

## Editor's Easy Chair

ONE of those recurrent selves who frequent the habitat of the Easy Chair, with every effect of exterior identities, looked in and said, before he sat down, and much before he was asked to sit down: "Are you one of those satirists of smart or swell society (or whatever it's called now) who despise it because they can't get into it, or one of those censors who won't go into it because they despise it?"

"Your question," we replied, "seems to be rather offensive, but we don't know that it's voluntarily so, and it's certainly interesting. On your part will you say what has prompted you, just at the moment, to accost us with this inquiry?" Before he could answer, we hastened to add, "By the way, what a fine, old-fashioned, gentlemanly word *accost* is! People used to accost one another a great deal in polite literature. 'Seeing her embarrassment from his abrupt and vigorous stare, he thus accosted her.' Or, 'Embarrassed by his fixed and penetrating regard, she timidly accosted him.' It seems to us that we remember a great many passages like these. Why has the word gone out? It was admirably fitted for such junctures, and it was so polished by use that it slipped from the pen without any effort of the brain, and—"

"I have no time for idle discussions of a mere literary nature," our other self returned. "I am very full of the subject which I have sprung upon you, and which I see you are trying to shirk."

"Not at all," we smilingly retorted. "We will answer you according to your folly without the least reluctance. We are not in smart or swell society because we cannot get in; but at the same time we would not get in if we could, because we despise it too much. We wonder," we continued, speculatively, "why we always suspect the society satirist of suffering from a social snub? It doesn't in the least follow. Was Pope, when he invited his S'in' John to—

—leave all meaner things  
To low ambition and the pride of kings'  
—goaded to magnanimity by a slight from royalty? Was Mr. Benson when he came over here from London excluded from the shining first circles of New York and Newport, which are apparently reflected with such brilliant fidelity in *The Relentless City*, and was he wreaking an unworthy resentment in portraying our richly moneyed, blue-blooded society to the life? How are manners ever to be corrected with a smile if the smile is always suspected of being an agonized grin, the contortion of the features by the throes of a mortified spirit? Was George William Curtis in his amusing but unsparing *Potiphar Papers*—"

"Ah, now you are shouting!" our other self exclaimed.

"Your slang is rather antiquated," we returned, with grave severity. "But just what do you mean by it in this instance?"

"I mean that manners are never corrected with a smile, whether of compassion or of derision. The manners that are bad, that are silly, that are vulgar, that are vicious, go on unchastened from generation to generation. Even the good manners don't seem to decay: simplicity, sincerity, kindness, don't really go out, any more than the other things, and fortunately the other things are confined only to a small group in every civilization, to the black sheep of the great, whity-brown or golden-fleeced human family."

"What has all this vague optimism to do with *The Potiphar Papers*, and smart society, and George William Curtis?" we brought the intruder sharply to book.

"A great deal, especially the part relating to the continuity of bad manners. I've just been reading an extremely clever little book by a new writer, called *New York Society on Parade*, which so far as its basal facts are concerned might have been written by the writer of *Our Best Society*, and the other *Potiphar*

*Papers*. The temperament varies from book to book; Mr. Ralph Pulitzer has a neater and lighter touch than George William Curtis; his book is more compact, more directly and distinctly a study, and it is less alloyed with the hopes of society reform which could be more reasonably indulged fifty-six years ago. Do you remember when *Our Best Society* came out in the eldest *Putnam's Magazine*, that phoenix of monthlies which has since twice risen from its ashes? Don't pretend that our common memory doesn't run back to the year 1853! We have so many things in common that I can't let you disgrace the firm by any such vain assumption of extreme youth!"

"Why should we assume it? The Easy Chair had then been three years firmly on its legs, or its rockers, and the succession of great spirits, now disembodied, whom its case invited, were all more or less in mature flesh. We remember that paper on *Our Best Society* vividly, and we recall the shock that its facts concerning the Upper Ten Thousand of New York imparted to the innocent, or at least the virtuous, Lower Twenty Millions inhabiting the rest of the United States. Do you mean to say that the Four Hundred of this day are no better than the Ten Thousand of that? Has nothing been gained for quality by that prodigious reduction in quantity?"

"On the contrary, the folly, the vanity, the meanness, the heartlessness, the vulgarity, have only been condensed and concentrated, if we are to believe Mr. Pulitzer; and I don't see why we should doubt him. Did you say you hadn't seen his very shapely little study? It takes, with all the unputtying sincerity of a kodak, the likeness of our best society in its three most characteristic aspects: full-face at dinner, three-quarters-face at the opera, and profile at a ball, where proud beauty hides its eyes on the shoulder of haughty commercial or financial youth, and moneyed age dips its nose in whatever symbolizes the Gascon wine in the paternal library. Mr. Pulitzer makes no attempt at dramatizing his persons. There is no ambitious Mrs. Potiphar with a longing for fashionable New York worlds to conquer, yet with a secret heartache for the love of her country girlhood;

no good, kind, sordid Potiphar bewildered and bedevilled by the surroundings she creates for him; no soft Rev. Cream Cheese, tenderly respectful of Mammon while ritually serving God; no factitious Ottoman of a Kurz Pasha, laughingly yet sadly observant of us playing at the forms of European society. Those devices of the satirist belonged to the sentimentalist mood of the Thackerayan epoch. But it is astonishing how exactly history repeats itself in the facts of the ball in 1910 from the ball of 1852. The motives, the *personnel*, almost the *matériel*, the incidents, are the same. I should think it would amuse Mr. Pulitzer, imitating nature from his actual observation, to find how essentially the same his study is with that of Curtis imitating nature fifty-seven years ago. There is more of nature in bulk, not in variety, to be imitated now, but as Mr. Pulitzer studies it in the glass of fashion, her mean, foolish, selfish face is unchanged. He would find in the sketches of the Mid-Victorian satirist all sorts of tender relents and generous hopes concerning the 'gay' New York of that time which the Early Edwardian satirist cannot indulge concerning the gay New York of this time. It seems as if we had really gone from bad to worse, not qualitatively — we couldn't — but quantitatively. There is more money, there are more men, more women, but otherwise our proud world is the proud world of 1853."

"You keep saying the same thing with 'damnable iterance,'" we remarked. "Don't you suppose that outside of New York there is now a vast society, as there was then, which enjoys itself sweetly, kindly, harmlessly? Is there no gentle Chicago or kind St. Louis, no pastoral Pittsburg, no sequestered Cincinnati, no bucolic Boston, no friendly Philadelphia, where 'the heart that is humble may look for' disinterested pleasure in the high society functions of the day or night? Does New York set the pace for all these places, and are dinners given there as here, not for the delight of the guests, but as the dire duty of the hostesses? Do the inhabitants of those simple sojourns go to the opera to be seen and not to hear? Do they follow on to balls before the piece is done, only to bear the

fardels of ignominy heaped upon them by the german's leaders, or to see their elders and fatters getting all the beautiful and costly favors while their own young and gracile loveliness is passed slighted by because they give no balls where those cruel captains can hope to shine in the van? It seems to us that in our own far prime—now well-nigh lost in the mists of antiquity—life was ordered kindlier; that dinners, and operaparties and dances were given—

‘To bless and never to ban.’”

“Very likely, on the low, society level on which our joint life moved,” our other self replied, with his unsparing candor. “You know we were a country, village, city-of-the-second-class personality. Even in the distant epoch painted in the *Potiphar Papers*, the motives of New York society were the same as now. It was not the place where birth and rank and fame relaxed or sported, as in Europe, or where ardent innocence played and feasted, as in the incorrupt towns of our interior. If Curtis once represented it rightly, it was the same ridiculous, hard-worked, greedy, costly, stupid thing which Mr. Pulitzer again represents it.”

“And yet,” we mused aloud, “this is the sort of thing which the ‘unthinking multitude’ who criticise, or at least review, books are always lamenting that our fiction doesn’t deal with. Why, in its emptiness and heaviness, its smartness and dulness, it would be the death of our poor fiction!”

“Well, I don’t know,” our counterpart responded. “If our fiction took it on the human ground, and ascertained its inner pathos, its real lamentableness, it might do a very good thing with those club-men and society girls and *grandes dames*. But that remains to be seen. In the mean time it is very much to have such a study of society as Mr. Pulitzer has given us. For the most part it is ‘satire with no pity in it,’ but there’s here and there a touch of compassion, which moves the more because of its rarity. When the author notes that here and there a pretty dear finds herself left with no one to take her out to supper at the ball, his few words wring the heart. ‘These poor victims of their sex

cannot, like the men, form tables of their own. All that each can do is to disappear as swiftly and as secretly as possible, hurrying home in humiliation for the present and despair for the future.’”

“Do such cruel things really happen in our best society?” we palpitated, in an anguish of sympathy.

“Such things and worse,” our other self responded, “as when in the german the fair *débutante* sees the leader advancing toward her with a splendid and costly favor, only to have him veer abruptly off to bestow it on some fat elderling who is going to give the next ball. But Mr. Pulitzer, though he has these spare intimations of pity, has none of the sentiment which there is rather a swash of in the *Potiphar Papers*. It’s the difference between the Mid-Victorian and the Early Edwardian point of view. Both satirists are disillusioned, but in the page of Curtis there is—

‘The tender grace of a day that is dead’

and the soft suffusion of hope for better things, while in the page of Mr. Pulitzer there is no such qualification of the disillusion. Both are enamored of the beauty of those daughters of Mammon, and of the distinction of our iron-clad youth, the athletic, well-groomed, well-tailored worldlings who hurry up-town from their banks, and brokers’ offices, and lawyers’ offices, to the dinners and opera-boxes and dances of fashion. ‘The girls and women are of a higher average of beauty than any European ballroom could produce. The men, too, are generally well built, tall, and handsome, easily distinguishable from the waiters,’ Mr. Pulitzer assures us.”

“Well, oughtn’t that to console?” we defied our other self. “Come! It’s a great thing to be easily distinguishable from the waiters, when the waiters are so often disappointed ‘remittance men’ of good English family, or the scions of Continental nobility. We mustn’t ask everything.”

“No, and apparently the feeding is less gross than it was in Curtis’s less sophisticated time. Many of the men seem still to smoke and booze throughout the night with the host in his ‘library,’ but the dancing youth don’t get drunk as some of them did at Mrs. Potiphar’s

supper, and people don't throw the things from their plates under the table."

"Well, why do you say, then, that there is no change for the better in our best society, that there is no hope for it?"

"Did I say that? If I did, I will stick to it. We must let our best society be, as it now imagines itself. I don't suppose that in all that gang of beautiful, splendid, wasteful, expensively surfeited people there are more than two or three young men of intellectual prowess or spiritual distinction, though there must be some clever and brilliant toadies of the artist variety. In fact, Mr. Pulitzer says as much outright; and it is the hard lot of some of the arts to have to tout for custom among the vulgar ranks of our best society."

"Very well, then," we said, with considerable resolution, "we must change the popular ideal of the best society. We must have a Four Hundred made up of the most brilliant artists, authors, doctors, professors, scientists, musicians, actors, and ministers, with their wives, daughters, and sisters, who will walk to one another's dinners, or at worst go by trolley, and occupy the cheaper seats at the opera, and dance in small and early assemblages, and live in seven-room-with-bath flats. Money must not count at all in the choice of these elect and beautiful natures. The question is, how shall we get the dense, unenlightened masses to regard them as the best society; how teach the reporters to run after them, and the press to chronicle their entertainments, engagements, marriages, divorces, voyages to and from Europe, and the other facts which now so dazzle the common fancy when it finds them recorded in the society intelligence of the newspapers?"

"Yes, as General Sherman said when he had once advocated the restriction of the suffrage and had been asked how he

was going to get the consent of the majority whose votes he meant to take away, 'Yes, that is the devil of it.'"

We were silent for a time, and then we suggested, "Don't you think that a beginning could be made by these real élite we have decided on refusing to associate with what now calls itself our best society?"

"But hasn't our *soi-disant* best society already made that beginning for its betters by excluding them?" our other self responded.

"There is something in what you say," we reluctantly assented, "but by no means everything. The beginning you speak of has been made at the wrong end. The true beginning of society reform must be made by the moral, æsthetic, and intellectual superiors of fashionable society as we now have it. The *grandes dames* must be somehow persuaded that to be really swell, really smart, or whatever the last word for the thing is, they must search *Who's Who in New York* for men and women of the most brilliant promise and performance and invite them. They must not search the banks and brokers' offices and lawyers' offices for their dancing men, but the studios, the editorial rooms, the dramatic agencies, the pulpits, for the most gifted young artists, assignment men, interviewers, actors, and preachers, and apply to the labor-unions for the cleverest and handsomest artisans; they must look up the most beautiful and intellectual girl students of all the arts and sciences, and department stores for cultivated and attractive salesladies. Then, when all such people have received cards to dinners or dances, it will only remain for them to have previous engagements, and the true beginning is made. Come! You can't say the thing is impossible."

"Not impossible, no," our complementary self replied. "But difficult."



## Editor's Study

IN our ultramodern interpretation of life we have the advantage of position.

We are not wiser than the ancients, but we face them; their portion of the ellipse needed our complementary portion for its true interpretation. Something is disclosed to our thought which they only felt, and which took in their thought the terms prompted by initiative impulse—terms expressing their sense of the aims and values of life but which we use with other meanings.

In a way, all beginnings intimate ends, as the seed holds the fruit, but it is the intervening cycle of growth that is interesting. The beginning, like the seed, is an involute, a closed-up thing. Doubtless the primitive Naturalism, if we could discover it, would show us peaceful communities, each closely and sympathetically bound together, and in many ways intimating, though in none illustrating, consummations such as our latter-day prophets dream of. But, in this stage, society was undeveloped; it was like a closed-up seed, which must die for its escape from darkness—must pass through a course apparently contradicting its initial principle, for the illustration of that principle.

The primitive amiability and peaceableness may have been the prelude to intimation, in an undeveloped humanity, of that world-peace which we look forward to as the signal consummation of a humanity fully developed; but it would not serve as an illustration of such a consummation, though we use the same term for it—"peace." That same kind of primordial amiability we still encounter among whole peoples who, like the Chinese, have been withdrawn from contacts with the outside world and who have lapsed into a crystalline stability. The progressive races, notably the Indo-European, created civilizations which repeated and contradicted every primitive virtue. Their flight from Eden had the range of an immense projection. We stand

at a point of this apparently contradictory and eccentric movement where we are able to see it as returning on another and higher plane, in its spiral course, to the principle it had seemed to repudiate.

We have, in our consideration of woman's emergence as a positive factor in our very modern civilization, and especially in our literature, shown how this emergence awaited that critical moment in the evolution of humanity when a new prospect was opened, which, as if defining and answering a long-cherished dream, appealed to her and invited her open and enthusiastic participation in affairs hitherto held to be quite exclusively the concern of man. We may call that moment the beginning of creative realism—of a new Naturalism, which had always been the secret expectation of woman.

This moment, for England, by a natural coincidence, was that of the first appearance of the English novel of society, divided by sharp cleavage from all previous romance. Hitherto every projection of the imagination in this field had been an evasion of plain, human reality, and the future of even this new form of fiction was yet to show many such evasions. But the turn had been taken. Richardson's *Pamela* has justly been called the first analytical novel in the English language. It was not merely an entertainment, bound to no verities; it was, with all its defects, a study of motives, a sincere attempt to truly disclose the springs of human action.

The same turn is visible to us, at our focus of the historical ellipse, in human civilization. We have had so much to say of woman, who, at this turn, found her predestined place in co-operation with man, as she did in the new era of fiction, that we have ignored and may have seemed to depreciate the immense accomplishment of man in that larger section of history which he exclusively dominated. As, from our modern advantage of position, we face this past, we see how