

INCIDENTAL THOUGHTS ON A BALD HEAD

I was asked to go, quite suddenly, and found myself there before I had time to think of what it might be. I understood her to say it was a meeting of some "Sunday society," some society that tried to turn the Sabbath from a day of woe to a day of rejoicing. "St. George's Hall, Langham Place," a cab, and there we were. I thought they would be picturesque Pagans. But the entertainment was the oddest it has ever been my lot to see, a kind of mystery. The place was dark, except for a big circle of light on a screen, and a dismal man with a long stick was talking about the effects of alcohol on your muscles. He talked and talked, and people went to sleep all about us. Euphemia's face looked so very pretty in the dim light that I tried to talk to her and hold her hand, but she only said "Ssh!" And then they began showing pictures on the screen--the most shocking things!--stomachs, and all that kind of thing. They went on like that for an hour, and then there was a lot of thumping with umbrellas, and they turned the lights up and we went home. Curious way of spending Sunday afternoon, is it not?

But you may imagine I had a dismal time all that hour. I understood the people about me were Sceptics, the kind of people who don't believe things--a singular class, and, I am told, a growing one. These excellent people, it seems, have conscientious objections to going to chapel or church, but at the same time the devotional habit of countless generations of pious forerunners is strong in them. Consequently they

have invented things like these lectures to go to, with a professor instead of a priest, and a lantern slide of a stomach by way of altar-piece; and alcohol they make their Devil, and their god is Hygiene--a curious and instructive case of mental inertia. I understand, too, there are several other temples of this Cult in London--South Place Chapel and Essex Hall, for instance, where they worship the Spirit of the Innermost. But the thing that struck me so oddly was the number of bald heads glimmering faintly in the reflected light from the lantern circle. And that set me thinking upon a difficulty I have never been able to surmount.

You see these people, and lots of other people, too, believe in a thing they call Natural Selection. They think, as part of that belief, that men are descended from hairy simian ancestors; assert that even a hundred thousand years ago the ancestor was hairy--hairy, heavy, and almost as much a brute as if he lived in Mr. Arthur Morrison's Whitechapel. For my own part I think it a pretty theory, and would certainly accept it were it not for one objection. The thing I cannot understand is how our ancestor lost that hair. I see no reason why he should not have kept his hair on. According to the theory of natural selection, materially favourable variations survive, unfavourable disappear; the only way in which the loss is to be accounted for is by explaining it as advantageous; but where is the advantage of losing your hair? The disadvantages appear to me to be innumerable. A thick covering of hair, like that of a Capuchin monkey, would be an invaluable protection against sudden changes of temperature, far better than any

clothing can be. Had I that, for instance, I should be rid of the perpetual cold in the head that so disfigures my life; and the multitudes who die annually of chills, bronchitis, and consumption, and most of those who suffer from rheumatic pains, neuralgia, and so forth, would not so die and suffer. And in the past, when clothing was less perfect and firing a casual commodity, the disadvantages of losing hair were all the greater. In very hot countries hair is perhaps even more important in saving the possessor from the excessive glare of the sun. Before the invention of the hat, thick hair on the head at least was absolutely essential to save the owner of the skull from sunstroke. That, perhaps, explains why the hair has been retained there, and why it is going now that we have hats, but it certainly does not explain why it has gone from the rest of the body.

One--remarkably weak--explanation has been propounded: an appeal to our belief in human vanity. He picked it out by the roots, because he thought he was prettier without. But that is no reason at all. Suppose he did, it would not affect his children. Professor Weismann has at least convinced scientific people of this: that the characters acquired by a parent are rarely, if ever, transmitted to its offspring. An individual given to such wanton denudation would simply be at a disadvantage with his decently covered fellows, would fall behind in the race of life, and perish with his kind. Besides, if man has been at such pains to uncover his skin, why have quite a large number of the most respected among us such a passionate desire to have it covered up again?

Yet that is the only attempted explanation I have ever come upon, and the thing has often worried me. I think it is just as probably a change in dietary. I have noticed that most of your vegetarians are shock-headed, ample-bearded men, and I have heard the Ancestor was vegetarian. Or it may be, I sometimes fancy, a kind of inherent disposition on the part of your human animal to dwindle. That came back in my memory vividly as I looked at the long rows of Sceptics, typical Advanced people, and marked their glistening crania. I recalled other losses. Here is Humanity, thought I, growing hairless, growing bald, growing toothless, unemotional, irreligious, losing the end joint of the little toe, dwindling in its osseous structures, its jawbone and brow ridges, losing all the full, rich curvatures of its primordial beauty.

It seems almost like what the scientific people call a Law. And by strenuous efforts the creature just keeps pace with his losses--devises clothes, wigs, artificial teeth, paddings, shoes--what civilised being could use his bare feet for his ordinary locomotion? Imagine him on a furze-sprinkled golf links. Then stays, an efficient substitute for the effete feminine backbone. So the thing goes on. Long ago his superficialities became artificial, and now the human being shrinks like a burning cigar, and the figure he has abandoned remains distended with artificial ashes, dead dry protections against the exposures he so unaccountably fears. Will he go on shrinking, I wonder?--become at last a mere lurking atomy in his own recesses, a kind of hermit crab, the bulk of him a complex mechanism, a thing of rags and tatters and papier-maché, stolen from the earth and the plant-world and his fellow beasts? And at last may he not

disappear altogether, none missing him, and a democracy of honest machinery, neatly clad and loaded up with sound principles of action, walk to and fro in a regenerate world? Thus it was my mind went dreaming in St. George's Hall. But presently, as I say, came the last word about stomachs, and the bald men woke up, rattled their umbrellas, said it was vastly interesting, and went toddling off home in an ecstasy of advanced Liberalism. And we two returned to the place whence we came.