact of bothers. There are the details of business – knowing the date approximately (an incessant anxiety) and the time of day. Then, having to buy things. Euphemia does most of this, it is true, but she draws the line at my boots and gloves and hosiery and tailoring. Then, doing up parcels and finding pieces of string or envelopes or stamps – which Euphemia might very well manage for me. Then, finding your way back after a quiet, thoughtful walk. Then, having to get matches for your pipe. I sometimes dream of a better world, where pipe, pouch, and matches all keep together instead of being mutually negatory. But Euphemia is always putting everything into some hiding-hole or other, which she calls its "place." Trivial things in their way, you may say, yet each levying so much toll on my brain and nervous system, and demanding incessant vigilance and activity. I calculated once that I wasted a masterpiece upon these mountainous little things about every three months of my life. Can I help thinking of them, then, and asking why I suffer thus? And can I avoid seeing at last how it is they hang together?

For there is still one other bother, a kind of *bother botherum*,

to tell of, though I hesitate at the telling. It brings this rabble herd of worries into line and makes them formidable; it is, so to speak, the Bother Commander-in-Chief. Well! Euphemia. I simply worship the ground she treads upon, mind, but at the same time the truth is the truth. Euphemia is a bother. She is a brave little woman, and helps me in every conceivable way. But I wish she would not. It is so obviously all her doing. She makes me get up of a morning – I would not stand as much from anybody else – and keeps a sharp eye on my chin and collar. If it were not for her I could sit about always with no collar or tie on in that old jacket she gave to the tramp, and just smoke and grow a beard and let all the bothers slide. I would never wash, never shave, never answer any letters, never go to see any friends, never do any work – except, perhaps, an insulting postcard to a publisher now and again. I would just sit about.

Sometimes I think this may be peculiar in me. At other times I fancy I am giving voice to the secret feeling of every member of my sex. I suspect, then, that we would all do as the noble savage does, take our things off and lie about comfortable, if only someone had the courage to begin. It is these women – all love and reverence to Euphemia notwithstanding – who make us work and bother us with Things. They keep us decent, and remind us we have a position to support. And really, after all, this is not my original discovery! There is the third chapter of Genesis, for instance. And then who has not read Carlyle's gloating over a certain historical suit of leather? It gives me a queer thrill of envy,

that Quaker Fox and his suit of leather. Conceive it, if you can! One would never have to quail under the scrutiny of a tailor any more. Thoreau, too, come to think of it, was, by way of being a prophet, a pioneer in this Emancipation of Man from Bothery.

Then the silent gentry who brew our Chartreuse; what are they in retirement for? Looking back into history, with the glow of discovery in my eyes, I find records of wise men – everyone acknowledged they were wise men – who lived apart. In every age the same associate of solitude, silence, and wisdom. The holy hermits!.. I grant it, they professed to flee wickedness and seek after righteousness, but now my impression is that they fled bothers. We all know they had an intense aversion to any savour of domesticity, and they never shaved, washed, dined, visited, had new clothes. Holiness, indeed! They were *viveurs*… We have witnessed Religion without Theology, and why not an Unsectarian Thebaid? I sometimes fancy it needs only one brave man to begin… If it were not for the fuss Euphemia would make I certainly should. But I know she would come and worry me worse than St. Anthony was worried until I put them all on again, and that keeps me from the attempt.

I am curious whether mine is the common experience. I fancy, after all, I am only seeing in a clearer way, putting into modern phrase, so to speak, an observation old as the Pentateuch. And looking up I read upon a little almanac with which Euphemia has cheered my desk: —

"The world was sad" (sweet sadness!)
"The garden was a wild" (a picturesque wild)
"And man the hermit" (he made no complaint)
"Till the woman smiled." – Campbell.

[And very shortly after he had, as you know, all that bother about the millinery.]

ON THE CHOICE OF A WIFE

Wife-choosing is an unending business. This sounds immoral, but what I mean will be clearer in the context. People have lived – innumerable people – exhausted experience, and yet other people keep on coming to hand, none the wiser, none the better. It is like a waterfall more than anything else in the world. Every year one has to turn to and warn another batch about these stale old things. Yet it is one's duty – the last thing that remains to a man. And as a piece of worldly wisdom, that has nothing to do with wives, always leave a few duties neglected for the comfort of your age. There are such a lot of other things one can do when one is young.

Now, the kind of wife a young fellow of eight- or nine-and-twenty insists on selecting is something of one-and-twenty or less, inexperienced, extremely pretty, graceful, and well dressed, not too clever, accomplished; but I need not go on, for the youthful reader can fill in the picture himself from his own ideal. Every young man has his own ideal, as a matter of course, and they are all exactly alike. Now, I do not intend to repeat all the stale old saws of out-of-date wiseacres. Most of them are even more foolish than the follies they reprove. Take, for instance, the statement that "beauty fades." Absurd; everyone knows perfectly well that, as the years creep on, beauty simply gets more highly coloured. And then, "beauty is only skin-deep." Fantastically

wrong! Some of it is not that; and, for the rest, is a woman like a toy balloon? – just a surface? To hear that proverb from a man is to know him at once for a phonographic kind of fool. The fundamental and enduring grace of womanhood goes down to the skeleton; you cannot have a pretty face without a pretty skull, just as you cannot have one without a good temper.

Yet all the same there is an excellent reason why one should shun beauty in a prospective wife, at anyrate obvious beauty – the kind of beauty people talk about, and which gets into the photographers' windows. The common beautiful woman has a style of her own, a favourite aspect. After all, she cannot be perfect. She comes upon you, dazzles you, marries you; there is a time of ecstasy. People envy you, continue to envy you. After a time you envy yourself – yourself of the day before yesterday. For the imperfection, the inevitable imperfection – in one case I remember it was a smile – becomes visible to you, becomes your especial privilege. That is the real reason. No beauty is a beauty to her husband. But with the plain woman – the thoroughly plain woman – it is different. At first – I will not mince matters – her ugliness is an impenetrable repulse. Face it. After a time little things begin to appear through the violent discords: little scraps of melody – a shy tenderness in her smile that peeps out at you and vanishes, a something that is winning, looking out of her eyes. You find a waviness of her hair that you never saw at the beginning, a certain surprising, pleasing, enduring want of clumsiness in part of her ear. And it is yours. You can see she

strikes the beholder with something of a shock; and while the beauty of the beauty is common for all the world to rejoice in, you will find in your dear, plain wife beauty enough and to spare; exquisite – for it is all your own, your treasure-trove, your safely-hidden treasure…

Then, in the matter of age; though young fellows do not imagine it, it is very easy to marry a wife too young. Marriage has been defined as a foolish bargain in which one man provides for another man's daughter, but there is no reason why this should go so far as completing her education. If your conception of happiness is having something pretty and innocent and troublesome about you, something that you can cherish and make happy, a pet rabbit is in every way preferable. At the worst that will nibble your boots. I have known several cases of the girl-wife, and it always began like an idyll, charmingly; the tenderest care on one hand, winsome worship on the other – until some little thing, a cut chin or a missing paper, startled the pure and natural man out of his veneer, dancing and blaspheming, with the most amazing consequences. Only a proven saint should marry a girl-wife, and his motives might be misunderstood. The idyllic wife is a beautiful thing to read about, but in practice idylls should be kept episodes; in practice the idyllic life is a little too like a dinner that is all dessert. A common man, after a time, tires of winsome worship; he craves after companionship, and a sympathy based on experience. The ordinary young man, with the still younger wife, I have noticed, continues to love her with

all his heart – and spends his leisure telling somebody else's wife all about it. If in these days of blatant youth an experienced man's counsel is worth anything, it would be to marry a woman considerably older than oneself, if one must marry at all. And while upon this topic – and I have lived long – the ideal wife, I am persuaded, from the close observation of many years, is invariably, by some mishap, a widow…

Avoid social charm. It was the capacity for entertaining visitors that ruined Paradise. It grows upon a woman. An indiscriminating personal magnetism is perhaps the most dreadful vice a wife can have. You think you have married the one woman in the world, and you find you have married a host – that is to say, a hostess. Instead of making a home for you she makes you something between an ethnographical museum and a casual ward. You find your rooms littered with people and teacups and things, strange creatures that no one could possibly care for, that seem scarcely to care for themselves. You go about the house treading upon chance geniuses, and get tipped by inexperienced guests. And even when she does not entertain, she is continually going out. I do not deny that charming people are charming, that their company should be sought, but seeking it in marriage is an altogether different matter.

Then, I really must insist that young men do not understand the real truth about accomplishments. There comes a day when the most variegated wife comes to the end of her tunes, and another when she ends them for the second time; *Vita longa, ars*

brevis– at least, as regards the art of the schoolgirl. It is only like marrying a slightly more complicated barrel-organ. And, for another point, watch the young person you would honour with your hand for the slightest inkling of economy or tidiness. Young men are so full of poetry and emotion that it does not occur to them how widely the sordid vices are distributed in the other sex. If you are a hotel proprietor, or a school proprietor, or a day labourer, such weaknesses become a strength, of course, but not otherwise. For a literary person – if perchance you are a literary person – it is altogether too dreadful. You are always getting swept and garnished, straightened up and sent out to be shaved. And home – even your study – becomes a glittering, spick-and-span mechanism. But you know the parable of the seven devils?

To conclude, a summary. The woman you choose should be plain, as plain as you can find, as old or older than yourself, devoid of social gifts or accomplishments, poor – for your self-respect – and with a certain amiable untidiness. Of course no young man will heed this, but at least I have given my counsel, and very excellent reasons for that counsel. And possibly I shall be able to remind him that I told him as much, in the course of a few years' time. And, by the bye, I had almost forgotten! Never by any chance marry a girl whose dresses do up at the back, unless you can afford her a maid or so of her own.

THE HOUSE OF DI SORNO

A MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN A BOX

And the box, Euphemia's. Brutally raided it was by an insensate husband, eager for a tie and too unreasonably impatient to wait an hour or so until she could get home and find it for him. There was, of course, no tie at all in that box, for all his stirring – as anyone might have known; but, if there was no tie, there were certain papers that at least suggested a possibility of whiling away the time until the Chooser and Distributer of Ties should return. And, after all, there is no reading like your accidental reading come upon unawares.

It was a discovery, indeed, that Euphemia *had* papers. At the first glance these close-written sheets suggested a treasonable Keynote, and the husband gripped it with a certain apprehension mingling with his relief at the opiate of reading. It was, so to speak, the privilege of police he exercised, so he justified himself. He began to read. But what is this? "She stood on the balcony outside the window, while the noblest-born in the palace waited on her every capricious glance, and watched for an unbending look to relieve her hauteur, but in vain." None of your snippy-snappy Keynote there!

Then he turned over a page or so of the copy, doubting if the privilege of police still held good. Standing out by virtue of a different ink, and coming immediately after "bear her to

her proud father," were the words, "How many yards of carpet ¾ yds. wide will cover room, width 16 ft., length 27½ ft.?" Then he knew he was in the presence of the great romance that Euphemia wrote when she was sixteen. He had heard something of it before. He held it doubtfully in his hands, for the question of conscience still troubled him. "Bah!" he said abruptly, "not to find it irresistible was to slight the authoress and her skill." And with that he sat plump down among the things in the box very comfortably and began reading, and, indeed, read until Euphemia arrived. But she, at the sight of his head and legs, made several fragmentary and presumably offensive remarks about crushing some hat or other, and proceeded with needless violence to get him out of the box again. However, that is my own private trouble. We are concerned now with the merits of Euphemia's romance.

The hero of the story is a Venetian, named (for some unknown reason) Ivan di Sorno. So far as I ascertained, he is the entire house of Di Sorno referred to in the title. No other Di Sornos transpired. Like others in the story, he is possessed of untold wealth, tempered by a profound sorrow, for some cause which remains unmentioned, but which is possibly internal. He is first displayed "pacing a sombre avenue of ilex and arbutus that reflected with singular truth the gloom of his countenance," and "toying sadly with the jewelled hilt of his dagger." He meditates upon his loveless life and the burthen of riches. Presently he "paces the long and magnificent gallery," where a "hundred

generations of Di Sornos, each with the same flashing eye and the same marble brow, look down with the same sad melancholy upon the beholder" – a truly monotonous exhibition. It would be too much for anyone, day after day. He decides that he will travel. Incognito.

The next chapter is headed "In Old Madrid," and Di Sorno, cloaked to conceal his grandeur, "moves sad and observant among the giddy throng." But "Gwendolen" – the majestic Gwendolen of the balcony – "marked his pallid yet beautiful countenance." And the next day at the bull-fight she "flung her bouquet into the arena, and turning to Di Sorno" – a perfect stranger, mind you – "smiled commandingly." "In a moment he had flung himself headlong down among the flashing blades of the toreadors and the trampling confusion of bulls, and in another he stood before her, bowing low with the recovered flowers in his hand. 'Fair sir,' she said, 'methinks my poor flowers were scarce worth your trouble.'" A very proper remark. And then suddenly I put the manuscript down.

My heart was full of pity for Euphemia. Thus had she gone a-dreaming. A man of imposing physique and flashing eye, who would fling you oxen here and there, and vault in and out of an arena without catching a breath, for his lady's sake – and here I sat, the sad reality, a lean and slippered literary pretender, and constitutionally afraid of cattle.

Poor little Euphemia! For after all is said and done, and the New Woman gibed out of existence, I am afraid we do undeceive

these poor wives of ours a little after the marrying is over. It may be they have deceived themselves, in the first place, but that scarcely affects their disappointment. These dream-lovers of theirs, these monsters of unselfishness and devotion, these tall fair Donovans and dark worshipping Wanderers! And then comes the rabble rout of us poor human men, damning at our breakfasts, wiping pens upon our coat sleeves, smelling of pipes, fearing our editors, and turning Euphemia's private boxes into public copy. And they take it so steadfastly – most of them. They never let us see the romance we have robbed them of, but turn to and make the best of it – and us – with such sweet grace. Only now and then – as in the instance of a flattened hat – may a cry escape them. And even then —

But a truce to reality! Let us return to Di Sorno.

This individual does not become enamoured of Gwendolen, as the crude novel reader might anticipate. He answers her "coldly," and his eye rests the while on her "tirewoman, the sweet Margot." Then come scenes of jealousy and love, outside a castle with heavily mullioned windows. The sweet Margot, though she turns out to be the daughter of a bankrupt prince, has one characteristic of your servant all the world over – she spends all her time looking out of the window. Di Sorno tells her of his love on the evening of the bull-fight, and she cheerfully promises to "learn to love him," and therafter he spends all his days and nights "spurring his fiery steed down the road" that leads by the castle containing the young scholar. It becomes a habit with him – in

all, he does it seventeen times in three chapters. Then, "ere it is too late," he implores Margot to fly.

Gwendolen, after a fiery scene with Margot, in which she calls her a "petty minion," – pretty language for a young gentlewoman, – "sweeps with unutterable scorn from the room," never, to the reader's huge astonishment, to appear in the story again, and Margot flies with Di Sorno to Grenada, where the Inquisition, consisting apparently of a single monk with a "blazing eye," becomes extremely machinatory. A certain Countess di Morno, who intends to marry Di Sorno, and who has been calling into the story in a casual kind of way since the romance began, now comes prominently forward. She has denounced Margot for heresy, and at a masked ball the Inquisition, disguised in a yellow domino, succeeds in separating the young couple, and in carrying off "the sweet Margot" to a convent.

"Di Sorno, half distraught, flung himself into a cab and drove to all the hotels in Grenada" (he overlooked the police station), and, failing to find Margot, becomes mad. He goes about ejaculating "Mad, mad!" than which nothing could be more eloquent of his complete mental inversion. In his paroxysms the Countess di Morno persuades him to "lead her to the altar," but on the way (with a certain indelicacy they go to church in the same conveyance) she lets slip a little secret. So Di Sorno jumps out of the carriage, "hurling the crowd apart," and, "flourishing his drawn sword," "clamoured at the gate of

the Inquisition" for Margot. The Inquisition, represented by the fiery-eyed monk, "looked over the gate at him." No doubt it felt extremely uncomfortable.

Now it was just at this thrilling part that Euphemia came home, and the trouble about the flattened hat began. I never flattened her hat. It was in the box, and so was I; but as for deliberate flattening – It was just a thing that happened. She should not write such interesting stories if she expects me to go on tiptoe through the world looking about for her hats. To have that story taken away just at that particular moment was horrible. There was fully as much as I had read still to come, so that a lot happened after this duel of Sword *v.* Fiery Eye. I know from a sheet that came out of place that Margot stabbed herself with a dagger ("richly jewelled"), but of all that came between I have not the faintest suspicion. That is the peculiar interest of it. At this particular moment the one book I want to read in all the world is the rest of this novel of Euphemia's. And simply, on the score of a new hat needed, she keeps it back and haggles!

OF CONVERSATION

AN APOLOGY

I must admit that in conversation I am not a brilliant success. Partly, indeed, that may be owing to the assiduity with which my aunt suppressed my early essays in the art: "Children," she said, "should be seen but not heard," and incontinently rapped my knuckles. To a larger degree, however, I regard it as intrinsic. This tendency to silence, to go out of the rattle and dazzle of the conversation into a quiet apart, is largely, I hold, the consequence of a certain elevation and breadth and tenderness of mind; I am no blowfly to buzz my way through the universe, no rattle that I should be expected to delight my fellow-creatures by the noises I produce. I go about to this social function and that, deporting myself gravely and decently in silence, taking, if possible, a back seat; and, in consequence of that, people who do not understand me have been heard to describe me as a "stick," as "shy," and by an abundance of the like unflattering terms. So that I am bound almost in self-justification to set down my reasons for this temperance of mine in conversation.

Speech, no doubt, is a valuable gift, but at the same time it is a gift that may be abused. What is regarded as polite conversation is, I hold, such an abuse. Alcohol, opium, tea, are all very excellent things in their way; but imagine continuous alcohol, an incessant opium, or to receive, ocean-like, a perennially

flowing river of tea! That is my objection to this conversation: its continuousness. You have to keep on. You find three or four people gathered together, and instead of being restful and recreative, sitting in comfortable attitudes and at peace with themselves and each other, and now and again, perhaps three or four times in an hour, making a worthy and memorable remark, they are all haggard and intent upon keeping this fetish flow agoing. A fortuitous score of cows in a field are a thousand times happier than a score of people deliberately assembled for the purposes of happiness. These conversationalists say the most shallow and needless of things, impart aimless information, simulate interest they do not feel, and generally impugn their claim to be considered reasonable creatures. Why, when people assemble without hostile intentions, it should be so imperative to keep the trickling rill of talk running, I find it impossible to imagine. It is a vestige of the old barbaric times, when men murdered at sight for a mere whim; when it was good form to take off your sword in the antechamber, and give your friend your dagger-hand, to show him it was no business visit. Similarly, you keep up this babblement to show your mind has no sinister concentration, not necessarily because you have anything to say, but as a guarantee of good faith. You have to make a noise all the time, like the little boy who was left in the room with the plums. It is the only possible explanation.

To a logical mind there is something very distressing in this social law of gabble. Out of regard for Mrs. A, let us say, I

attend some festival she has inaugurated. There I meet for the first time a young person of pleasant exterior, and I am placed in her company to deliver her at a dinner-table, or dance her about, or keep her out of harm's way, in a cosy nook. She has also never seen me before, and probably does not want particularly to see me now. However, I find her nice to look at, and she has taken great pains to make herself nice to look at, and why we cannot pass the evening, I looking at her and she being looked at, I cannot imagine. But no; we must talk. Now, possibly there are topics she knows about and I do not – it is unlikely, but suppose so; on these topics she requires no information. Again, I know about other topics things unknown to her, and it seems a mean and priggish thing to broach these, since they put her at a disadvantage. Thirdly, comes a last group of subjects upon which we are equally informed, and upon which, therefore, neither of us is justified in telling things to the other. This classification of topics seems to me exhaustive.

These considerations, I think, apply to all conversations. In every conversation, every departure must either be a presumption when you talk into your antagonist's special things, a pedantry when you fall back upon your own, or a platitude when you tell each other things you both know. I don't see any other line a conversation can take. The reason why one has to keep up the stream of talk is possibly, as I have already suggested, to manifest goodwill. And in so many cases this could be expressed so much better by a glance, a deferential carriage, possibly in some cases

a gentle pressure of the hand, or a quiet persistent smile. And suppose there is some loophole in my reasoning – though I cannot see it – and that possible topics exist, how superficial and unexact is the best conversation to a second-rate book!

Even with two people you see the objection, but when three or four are gathered together the case is infinitely worse to a man of delicate perceptions. Let us suppose – I do not grant it – that there is a possible sequence of things to say to the person A that really harmonise with A and yourself. Grant also that there is a similar sequence between yourself and B. Now, imagine yourself and A and B at the corners of an equilateral triangle set down to talk to each other. The kind of talk that A appreciates is a discord with B, and similarly B's sequence is impossible in the hearing of A. As a matter of fact, a real conversation of three people is the most impossible thing in the world. In real life one of the three always drops out and becomes a mere audience, or a mere partisan. In real life you and A talk, and B pretends to be taking a share by interjecting interruptions, or one of the three talks a monologue. And the more subtle your sympathy and the greater your restraint from self-assertion, the more incredible triple and quadruple conversation becomes.

I have observed that there is even nowadays a certain advance towards my views in this matter. Men may not pick out antagonists, and argue to the general audience as once they did: there is a tacit taboo of controversy, neither may you talk your "shop," nor invite your antagonist to talk his. There is also a

growing feeling against extensive quotations or paraphrases from the newspapers. Again, personalities, scandal, are, at least in theory, excluded. This narrows the scope down to the "last new book," "the last new play," "impressions de voyage," and even here it is felt that any very ironical or satirical remarks, anything unusual, in fact, may disconcert your adversary. You ask: Have you read the *Wheels of Chance*? The answer is "Yes." "Do you like it?" "A little vulgar, I thought." And so forth. Most of this is stereo. It is akin to responses in church, a prescription, a formula. And, following out this line of thought, I have had a vision of the twentieth century dinner. At a distance it is very like the nineteenth century type; the same bright light, the same pleasant deglutition, the same hum of conversation; but, approaching, you discover each diner has a little drum-shaped body under his chin – his phonograph. So he dines and babbles at his ease. In the smoking-room he substitutes his anecdote record. I imagine, too, the suburban hostess meeting the new maiden: "I hope, dear, you have brought a lot of conversation," just as now she asks for the music. For my own part, I must confess I find this dinner conversation particularly a bother. If I could eat with my eye it would be different.

I lose a lot of friends through this conversational difficulty. They think it is my dulness or my temper, when really it is only my refined mind, my subtlety of consideration. It seems to me that when I go to see a man, I go to see him – to enjoy his presence. If he is my friend, the sight of him healthy and happy

is enough for me. I don't want him to keep his vocal cords, and I don't want to keep my own vocal cords, in incessant vibration all the time I am in his company. If I go to see a man, it distracts me to have to talk and it distracts me to hear him talking. I can't imagine why one should not go and sit about in people's rooms, without bothering them and without their bothering you to say all these stereotyped things. Quietly go in, sit down, look at your man until you have seen him enough, and then go. Why not?

Let me once more insist that this keeping up a conversation is a sign of insecurity, of want of confidence. All those who have had real friends know that when the friendship is assured the gabble ceases. You are not at the heart of your friend, if either of you cannot go off comfortably to sleep in the other's presence. Speech was given us to make known our needs, and for imprecation, expostulation, and entreaty. This pitiful necessity we are under, upon social occasions, to say something – however inconsequent – is, I am assured, the very degradation of speech.

IN A LITERARY HOUSEHOLD

In the literary household of fiction and the drama, things are usually in a distressing enough condition. The husband, as you know, has a hacking cough, and the wife a dying baby, and they write in the intervals of these cares among the litter of the breakfast things. Occasionally a comic, but sympathetic, servant brings in an armful – "heaped up and brimming over" – of rejected MSS., for, in the dramatic life, it never rains but it pours. Instead of talking about editors in a bright and vigorous fashion, as the recipients of rejections are wont, the husband groans and covers his face with his hands, and the wife, leaving the touching little story she is writing – she posts this about 9 p.m., and it brings in a publisher and £100 or so before 10.30 – comforts him by flopping suddenly over his shoulder. "Courage," she says, stroking his hyacinthine locks (whereas all real literary men are more or less grey or bald). Sometimes, as in *Our Flat*, comic tradesmen interrupt the course of true literature with their ignoble desire for cash payment, and sometimes, as in *Our Boys*, uncles come and weep at the infinite pathos of a bad breakfast egg. But it's always a very sordid, dusty, lump-in-your-throaty affair, and no doubt it conduces to mortality by deterring the young and impressionable from literary vices. As for its truth, that is another matter altogether.

Yet it must not be really imagined that a literary household is

just like any other. There is the brass paper-fastener, for instance. I have sometimes thought that Euphemia married me with an eye to these conveniences. She has two in her grey gloves, and one (with the head inked) in her boot in the place of a button. Others I suspect her of. Then she fastened the lamp shade together with them, and tried one day to introduce them instead of pearl buttons as efficient anchorage for cuffs and collars. And she made a new handle for the little drawer under the inkstand with one. Indeed, the literary household is held together, so to speak, by paper-fasteners, and how other people get along without them we are at a loss to imagine.

And another point, almost equally important, is that the husband is generally messing about at home. That is, indeed, to a superficial observer, one of the most remarkable characteristics of the literary household. Other husbands are cast out in the morning to raven for income and return to a home that is swept and garnished towards the end of the day; but the literary husband is ever in possession. His work must not be disturbed even when he is merely thinking. The study is consequently a kind of domestic cordite factory, and you are never certain when it may explode. The concussion of a dust-pan and brush may set it going, the sweeping of a carpet in the room upstairs. Then behold a haggard, brain-weary man, fierce and dishevelled, and full of shattered masterpiece – expostulating. Other houses have their day of cleaning out this room, and their day for cleaning out that; but in the literary household there is one uniform date for all such

functions, and that is "to-morrow." So that Mrs. Mergles makes her purifying raids with her heart in her mouth, and has acquired a way of leaving the pail and brush, or whatever artillery she has with her, in a manner that unavoidably engages the infuriated brute's attention and so covers her retreat.

It is a problem that has never been probably solved, this discord of order and orderly literary work. Possibly it might be done by making the literary person live elsewhere or preventing literary persons from having households. However it might be done, it is not done. This is a thing innocent girls exposed to the surreptitious proposals of literary men do not understand. They think it will be very fine to have photographs of themselves and their "cosy nooks" published in magazines, to illustrate the man's interviews, and the full horror of having this feral creature always about the house, and scarcely ever being able to do any little thing without his knowing it, is not brought properly home to them until escape is impossible.

And then there is the taint of "copy" everywhere. That is really the fundamental distinction. It is the misfortune of literary people, that they have to write about something. There is no reason, of course, why they should, but the thing is so. Consequently, they are always looking about them for something to write about. They cannot take a pure-minded interest in anything in earth or heaven. Their servant is no servant, but a character; their cat is a possible reservoir of humorous observation; they look out of window and see men as columns

walking. Even the sanctity of their own hearts, their self-respect, their most private emotions are disregarded. The wife is infected with the taint. Her private opinion of her husband she makes into a short story – forgets its origin and shows it him with pride – while the husband decants his heart-beats into occasional verse and minor poetry. It is amazing what a lot of latter-day literature consists of such breaches of confidence. And not simply latter-day literature.

The visitor is fortunate who leaves no marketable impression behind. The literary entertainers eye you over, as if they were dealers in a slave mart, and speculate on your uses. They try to think how you would do as a scoundrel, and mark your little turns of phrase and kinks of thought to that end. The innocent visitor bites his cake and talks about theatres, while the meditative person in the arm-chair may be in imagination stabbing him, or starving him on a desert island, or even – horrible to tell! – flinging him headlong into the arms of the young lady to the right and "covering her face with a thousand passionate kisses." A manuscript in the rough of Euphemia's, that I recently suppressed, was an absolutely scandalous example of this method of utilising one's acquaintances. Mrs. Harborough, who was indeed Euphemia's most confidential friend for six weeks and more, she had made to elope with Scrimgeour – as steady and honourable a man as we know, though unpleasant to Euphemia on account of his manner of holding his teacup. I believe there really was something – quite harmless, of course – between Mrs.

Harborough and Scrimgeour, and that, imparted in confidence, had been touched up with vivid colour here and there and utilised freely. Scrimgeour is represented as always holding teacups in his peculiar way, so that anyone would recognise him at once. Euphemia calls that character. Then Harborough, who is really on excellent terms with his wife, and, in spite of his quiet manner, a very generous and courageous fellow, is turned aside from his headlong pursuit of the fugitives across Wimbledon Common – they elope, by the bye, on Scrimgeour's tandem bicycle – by the fear of being hit by a golf ball. I pointed out to Euphemia that these things were calculated to lose us friends, and she promises to destroy the likeness; but I have no confidence in her promise. She will probably clap a violent auburn wig on Mrs. Harborough and make Scrimgeour squint and give Harborough a big beard. The point that she won't grasp is, that with that fatal facility for detail, which is one of the most indisputable proofs of woman's intellectual inferiority, she has reproduced endless remarks and mannerisms of these excellent people with more than photographic fidelity. But this is really a private trouble, though it illustrates very well the shameless way in which those who have the literary taint will bring to market their most intimate affairs.

ON SCHOOLING AND THE PHASES OF MR. SANDSOME

I do not know if you remember your "dates." Indeed, I do not know if anyone does. My own memory is of a bridge; like that bridge of Goldsmith's, standing firm and clear on its hither piers and then passing into a cloud. In the beginning of days was "William the Conqueror, 1066," and the path lay safe and open to Henry the Second; then came Titanic forms of kings, advancing and receding, elongating and dwindling, exchanging dates, losing dates, stealing dates from battles and murders and great enactments – even inventing dates, vacant years that were really no dates at all. The things I have suffered – prisons, scourgings, beating with rods, wild masters, in bounds often, a hundred lines often, standing on forms and holding out books often – on account of these dates! I knew, and knew well before I was fifteen, what these "heredity" babblers are only beginning to discover – that the past is the curse of the present. But I never knew my dates – never. And I marvel now that all little boys do not grow up to be Republicans, seeing how much they suffer for the mere memory of Kings.

Then there were pedigrees, and principal parts and conjugations, and county towns. Every county had a county town, and it was always on a river. Mr. Sandsome never allowed

us a town without that colophon. I remember in my early manhood going to Guildford on the Wey, and trying to find that unobtrusive rivulet. I went over the downs for miles. It is not only the Wey I have had a difficulty in finding. There are certain verses – Heaven help me, but I have forgotten them! – about "*i* vel *e* dat" (*was* it dat?) "utrum malis" – if I remember rightly – and all that about *amo, amas, amat*. There was a multitude of such things I acquired, and they lie now, in the remote box-rooms and lumber recesses of my mind, a rusting armoury far gone in decay. I have never been able to find a use for them. I wonder even now why Mr. Sandsome equipped me with them. Yet he seemed to be in deadly earnest about this learning, and I still go in doubt. In those early days he impressed me, chiefly in horizontal strips, with the profoundest respect for his mental and physical superiority. I credited him then, and still incline to believe he deserved to be credited, with a sincere persuasion that unless I learnt these things I should assuredly go – if I may be frank – to the devil. It may be so. I may be living in a fool's paradise, prospering – like that wicked man the Psalmist disliked. Some unsuspected gulf may open, some undreamt-of danger thrust itself through the phantasmagoria of the universe, and I may learn too late the folly of forgetting my declensions.

I remember Mr. Sandsome chiefly as sitting at his desk, in a little room full of boys, a humming hive whose air was thick with dust, as the slanting sunbeams showed. When we were not doing sums or writing copies, we were always learning or saying

lessons. In the early morning Mr. Sandsome sat erect and bright, his face animated, his ruddy eyes keen and observant, the cane hanging but uncertainly upon its hook. There was a standing up of classes, a babble of repetition, now and then a crisis. How long the days were then! I have heard that scientific people – Professor C. Darwin is their leader, unless I err – which probably I do, for names and dates I have hated from my youth up – say the days grow longer. Anyhow, whoever says it, it is quite wrong. But as the lank hours of that vast schooltime drawled on, Mr. Sandsome lost energy, drooped like a flower, – especially if the day was at all hot, – his sandy hair became dishevelled, justice became nerveless, hectic, and hasty. Finally came copybooks; and yawns and weird rumblings from Mr. Sandsome. And so the world aged to the dinner-hour.

When I had been home – it was a day school, for my aunt, who had an appetite for such things, knew that boarding-schools were sinks of iniquity – and returned, I had Mr. Sandsome at another phase. He had dined – for we were simple country folk. The figurative suggestions of that "phase" are irresistible – the lunar quality. May I say that Mr. Sandsome was at his full? We now stood up, thirty odd of us altogether, to read, reading out of books in a soothing monotone, and he sat with his reading-book before him, ruddy as the setting sun, and slowly, slowly settling down. But now and then he would jerk back suddenly into staring wakefulness as though he were fishing – with himself as bait – for schoolboy crimes in the waters of oblivion – and fancied a

nibble. That was a dangerous time, full of anxiety. At last he went right under and slept, and the reading grew cheerful, full of quaint glosses and unexpected gaps, leaping playfully from boy to boy, instead of travelling round with a proper decorum. But it never ceased, and little Hurkley's silly little squeak of a voice never broke in upon its mellow flow. (It took a year for Hurkley's voice to break.) Any such interruption and Mr. Sandsome woke up and into his next phase forthwith – a disagreeable phase always, and one we made it our business to postpone as long as possible.

During that final period, the last quarter, Mr. Sandsome was distinctly malignant. It was hard to do right; harder still to do wrong. A feverish energy usually inspired our government. "Let us try to get some work done," Mr. Sandsome would say – and I have even known him teach things then. More frequently, with a needless bitterness, he set us upon impossible tasks, demanding a colossal tale of sums perhaps, scattering pens and paper and sowing the horrors of bookkeeping, or chastising us with the scorpions of parsing and translation. And even in wintry weather the little room grew hot and stuffy, and we terminated our schoolday, much exhausted, with minds lax, lounging attitudes, and red ears. What became of Mr. Sandsome after the giving-out of home-work, the concluding prayer, and the aftermath of impositions, I do not know. I stuffed my books, such as came to hand – very dirty they were inside, and very neat out with my Aunt Charlotte's chintz covers – into my green baize bag, and went forth from the mysteries of schooling into the great world,

up the broad white road that went slanting over the Down.

I say "the mysteries of schooling" deliberately. I wondered then, I wonder still, what it was all for. Reading, almost my only art, I learnt from Aunt Charlotte; a certain facility in drawing I acquired at home and took to school, to my own undoing. "Undoing," again, is deliberate – it was no mere swish on the hand, gentle reader. But the things I learnt, more or less partially, at school, lie in my mind, like the "Sarsen" stones of Wiltshire – great, disconnected, time-worn chunks amidst the natural herbage of it. "The Rivers of the East Coast; the Tweed, the Tyne, the Wear, the Tees, the Humber" – why is that, for instance, sticking up among my ferns and wild flowers? It is not only useless but misleading, for the Humber is not another Tweed. I sometimes fancy the world may be mad – yet that seems egotistical. The fact remains that for the greater part of my young life Mr. Sandsome got an appetite upon us from nine till twelve, and digested his dinner, at first placidly and then with petulance, from two until five – and we thirty odd boys were sent by our twenty odd parents to act as a sort of chorus to his physiology. And he was fed (as I judge) more than sufficiently, clothed, sheltered, and esteemed on account of this relation. I think, after all, there must have been something in that schooling. I can't believe the world mad. And I have forgotten it – or as good as forgotten it – all! At times I feel a wild impulse to hunt up all those chintz-covered books, and brush up my dates and paradigms, before it is too late.

THE POET AND THE EMPORIUM

"I am beginning life," he said, with a sigh. "Great Heavens! I have spent a day —*a day!*– in a shop. Three bedroom suites and a sideboard are among the unanticipated pledges of our affection. Have you lithia? For a man of twelve limited editions this has been a terrible day."

I saw to his creature comforts. His tie was hanging outside his waistcoat, and his complexion was like white pasteboard that has got wet. "Courage," said I. "It will not occur again – "

"It will," said he. "We have to get there again tomorrow. We have – what is it? – carpets, curtains – "

He produced his tablets. I was amazed. Those receptacles of choice thoughts!

"The amber sunlight splashing through the leaky – leafy interlacing green," he read. "No! – that's not it. Ah, here! Curtains! Drawing-room – not to cost more than thirty shillings! And there's all the Kitchen Hardware! (Thanks.) Dining-room chairs – query – rush bottoms? What's this? G.L.I.S. – ah! "Glistering thro' deeps of glaucophane" – that's nothing. Mem. to see can we afford Indian needlework chairs – 57s. 6d.? It's dreadful, Bellows!"

He helped himself to a cigarette.

"Find the salesman pleasant?" said I.

"Delightful. Assumed I was a spendthrift millionaire at first.

Produced in an off-hand way an eighty-guinea bedroom suite – we're trying to do the entire business, you know, on about two hundred pounds. Well – that's ten editions, you know. Came down, with evidently dwindling respect, to things that were still ruinously expensive. I told him we wanted an idyll – love in a cottage, and all that kind of thing. He brushed that on one side, said idols were upstairs in the Japanese Department, and that perhaps we might *do* with a servant's set of bedroom furniture. Do with a set! He was a gloomy man with (I should judge) some internal pain. I tried to tell him that there was quite a lot of middle-class people like myself in the country, people of limited or precarious means, whose existence he seemed to ignore; assured him some of them led quite beautiful lives. But he had no ideas beyond wardrobes. I quite forgot the business of shopping in an attempt to kindle a little human enthusiasm in his heart. We were in a great vast place full of wardrobes, with a remote glittering vista of brass bedsteads – skeleton beds, you know – and I tried to inspire him with some of the poetry of his emporium; tried to make him imagine these beds and things going east and west, north and south, to take sorrow, servitude, joy, worry, failing strength, restless ambition in their impartial embraces. He only turned round to Annie, and asked her if she thought she could *do* with 'enamelled.' But I was quite taken with my idea – Where is it? I left Annie to settle with this misanthrope, amidst his raw frameworks of the Homes of the Future."

He fumbled with his tablets. "Mats for hall – not to exceed 3s.

9d… Kerbs … inquire tiled hearth … Ah! Here we are: 'Ballade of the Bedroom Suite': —

"'Noble the oak you are now displaying,
Subtly the hazel's grainings go,
Walnut's charm there is no gainsaying,
Red as red wine is your rosewood's glow;
Brave and brilliant the ash you show,
Rich your mahogany's hepatite shine,
Cool and sweet your enamel: But oh!
Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?'

"They have 'em in the catalogue at five guineas, with a picture – quite as good they are as the more expensive ones. To judge by the picture."

"But that's scarcely the idea you started with," I began.

"Not; it went wrong – ballades often do. The preoccupation of the 'Painted Pine' was too much for me. What's this? 'N.B. – Sludge sells music stools at – ' No. Here we are (first half unwritten): —

"'White enamelled, like driven snow,
Picked with just one delicate line.
Price you were saying is? Fourteen! – No!
Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?'

"Comes round again, you see! Then *L'Envoy*: —

"'Salesman, sad is the truth I trow:
Winsome walnut can never be mine.
Poets are cheap. And their poetry. So
Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?'

"Prosaic! As all true poetry is, nowadays. But, how I tired as the afternoon moved on! At first I was interested in the shopman's amazing lack of imagination, and the glory of that fond dream of mine – love in a cottage, you know – still hung about me. I had ideas come – like that Ballade – and every now and then Annie told me to write notes. I think my last gleam of pleasure was in choosing the drawing-room chairs. There is scope for fantasy in chairs. Then – "

He took some more whisky.

"A kind of grey horror came upon me. I don't know if I can describe it. We went through vast vistas of chairs, of hall-tables, of machine-made pictures, of curtains, huge wildernesses of carpets, and ever this cold, unsympathetic shopman led us on, and ever and again made us buy this or that. He had a perfectly grey eye – the colour of an overcast sky in January – and he seemed neither to hate us nor to detest us, but simply to despise us, to feel such an overwhelming contempt for our petty means and our petty lives, as an archangel might feel for an apple-maggot. It made me think…"

He lit a fresh cigarette.

"I had a kind of vision. I do not know if you will understand. The Warehouse of Life, with our Individual Fate hurrying each

of us through. Showing us with a covert sneer all the good things that we cannot afford. A magnificent Rosewood love affair, for instance, deep and rich, fitted complete, some hours of perfect life, some acts of perfect self-sacrifice, perfect self-devotion… You ask the price."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?" I quoted.

"That's it. All the things one might do, if the purse of one's courage were not so shallow. If it wasn't for the lack of that coinage, Bellows, every man might be magnificent. There's heroism, there's such nobility as no one has ever attained to, ready to hand. Anyone, if it were not for this lack of means, might be a human god in twenty-four hours… You see the article. You cannot buy it. No one buys it. It stands in the emporium, I suppose, for show – on the chance of a millionaire. And the shopman waves his hand to it on your way to the Painted Pine.

"Then you meet other couples and solitary people going about, each with a gloomy salesman leading. The run of them look uncomfortable; some are hot about the ears and in the spiteful phase of ill-temper; all look sick of the business except the raw new-comers. It's the only time they will ever select any furniture, their first chance and their last. Most of their selections are hurried a little. The salesman must not be kept all day… Yet it goes hard with you if you buy your Object in Life and find it just a 'special line' made to sell… We're all amateurs at living, just as we are all amateurs at furnishing – or dying. Some of the poor

devils one meets carry tattered little scraps of paper, and fumble conscientiously with stumpy pencils. It's a comfort to see how you go, even if you do have to buy rubbish. 'If we have *this* so good, dear, I don't know *how* we shall manage in the kitchen,' says the careful housewife… So it is we do our shopping in the Great Emporium."

"You will have to rewrite your Ballade," said I, "and put all that in."

"I wish I could," said the poet.

"And while you were having these very fine moods?"

"Annie and the shopman settled most of the furniture between them. Perhaps it's just as well. I was never very good at the practical details of life… Cigarette's out! Have you any more matches?"

"Horribly depressed you are!" I said.

"There's to-morrow. Well, well…"

And then he went off at a tangent to tell me what he expected to make by his next volume of poems, and so came to the congenial business of running down his contemporaries, and became again the cheerful little Poet that I know.

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

During the early Victorian revival of chivalry the Language of Flowers had some considerable vogue. The Romeo of the mutton-chop whiskers was expected to keep this delicate symbolism in view, and even to display his wit by some dainty conceits in it. An ignorance of the code was fraught with innumerable dangers. A sprig of lilac was a suggestion, a moss-rosebud pushed the matter, was indeed evidence to go to court upon; and unless Charlotte parried with white poplar – a by no means accessible flower – or apricot blossom, or failing these dabbed a cooling dock-leaf at the fellow, he was at her with tulip, heliotrope, and honeysuckle, peach-blossom, white jonquil, and pink, and a really overpowering and suffocating host of attentions. I suppose he got at last to three-cornered notes in the vernacular; and meanwhile what could a poor girl do? There was no downright "No!" in the language of flowers, nothing equivalent to "Go away, please," no flower for "Idiot!" The only possible defence was something in this way: "Your cruelty causes me sorrow," "Your absence is a pleasure." For this, according to the code of Mr. Thomas Miller (third edition, 1841, with elegantly coloured plates) you would have to get a sweet-pea blossom for Pleasure, wormwood for Absence, and indicate Sorrow by the yew, and Cruelty by the stinging-nettle. There is always a little risk of mixing your predicates in this

kind of communication, and he might, for instance, read that his Absence caused you Sorrow, but he could scarcely miss the point of the stinging-nettle. That and the gorse carefully concealed were about the only gleams of humour possible in the language. But then it was the appointed tongue of lovers, and while their sickness is upon them they have neither humour nor wit.

This Mr. Thomas Miller wrote abundant flowers of language in his book, and the plates were coloured by hand. By the bye, what a blessed thing colour-printing is! These hand-tinted plates, to an imaginative person, are about as distressing as any plates can very well be. Whenever I look at these triumphs of art over the beauties of nature, with all their weary dabs of crimson, green, blue, and yellow, I think of wretched, anæmic girls fading their youth away in some dismal attic over a publisher's, toiling through the whole edition tint by tint, and being mocked the while by Mr. Miller's alliterative erotics. And they *are* erotics! In one place he writes, "Beautiful art thou, O Broom! on the breezy bosom of the bee-haunted heath"; and throughout he buds and blossoms into similar delights. He wallows in doves and coy toyings and modest blushes, and bowers and meads. He always adds, "Wonderful boy!" to Chatterton's name as if it were a university degree (W.B.), and he invariably refers to Moore as the Bard of Erin, and to Milton as the Bard of Paradise – though Bard of the Bottomless Pit would be more appropriate. However, we are not concerned with Mr. Miller's language so much as with a very fruitful suggestion he throws out, that "it is surely worth

while to trace a resemblance between the flower and the emblem it represents" (a turn like that is nothing to Mr. Miller) "which shall at least have some show of reason in it."

Come to think of it, there is something singularly unreasonable about almost all floral symbolism. There is your forget-me-not, pink in the bud, and sapphire in the flower, with a fruit that breaks up into four, the very picture of inconstancy and discursiveness. Yet your lover, with a singular blindness, presents this to his lady when they part. Then the white water-lily is supposed to represent purity of heart, and, mark you, it is white without and its centre is all set about with innumerable golden stamens, while in the middle lies, to quote the words of that distinguished botanist, Mr. Oliver, "a fleshy disc." Could there be a better type of sordid and mercenary deliberation maintaining a fair appearance? The tender apple-blossom, rather than Pretence, is surely a reminder of Eden and the fall of love's devotion into inflated worldliness. The poppy which flaunts its violent colours athwart the bearded corn, and which frets and withers like the Second Mrs. Tanqueray so soon as you bring it to the shelter of a decent home, is made the symbol of Repose. One might almost think Aimé Martin and the other great authorities on this subject wrote in a mood of irony.

The daisy, too, presents you Innocence, "companion of the milk-white lamb," Mr. Miller calls it. I am sorry for the milk-white lamb. It was one of the earliest discoveries of systematic botany that the daisy is a fraud, a complicated impostor. *The*

daisy is not a flower at all. It is a favourite trap in botanical examinations, a snare for artless young men entering the medical profession. Each of the little yellow things in the centre of the daisy is a flower in itself, – if you look at one with a lens you will find it not unlike a cowslip flower, – and the white rays outside are a great deal more than the petals they ought to be if the Innocence theory is to hold good. There is no such thing as an innocent flower; they are all so many deliberate advertisements to catch the eye of the undecided bee, but any flower almost is simpler than this one. We would make it the emblem of artistic deception, and the confidence trick expert should wear it as his crest.

The violet, again, is a greatly overrated exemplar. It stimulates a certain bashfulness, hangs its head, and passed as modest among our simple grandparents. Its special merit is its perfume, and it pretends to wish to hide that from every eye. But, withal, the fragrance is as far-reaching as any I know. It droops ingenuously. "How *could* you come to me," it seems to say, "when all these really brilliant flowers invite you?" Mere fishing for compliments. All the while it is being sweet, to the very best of its undeniable ability. Then it comes, too, in early spring, without a chaperon, and catches our hearts fresh before they are jaded with the crowded beauties of May. A really modest flower would wait for the other flowers to come first. A subtle affectation is surely a different thing from modesty. The violet is simply artful, the young widow among flowers, and to hold up

such a flower as an example is not doing one's duty by the young. For true modesty commend me to the agave, which flowers once only in half a hundred years, as one may see for oneself at the Royal Botanical Gardens.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.