

THE USE OF IDEALS

"Ideals!" said my uncle; "certainly Ideals. Of course one must have ideals, else life would be bare materialism. Bare fact alone, naked necessity, is impossible barren rock for a soul to root upon. Life, indeed, is an unfurnished house, an empty glass in a thirsty land--good and necessary for foundation, but insufficient for any satisfaction unless we have ideals. Or, again, ideals are the flesh upon the skeleton of reality, and it cannot live without them.

"It always appears to me," said my uncle, "that the comparison of ideals to furniture is particularly appropriate. They are the draperies of the mind, and they hide the nakedness of truth. Your fireplace is ugly, your mere necessary shelves and seats but planks and crudity, all your surroundings so much office furniture, until the skilful hand and the draperies come in. Then a few cunning loopings and foldings, and behold softness and delicacy, crudity gone, and life well worth the living. So that you cannot value ideals too highly.

"Yet at the same time----" My uncle became meditative.

"I would not have a man the slave of his ideals. Hangings make the room comfortable, but, after all, hangings are hangings. Perhaps, now and then--of course, I would not suggest continual inconstancy--a slight change, a little rearrangement, even a partial replacement, might brighten up the dear old dwelling-place. An ideal may be clung

to too fondly. When the moth gets into it, or the dust--did not Carlyle warn us against this, lest they 'accumulate and at last produce suffocation'? I am exactly at one with him there.

"And that, as any Cabinet Minister explains every time he opens a public library, is why we have literature. Good books are the warehouses of ideals. Does it strike you your furniture is sombre, a bit Calvinistic and severe--try a statuette by Pope, or a classical piece out of Heine. Too much white and gold for every-day purposes--then the Reverend Laurence Sterne will oblige. Urban tone may be corrected by Hardy, and Lowell will give you urbanity. And, however well you match and balance them, remember there is a time for ideals, and a time when they are better out of the way.

"The Philistine of Victorian literature, is a person without ideals, the practical man. But just now the fashion is all for the things. Ruskin and Carlyle set it going, and to-day the demand for ideals exceeds the supply. And as a result, we meet with innumerable people anxious to have the correct thing, but a little unsympathetic or inexpert, and those unavoidable people who do not like the things but feel compelled to get them. Ideals are not the easiest possessions to have and manage, and they may even rise to the level of serious inconveniences. So that I sometimes wonder these Extension people have not taken up the subject of their management and use.

"Note, for instance, the folly of bringing ideals too much into the

daily life; it is childish, like a baby insisting on its new toy at meal times, and taking it to bed. Never use an ideal as a standard, and avoid any that reflect upon your conduct. The extremest decorative people refrain from enamelling their kettles, and my cook though a 'born lady' does not wear her silk dress in the kitchen. Ideals are the full dress of the soul. A business man, for instance, who let visions of reverend Venetian and Genoese seigniors interfere with his agile City movements--who, to carry out our comparison, draped his mind with these things--would be uncommonly like a bowler in a dressing-gown.

"Then an ideal, we are also told, is an elevating influence in life; but unless one is very careful one may get hoist with one's own petard to a pitifully transitory soar above common humanity. The soar itself is not unpleasant, but the sequel is sometimes disagreeable.

"To show how an ideal may trip up an inexpert mortal, take that man Javvers and his wife. She also had an ideal husband, which was, indeed, a kind of bigamy, and her constant references to this creation of hers used to drive poor old Javvers frantic. It became as objectionable as if she had been its sorrowing widow, and ultimately it wrecked the happiness of their little home very completely.

"The seat of ideals, then, in one's mind, should be, as it were, a lounge, over which these hangings may drape and flap harmlessly; but it may easily become as the bed of Procrustes. To turn ideals to idols, and to command your whole world to bow down to them, savours of the

folly of Nebuchadnezzar the king. Let your ideal world be far away from reality, fit it with rococo furniture, angels and birds-of-paradise, Minnesinger flowers and views of the Delectable Mountains: and go there occasionally and rest--to return without illusions, without encumbrance, but with renewed zest, to the sordid world of the actual, the world of every day. Herein is the real use of the ideal; all other is fanaticism and folly."