The Simple Life

By CHARLES WAGNER

Translated From the French by Mary Louise Hendee

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

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

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

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

"Well, I wish that this art were more honored than it is. As education should consist in thinking with one's mind, feeling with one's heart, expressing the little personalities of the inmost, invisible 'I'—which, on the contrary, are repressed, leveled down, by conformity—I would that the young girl in her novitiate of womanhood, the future mother, might early become the little exponent of this art of the toilet—her own dressmaker, in short—she who one day shall make the dresses of her children, but with the taste and the gift to improvise, to express herself in that masterpiece of feminine personality and skill, a gown, without which a woman is no more than a bundle of rags."

The dress you have made for yourself is almost always the most becoming, and, however that may be, it is the one that pleases you most. Women of leisure too often forget this; working women also in city and country alike. Since these last are costumed by dressmakers and milliners in very doubtful imitation of the modish world, grace has almost disappeared from their dress. And has anything more surely the gift to please than the fresh apparition of a young working girl or a daughter of the fields wearing the costume of her country and beautiful from her simplicity alone?

These same reflections might be applied to the fashion of decorating and arranging our houses. If there are toilets which reveal an entire conception of life, hats that are poems, knots of ribbon that are veritable works of art, so there are interiors which after their manner speak to the mind. Why, under pretext of decorating our homes, do we destroy that personal character which always has such value? Why have our sleeping rooms conform to those of hotels, our reception rooms to waiting rooms, by making predominant a uniform type of official beauty?

What a pity to go through the houses of a city, the cities of a country, the countries of a vast continent, and encounter everywhere certain forms identical, inevitable, exasperating by their repetition! How aesthetics would gain by more simplicity! Instead of this luxury in job lots, all these decorations, pretentious, but vapid from iteration, we should have an infinite variety; happy improvisations would strike our eyes, the unexpected in a thousand forms would rejoice our hearts, and we should rediscover the secret of impressing on a drapery or a piece of furniture that stamp of human personality which makes certain antiques priceless.

Let us pass at last to things simpler still; I mean the little details of housekeeping which many young people of our day find so unpoetical. Their contempt for material things, for the humble cares a house demands, arises from a confusion very common, but none the less unfortunate, which comes from the belief that beauty and poetry are within some things, while others lack them; that some occupations are distinguished and agreeable, such as cultivating letters, playing the harp, and that others are menial and disagreeable, like blacking shoes, sweeping and watching the pot boil. Childish error! Neither harp nor broom has anything to do with it. All depends on the hand in which they rest and the spirit that moves it. Poetry is not in things; it is in us. It must be impressed on objects from without, as the sculptor impresses his dream on the marble. If our life and our occupations remain too often without charm in spite of any outward distinction they may have it is because we have not known how to put anything into them. The height of art is to make the inert live and to tame the savage. I would have our young girls apply themselves to the development of the truly feminine art of giving a soul to things which have none. The triumph of woman's charm is in that work. Only a woman knows how to put into a home that indefinable something whose virtue has made the poet say, "The house top rejoices and is glad." They say there are no such things as fairies or that there are fairies no longer, but they know not what they say. The original of the fairies sung by poets was found and is still among those amiable mortals who knead bread with energy, mend rents with cheerfulness, nurse the sick with smiles, put witchery into a ribbon and genius into a stew.

It is indisputable that the culture of the fine arts has something refining about it and that our thoughts and acts are in the end impregnated with that which strikes our eyes. But the exercise of the arts and the contemplation of their products are restricted privileges. It is not given to every one to possess, to comprehend or to create fine things. Yet there is a kind of ministering beauty which may make its way everywhere—the beauty which springs from the hands of our wives and daughters. Without it what is the most richly decorated house? A dead dwelling place. With it the barest home has life and brightness. Among the forces capable of transforming the will and increasing happiness there is perhaps none in more universal use than this beauty. It knows how to shape itself by means of the crudest tools in the midst of the greatest difficulties. When the dwelling is cramped, the purse limited, the table modest, a woman who has the gift finds a way to make order, fitness and convenience reign in her house. She puts care and art into everything she undertakes. To do well what one has to do is not in her eyes the privilege of the rich, but the right of all. That is her aim, and she knows how to give her home a dignity and an attractiveness that the dwellings of princes, if everything is left to mercenaries, cannot possess.

Thus understood life quickly shows itself rich in hidden beauties, in attractions and satisfactions close at hand. To be oneself, to realize in one's natural place the kind of beauty which is fitting there—this is the ideal. How the mission of woman broadens and deepens in significance when it is summed up in this: To put a soul into the inanimate and to give to this gracious spirit of things those subtle and winsome outward manifestations to which the most brutish of human beings is sensible! Is not this better than to covet what one has not and to give oneself up to longings for a poor imitation of others' finery?

CHAPTER XII.

PRIDE AND SIMPLICITY IN THE INTERCOURSE OF MEN.

It would perhaps be difficult to find a more convincing example than pride to show that the obstacles to a better, stronger, serener life are rather in us than in circumstances. The diversity and, more than that, the contrasts in social conditions give rise inevitably to all sorts of conflicts. Yet, in spite of this, how greatly would social relations be simplified if we put another spirit into mapping out our plan of outward necessities! Be well persuaded that it is not primarily differences of class and occupation, differences in the outward manifestations of their destinies, which embroil men. If such were the case, we should find an idyllic peace reigning among colleagues and all those whose interests and lot are virtually equivalent. On the contrary, as every one knows, the most violent shocks come when equal meets equal, and there is no war worse than civil war. But that which above all things else hinders men from good understanding is pride. It makes a man a hedgehog, wounding every one he touches. Let us speak first of the pride of the great.

What offends me in this rich man passing in his carriage is not his equipage, his dress or the number and splendor of his retinue. It is his contempt. That he possesses a great fortune does not disturb me, unless I am badly disposed. But that he splashes me with mud, drives over my body, shows by his whole attitude that I count for nothing in his eyes because I am not rich, like himself—this is what disturbs me, and righteously. He heaps suffering upon me needlessly. He humiliates and insults me gratuitously. It is not what is vulgar within me, but what is noblest, that asserts itself in the face of this offensive pride. Do not accuse me of envy. I feel none. It is my manhood that is wounded. We need not search far to illustrate these ideas. Every man of any acquaintance with life has had numerous experiences which will justify our dictum in his eyes.

In certain communities devoted to material interests the pride of wealth dominates to such a degree that men are quoted like values in the stock market. The esteem in which a man is held is proportionate to the contents of his strong box. Here "society" is made up of big fortunes, the middle class of medium fortunes. Then come people who have little, then those who have nothing. All intercourse is regulated by this principle. And the relatively rich man who has shown no disdain for those less opulent is crushed in turn by the contempt of his superiors in fortune. So the madness of comparison rages from the summit to the base. Such an atmosphere is ready to perfection for the nurture of the worst feeling. Yet it is not wealth, but the spirit of the wealthy, that must be arraigned.

Many rich men are free from this gross conception—especially is this true of those who from father to son are accustomed to ease—yet they sometimes forget that there is a certain delicacy in not making contrasts too marked. Suppose there is no wrong in enjoying a large superfluity, is it indispensable to display it, to wound the eyes of those who lack necessities, to flaunt one's magnificence at the doors of poverty? Good taste and a sort of modesty always hinder a well man from talking of his fine appetite, his sound sleep, his exuberance of spirits, in the presence of one dying of consumption. Many of the rich do not exercise this tact and so are greatly wanting in pity and discretion. Are they not unreasonable to complain of envy after having done everything to provoke it?

(To be continued.)

Frank Vincent Du Mond, the famous artist and proprietor of the Lyme school, has been appointed chief of the art department of the Lewis and Clark exposition.