

## THE SIMPLIFICATION OF LIFE



THE editor asks me to say "a few words" about "Simplification"—a subject which seems somehow to have got itself connected with my name, though I should think it only a comparatively-speaking small part of my programme. I remember, in that highly moral tale "Sandford and Merton," that there is an affecting account of a certain Miss Simpkins who, after some frivolous charmer has executed the usual fireworks on the piano, sits down and plays "a few simple chords" which "bring tears to all eyes." I suppose our editor expects me to produce a similarly touching effect on the readers of the "Savoy."

But I really have no sentimentalities to give utterance to on this subject, nor any moral tale to unfold. People (of the kind that carry reticules) sometimes coming into my study and finding it a moderately bright room with a few objects in it worth looking at, take it upon themselves to say, "but I thought it was against your *principles* to have ornaments;" and then I have to explain, for the hundredth time, that I have never said anything of the kind, that I have never set up duty as against beauty, and that, anyhow, I have not the smallest intention of boxing my life, or that of others, within the four corners of any mere cut-and-dried principle.

It is just a question of facts, and of the science of life. And the facts are these. People as a rule, being extremely muddle-headed about life, are under a fixed impression that the more they can acquire and accumulate in any department, the "better off" they will be, and the better times they will have. Consequently when they walk down the street and see nice things in the shop windows, instead of leaving them there, if they have any money in their pockets, they buy them and put them on their backs or into their mouths, or in their rooms and round their walls; and then, after a time, finding the result not very satisfactory, they think they have not bought the *right* things, and so go out again and buy some more. And they go on doing this in a blind habitual way till at last their bodies and lives are as muddled up as their brains are, and they can hardly move about or enjoy themselves

for the very multitude of their possessions, and impediments, and duties, and responsibilities, and diseases connected with them.

The origin of this absurd conduct is of course easy to see. It is what the scientific men call an "atavism." In the case of most of us, our ancestors, a few generations back, were no doubt actually in want (and if one goes far enough this is true of everybody)—in want of sufficient food or sufficient clothing. Consequently it became a fixed "principle" in those days, when you saw a chance, to accumulate as much as you could; which principle at last became a blind habit. Savages when they come across a good square meal—in the shape of a dead elephant—just stuff as much as ever they can, knowing it doubtful when they will get another chance. In decent society nowadays the fixed idea of stuffing has been got over to some extent, but the other fixed ideas mostly remain; and, without knowing exactly why, people cram their houses, their rooms, their shelves, with "goods," their backs with clothes, their fingers with rings, and so forth, to the last point that can be borne.

Of course if the good folk really enjoy doing so, it's all right. But, from the wails and groans one constantly hears, this seems to be an open question. The gratification of fixed ideas, unlike the gratification of a living need, seems to be a kind of mechanical thing, supposed to be necessary, but certainly burdensome, and bringing little enjoyment with it. And progress seems frequently to consist in just getting rid of such ideas as best one can, by surgical operation or otherwise.

There are different ways of dealing with this question of Accumulation, which so harasses modern life. The first may be called the method of Thoreau. Thoreau had an ornament on his shelf, but finding it wanted dusting every day, and having to do the dusting himself, he ultimately came to the conclusion that it wasn't worth the trouble, and threw the ornament out of the window. That was perfectly sensible. There was no question exactly of sentiment or of principle, but just a question of fact—was the pleasure worth the trouble?

Personally I like to have a few things of beauty about me; and as it happens that I dust and clean out my room myself, I know exactly how much trouble each thing in it is, and whether the trouble is compensated by the pleasure. It is merely a personal question. Some people might like their rooms crowded up with objects, and still be willing to spend a good part of their lives in keeping them in order; but no one surely could quarrel with them on that account.

That is all easy enough to see. But now there is another class of folk who, experiencing the pleasure of having certain possessions, are not willing to undergo the labour of keeping them in order. They want the pleasure without the trouble or pains attaching to it. That is, they want to make water run up-hill. They therefore buy servants and attendants to keep the things in order for them. And they do this because they think the method will be a "simplification" in their sense, *i.e.*, that it will save them trouble. But in general they think this only because they are muddle-headed and do not think clearly.

The problem is not escaped; for most people, being partly human, cannot have other folk living under the same roof without feeling bound to and even concerned about them, to consider them and their needs, their interests, their troubles, sicknesses, and so forth. Thus, after a time, they find that instead of reducing complications they have only added a fresh responsibility to their lives. Having got a housemaid to look after your rooms for you, you find that she has to be instructed constantly in her work, that even so she does things wrong, breaks the china, and quarrels with the other servants; that she has an invalid mother at home, and a young man in a neighbouring public house, and no end of griefs and grievances, fads and fancies, of her own; so that now, instead of dusting and cleaning your own rooms, the only difference is that you have to dust and clean the *housemaid* every day, which turns out to be a much more complicated and serious job.

If on the other hand, as is the case with some people, you are really a little less than human, and are in the habit of treating your servants and attendants as a kind of cattle, and can consent to live in a house with them on such terms—you are still no better off by this method. For naturally they revenge themselves on you at every point. In one of those suburban villas whose endless rows run out like rays of sweetness and light from the centre of the civilized world, I heard the other day a charming duet between husband and wife. It was founded on the old subject. "Brutes!" at last exclaimed the husband. "They do all they can to annoy you. Now there's that cook, she's *always singing*—always singing at her work. And I'm certain she does it because she knows I don't like it!" Well, of course you are lucky if you come in for nothing worse than singing—though that, no doubt, is trying enough when out of tune. But it is exhausting work anyhow, trying to make water run up-hill, and at the best it is work that's never finished.

All this however does not prove that servants are necessarily a mistake. Because you get rid of one *idée fixe* it does not follow that you must enslave

yourself to its opposite. If you were sufficiently attached to your attendants it might turn out that the pleasure their presence gave you compensated for the trouble they caused. And it might happen that you were really doing more useful and congenial work in dusting your housemaid's mind than in dusting your room. In this case there would be a sensible and natural exchange of services, with a gain to both parties ; and the relation would actually be a "simplification." These things are so very obvious that I feel quite ashamed to put them down ; but it is not my fault that I am called upon to do so.

Life is an art, and a very fine art. One of its first necessities is that you should not have *more* material in it—more chairs and tables, servants, houses, lands, bank-shares, friends, acquaintances, and so forth, than you can really handle. It is no good pretending that you are obliged to have them. You must cut that nonsense short. It is so evidently better to give your carriage and horses away to someone who can really make use of them than to turn yourself into a dummy for the purpose of "exercising" them every day. It is so much better to be rude to needless acquaintances than to feign you like them, and so muddle up both their lives and yours with a fraud.

In a well-painted picture there isn't a grain of paint which is mere material. All is expression. And yet life is a greater art than painting pictures. Modern civilized folk are like people sitting helplessly in the midst of heaps of paint-cans and brushes—and ever accumulating more ; but when they are going to produce anything lovely or worth looking at in their own lives, Heaven only knows !

In this sense Simplification is the first letter of the alphabet of the Art of Life. But it is only that ; it is no more than the first letter. And as there are so many other letters to learn, I trust that we may now pass on ; and that we may be spared further queries on the subject from our friends, with reticules or without.

EDWARD CARPENTER.