

THE THEORY OF THE PERPETUAL DISCOMFORT OF HUMANITY

He had been sitting with his feet upon the left jamb of my mantel, admiring the tips of his shoes in silence for some time.

"George," he said, dropping his cigar-ash thoughtfully into my inkstand, in order, I imagine, to save my carpet, "have you ever done pioneer work for Humanity?"

"Never," I said. "How do you get that sort of work?"

"I don't know. I met a man and a woman, though, the other night, who said they were engaged in that kind of thing. It seems to me to be exhausting work, and it makes the hair very untidy. They do it chiefly with their heads. It consists, so I understand, of writing stuff in a hurry, rushing about in cabs, wearing your hair in some unpleasant manner, and holding disorderly meetings."

"Who are these people?"

"Never heard of them before, though they told me they were quite well known. The lady asked me if I had been to Chicago."

I chuckled. I could imagine no more hideous insult to my uncle.

"I told her that I had been to most places south-eastward and eastward,

but never across the Atlantic. She informed me that I ought to have gone to Chicago, and that America was a great country, and I remarked that I had always thought it was so great that one could best appreciate it at a distance. Then she asked me what I thought of the condition of the lower classes, and I told her I was persuaded, from various things I had noticed, that a lot of them were frightfully hard up. And with that she started off to show whose fault it was, by the Socratic method."

"Entertaining?"

"A little. I did not get all my answers right. For instance, when she asked, 'Who sends the members of Parliament to Westminster?' I answered her, 'The governors of the young ones and the wives of the others.' And when she said that was wrong--I don't remember Socrates ever saying bluntly that an answer was wrong--I said I supposed she referred to the Evil One. It was very dull of me, of course, and it obliged her to dictate the right solution.

"Afterwards she threw over teaching me anything, and explained to me all about her Movements. At least, I got really interested in her Movements. One thing she said struck me very much, though it could hardly be called novel. It was that the fads of one age were the fashions of the next; that while the majority of people were engaged in their little present-day chores, persons like herself are making the laws and preparing the customs for the generation to follow."

"Poor generations to follow!" I said.

"Yes, but there is a lot of truth in it; and do you know there flashed upon me all at once a great theory, the Theory of the Perpetual Discomfort of Humanity. Just let me explain it to you, George," he said, bringing himself round so that his legs hung over the arm of his chair. "I think you will see I have made a very great discovery, gone to the root of the whole of this bother of reform movement, advancement of humanity, and the rest of it." He sucked his cigar for a moment. "Each age," he said, "has its own ideals of what constitutes human happiness."

"A very profound observation," said I.

"Looking down the vista of history, one may generalise and say that we see human beings continually troubled by the conditions under which they live. I can think of no time in the world when there was not some Question or other getting fussed about: at one time episcopal celibacy, at another time the Pict and Scot problem, and so on. Always a crumpled rose-leaf. Hence reform movements. Now, reforms move slowly, and by the time these reforms come about, the people whom they would have made happy, and who fussed and encountered dislike and satire and snubbing, and burning and boiling in oil, and suchlike discouragements, for the sake of them, were dead and buried and mere sanitary problems. The new people had new and quite different needs, and the reforms for

which their fathers fought and died more or less uncomfortably, and got into debt with the printers, so soon as there were printers to get into debt with, were about as welcome as belated dinner guests. You take me? Ireland, when Home Rule comes home to it, will simply howl with indignation. And we are living in the embodied discontent of the eighteenth century. Adam Smith, Tom Paine, and Priestley would have looked upon this age and seen that it was good--devilish good; and as you know, George, to us it is--well, a bit of a nuisance anyhow. However, most people are like myself, and try to be as comfortable as they can, and no doubt the next generation might do very well with it. And then the pioneer people begin legislating, agitating, and ordering things differently. As you know, George, I am inclined to conservatism. Constitutionally, I tend to adapt myself to my circumstances. It seems to me so much easier to fit the man to the age than to fit the age to the man. Let us, I say, settle down. We shall never be able to settle down while they keep altering things. It may not be a perfect world, but then I am not a perfect man: Some of the imperfections are, at least, very convenient. So my theory is this: the people whom the age suits fairly well don't bother--I don't bother; the others do. It is these confounded glaring and unshorn anachronisms that upset everything. They go about flapping their ideals at you, and writing novels with a motive, and starting movements and societies, and generally poking one's epoch to rags, until at last it is worn out and you have to start a new one. My conception of the progress of humanity is something after the Wandering Jew pattern. Your average humanity I figure as a comfortable person like myself,

always trying to sit down and put its legs somewhere out of the way, and being continually stirred up by women in felt hats and short skirts, and haggard men with those beastly, long, insufficient beards, and soulful eyes, and trumpet-headed creatures, and bogles with spectacles and bald heads, and nephews who look at watches. What are you looking at your watch for, George? I'm very happy as I am.

"Has it ever occurred to you, George, that one of the most uncomfortable things in the world must be to outlive your age? To have all the reforms of your boyish liberalism coming home to roost, just as you are settling down to the old order....

"Six o'clock, by Jove! We shall keep them waiting if we don't mind."