

Certain Personal Matters

By

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 hepatic 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