

THE PLEASURE OF QUARRELLING

Your cultivated man is apt to pity the respectable poor, on the score of their lack of small excitements, and even in the excess of his generous sympathy to go a Toynbee-Halling in their cause. And Sir Walter Besant once wrote a book about Hoxton, saying, among other things, how monotonous life was there. That is your modern fallacy respecting the lower middle class. One might multiply instances. The tenor of the pity is always the same.

"No music," says the cultivated man, "no pictures, no books to read nor leisure to read in. How can they pass their lives?"

The answer is simple enough, as Emily Brontë knew. They quarrel. And an excellent way of passing the time it is; so excellent, indeed, that the pity were better inverted. But we all lack the knowledge of our chiefest needs. In the first place, and mainly, it is hygienic to quarrel, it disengages floods of nervous energy, the pulse quickens, the breathing is accelerated, the digestion improved. Then it sets one's stagnant brains astir and quickens the imagination; it clears the mind of vapours, as thunder clears the air. And, finally, it is a natural function of the body. In his natural state man is always quarrelling--by instinct. Not to quarrel is indeed one of the vices of our civilisation, one of the reasons why we are neurotic and anæmic, and all these things. And, at last, our enfeebled palates have even lost the capacity for

enjoying a "jolly good row."

There can be no more melancholy sight in the world than that of your young man or young woman suffering from suppressed pugnacity. Up to the end of the school years it was well with them; they had ample scope for this wholesome commerce, the neat give and take of offence. In the family circle, too, there are still plentiful chances of acquiring the taste. Then, suddenly, they must be gentle and considerate, and all the rest of it. A wholesome shindy, so soon as toga and long skirts arrive, is looked upon as positively wrong; even the dear old institution of the "cut" is falling into disrepute. The quarrelling is all forced back into the system, as it were; it poisons the blood. This is why our literature grows sinister and bitter, and our daughters yearn after this and that, write odd books, and ride about on bicycles in remarkable clothes. They have shut down the safety valve, they suffer from the present lamentable increase of gentleness. They must find some outlet, or perish. If they could only put their arms akimbo and tell each other a piece of their minds for a little, in the ancient way, there can be not the slightest doubt that much of this fin-de-siècle unwholesomeness would disappear.

Possibly this fashion of gentleness will pass. Yet it has had increasing sway now for some years. An unhealthy generation has arisen--among the more educated class at least--that quarrels little, regards the function as a vice or a nuisance, as the East-ender does a taste for fine art or literature. We seem indeed to be getting altogether out of the way of it. Rare quarrels, no doubt, occur to everyone, but rare quarrelling is

no quarrelling at all. Like beer, smoking, sea-bathing, cycling, and the like delights, you cannot judge of quarrelling by the early essay. But to show how good it is--did you ever know a quarrelsome person give up the use? Alcohol you may wean a man from, and Barrie says he gave up the Arcadia Mixture, and De Quincey conquered opium. But once you are set as a quarreller you quarrel and quarrel till you die.

How to quarrel well and often has ever been something of an art, and it becomes more of an art with the general decline of spirit. For it takes two to make a quarrel. Time was when you turned to the handiest human being, and with small care or labour had the comfortable warmth you needed in a minute or so. There was theology, even in the fifties it was ample cause with two out of three you met. Now people will express a lamentable indifference. Then politics again, but a little while ago fat for the fire of any male gathering, is now a topic of mere tepidity. So you are forced to be more subtle, more patient in your quarrelling. You play like a little boy playing cricket with his sisters, with those who do not understand. A fellow-votary is a rare treat. As a rule you have to lure and humour your antagonist like a child. The wooing is as intricate and delicate as any wooing can well be. To quarrel now, indeed, requires an infinity of patience. The good old days of thumb-biting--"Do you bite your thumbs at us, sir?" and so to clash and stab--are gone for ever.

There are certain principles in quarrelling, however, that the true quarreller ever bears in mind, and which, duly observed, do much to

facilitate encounters. In the first place, cultivate Distrust. Have always before you that this is a wicked world, full of insidious people, and you never know what villainous encroachments upon you may be hidden under fair-seeming appearances. That is the flavour of it. At the first suspicion, "stick up for your rights," as the vulgar say. And see that you do it suddenly. Smite promptly, and the surprise and sting of your injustice should provoke an excellent reply. And where there is least ground for suspicion, there, remember, is the most. The right hand of fellowship extended towards you is one of the best openings you have. "Not such a fool," is the kind of attitude to assume, and "You don't put upon me so easy." Your adversary resents this a little, and, rankling, tries to explain. You find a personal inference in the expostulation.

Next to a wariness respecting your interests is a keen regard for your honour. Have concealed in the privacy of your mind a code of what is due to you. Expand or modify it as occasion offers. Be as it were a collector of what are called "slights," and never let one pass you. Watch your friend in doorways, passages; when he eats by you, when he drinks with you, when he addresses you, when he writes you letters. It will be hard if you cannot catch him smuggling some deadly insult into your presence. Tax him with it. He did not think, forsooth! Tell him no gentleman would do such a thing, thinkingly or not; that you certainly will not stand it again. Say you will show him. He will presently argue or contradict. So to your climax.

Then, again, there is the personal reference. "Meaning me, sir?" Your

victim with a blithe heart babbles of this or that. You let him meander here and there, watching him as if you were in ambush. Presently he comes into your spring. "Of course," you say, "I saw what you were driving at just this minute, when you mentioned mustard in salad dressing, but if I am peppery I am not mean. And if I have a thing to say I say it straight out." A good gambit this, and well into him from the start. The particular beauty of this is that you get him apologetic at first, and can score heavily before he rises to the defensive.

Then, finally, there is your abstract cause, once very fruitful indeed, but now sadly gone in decay, except perhaps in specialist society. As an example, let there be one who is gibing genially at some topic or other, at Japanese king-crabs, or the inductive process, or any other topic which cannot possibly affect you one atom. Then is the time to drop all these merely selfish interests, and to champion the cause of truth. Fall upon him in a fine glow of indignation, and bring your contradiction across his face--whack!--so that all the table may hear. Tell him, with his pardon, that the king-crab is no more a crab than you are a jelly-fish, or that Mill has been superseded these ten years. Ask: "How can you say such things?" From thence to his general knowledge is a short flight, and so to his veracity, his reasoning powers, his mere common sense. "Let me tell you, sir," is the special incantation for the storm.

These are the four chief ways of quarrelling, the four gates to this delightful city. For it is delightful, once your 'prentice days are

past. In a way it is like a cold bath on a winter's morning, and you glow all day. In a way it is like football, as the nimble aggravation dances to and fro. In a way it is like chess. Indeed, all games of skill are watered quarrels, quarrel and soda, come to see them in a proper light. And without quarrelling you have not fully appreciated your fellow-man. For in the ultimate it is the train and complement of Love, the shadow that rounds off the delight we take in poor humanity. It is the vinegar and pepper of existence, and long after our taste for sweets has vanished it will be the solace of our declining years.