

THE COAL-SCUTTLE

A STUDY IN DOMESTIC ÆSTHETICS

Euphemia, who loves to have home dainty and delightful, would have no coals if she could dispense with them, much less a coal-scuttle. Indeed, it would seem she would have no fireplace at all, if she had her will.

All the summer she is happy, and the fireplace is anything but the place for a fire; the fender has vanished, the fireirons are gone, it is draped and decorated and disguised. So would dear Euphemia drape and disguise the whole iron framework of the world, with that decorative and decent mind of hers, had she but the scope. There are exotic ferns there, spreading their fanlike fronds, and majolica glows and gleams; and fabrics, of which Morris is the actual or spiritual begetter, delight the eye. In summer-time our fireplace is indeed a thing of beauty, but, alas for the solar system! it is not a joy for ever. The sun at last recedes beyond the equinoxes, and the black bogey who has slept awakens again. Euphemia restores the fender kerb and the brazen dogs and the fireirons that will clatter; and then all the winter, whenever she sits before the fire, her trouble is with her. Even when the red glow of the fire lights up her features most becomingly, and flattery is in her ear, every now and then a sidelong glance at her ugly foe shows that the thought of it is in her mind, and that the crumpled roseleaf, if such a phrase may be used for a coal-scuttle, insists on being felt. And she has even been discovered alone, sitting elbows on

knees, and chin on her small clenched fist, frowning at it, puzzling how to circumvent the one enemy of her peace.

"It" is what Euphemia always calls this utensil, when she can bring herself to give the indescribable an imperfect vent in speech. But commonly the feeling is too deep for words. Her war with this foeman in her household, this coarse rebel in her realm of soft prettiness, is one of those silent ones, those grim struggles without outcry or threat or appeal for quarter that can never end in any compromise, never find a rest in any truce, except the utter defeat of her antagonist. And how she has tried--the happy thoughts, the faint hopes, the new departures and outflanking movements! And even to-day there the thing defies her--a coal-box, with a broad smile that shows its black teeth, thick and squat, filling a snug corner and swaggering in unmanly triumph over the outrage upon her delicacy that it commits.

One of Euphemia's brightest ideas was to burn wood. Logs make even a picturesque pile in a corner--look "uncommon." But there are objections to wood. Wood finely divided burns with gay quirks and jets of flame, and making cheerful crackling noises the while; but its warmth and brightness are as evanescent as love's young dream. And your solid log has a certain irritating inertness. It is an absentee fuel, spending its fire up the chimney, and after its youthful clouds of glory turns but a cheerless side of black and white char towards the room. And, above all, the marital mind is strangely exasperated by the log. Smite it with the poker, and you get but a sullen resonance, a flight of red sparks, a

sense of an unconquerable toughness. It is worse than coke. The crisp fracture of coal, the spitting flames suddenly leaping into existence from the shiny new fissures, are altogether wanting. Old-seasoned timber burns indeed most delightfully, but then it is as ugly as coal, and withal very dear. So Euphemia went back to coal again with a sigh. Possibly if Euphemia had been surrounded by the wealth she deserves this trouble would not have arisen. A silent servant, bearing the due dose of fresh fuel, would have come gliding from a mysterious Beneath, restored the waning animation of the grate, and vanished noiselessly again. But this was beyond the range of Euphemia's possibilities. And so we are face to face with this problem of the scuttle again.

At first she would feign there was no such thing as coal. It was too horrible. Only a Zola would admit it. It was the epoch of concealment. The thing purchased was like a little cupboard on four legs; it might have held any convenient trifle; and there was a shelf upon the top and a book of poetry and a piece of crackled Satsuma. You took a little brass handle and pulled it down, and the front of the little cupboard came forward, and there you found your coal. But a dainty little cupboard can no more entertain black coal and inelegant firewood and keep its daintiness than a mind can entertain black thoughts and yet be sweet. This cabinet became demoralised with amazing quickness; it became incontinent with its corruptions, a hinge got twisted, and after a time it acquired the habit of suddenly, and with an unpleasant oscillatory laughing noise, opening of its own accord and proclaiming its horrid secret to Euphemia's best visitors. An air of wickedness, at once

precocious and senile, came upon it; it gaped and leered at Euphemia as the partner of her secret with such a familiar air of "I and you" that she could stand it no longer, and this depraved piece of furniture was banished at last from her presence, and relegated to its proper sphere of sham gentility below stairs, where it easily passed itself upon the cook as an exquisite. Euphemia tried to be sensible then, and determined, since she must have coal in her room, to let no false modesty intervene, but to openly proclaim its presence to all the world.

The next thing, therefore, was a cylinder of brass, broadly open above, saying to the world, as it were, "Look! I contain coal." And there were brass tongs like sugar tongs wherewith Euphemia would regale the fire and brighten it up, handing it a lump at a time in the prettiest way. But brass dints. The brazen thing was quiet and respectable enough upstairs, but ever and again it went away to be filled. What happened on these holiday jaunts Euphemia has never ascertained. But a chance blow or worse cause ran a crease athwart the forehead of the thing, and below an almost imperceptible bulging hinted at a future corpulency. And there was complaint of the quantity of polishing it needed, and an increasing difficulty in keeping it bright. And except when it was full to the brim, the lining was unsightly; and this became more so. One day Ithuriel must have visited Euphemia's apartment, and the tarnished brilliancy of the thing stood confessed. For some days there was an interregnum, and a coal-scuttle from downstairs--a black unstable thing on flat foot and with a vast foolish nether lip--did its duty with inelegant faithfulness.

Then Euphemia had a really pretty fancy. She procured one of those big open garden baskets and painted it a pleasant brown, and instead of a garden fork she had a little half horticultural scoop. In this basket she kept her coals, and she tied a pink ribbon on the handle. One might fancy she had been in some dewy garden and had dug a few coals as one might dig up bulbs, and brought them in and put them down. It attracted attention from all her visitors, and set a kind of fashion in the neighbourhood. For a time Euphemia was almost contented. But one day a malignant woman called, and looked at this device through her gilt eye-glasses, while she secretly groped in the dark of her mind for an unpleasant thing to say. Then suddenly she remarked, "Why not put your coal in a bassinette? Or keep it all on the floor?" Euphemia's face fell. The thing was undeniably very like a cradle, in the light of this suggestion; the coal certainly did seem a little out of place there; and besides, if there were more than three or four lumps they had a way of tumbling over the edge upon the carpet when the fire was replenished. The tender shoot of Euphemia's satisfaction suddenly withered and died.

So the struggle has gone on. Sometimes it has been a wrought iron tripod with a subtle tendency to upset in certain directions; sometimes a coal-box; once even the noisy old coal-box of japanned tin, making more noise than a Salvation Army service, and strangely decorated with "art" enamels, had a turn. At present Euphemia is enduring a walnut "casket," that since its first week of office has displayed an increasing indisposition to shut. But things cannot stay like this. The worry and

anxiety and vexation, Euphemia declares, are making her old before her time. A delicate woman should not be left alone to struggle against brazen monsters. A closed gas stove is happily impossible, but the husband of the household is threatened with one of those beastly sham fires, wherein gas jets flare among firebrick--a mechanical fire without vitality or variety, that never dances nor crackles nor blazes, a monotonous horror, a fire you cannot poke. That is what it will certainly come to if the problem remains unsolved.