

By Max Beerbohm

Say, shall these things be forgotten
In the Row that men call Rotten,
Beauty Clare?—*Hamilton Aïdè.*

I SUPPOSE that there is no one, however optimistic, that has not wished, from time to time, that he had been born into some other age than this. Poor Professor Froude once admitted that he would like to have been a prehistoric man. Don Quixote is only one of many who have tried to revive the days of chivalry. A desire to have lived in the eighteenth century is common to all our second-rate *litterateurs*. But, for my own part, I have often felt that it would have been nice to live in that bygone epoch when society was first inducted into the mysteries of art and, not losing yet its old and elegant *tenuë*, first babbled of blue china and white lilies, and of the painter Rossetti and of the poet Swinburne. It would have been a fine thing to see the *tableaux* at Cromwell House or the Pastoral Plays at Coombe Wood, to have strained my eyes for a glimpse of the Jersey Lily, clapped holes in my gloves for Connie Gilchrist, and danced all night long to the strains of the Manola Valse. The period of 1880 must have been delicious.

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It is now so remote from us that much therein is hard for us to understand, much must remain mobled in the mists of antiquity. The material upon which any historian, grappling with any historical period, chiefly relies is, as he himself would no doubt admit, whatever has already been written by other historians. Strangely enough, no historian has yet written of this most vital epoch. Nor are the contemporary memoirs, though indeed many, very valuable. From such writers as *Montague Williams*, *Frith*, or the *Bancrofts*, you gain little peculiar knowledge. That quaint old chronicler, H. W. Lucy, describes amusingly enough the frown of Sir Richard (afterwards Lord) Cross or the tea-rose in the Premier's button-hole. But what can he tell us of the negotiations that preceded Mr. Gladstone's return to public life, or of the secret councils of the Fourth Party, whereby Sir Stafford was gradually eclipsed? At such things as these we can but guess. Good memoirs must always be the cumulation of gossip, but gossip, alas, was killed by the Press. In the tavern or the barber's shop, all secrets passed into every ear, but from the morning paper little is to be culled. Manifestations are made manifest to us, but the inner aspect of things is sacred. I have been seriously handicapped by having no real material, save such newspapers of the time as *Punch*, or the *London Charivari*, *The Queen*, *The Lady's Newspaper*, and others. The idea of excavation, which in the East has been productive of such rich material for the historian, was indeed suggested to me, but owing to obvious difficulties had to be abandoned. I trust then that the reader may pardon any deficiencies in so brief an excursus by reason of the great difficulties of research and the paucity of intimate authorities.

The period of 1880 and of the four years immediately succeeding it must always be memorable to us, for it marks a great change

change in the constitution of society. It would seem that during the five or six years that preceded it, the "Upper Ten Thousand," as they were quaintly called by the journals of the day, had taken a somewhat more frigid tone. The Prince of Wales had inclined for a while to be restful after the revels of his youth. The continued seclusion of Queen Victoria, who during these years was engaged upon that superb work of introspection and self-analysis, *More Leaves from the Higblands*, had begun to tell upon the social system. Balls and entertainments, both at Court and in the houses of the nobles, were notably fewer. The vogue of the opera was passing. Even in the top of the season, Rotten Row, so I read, was not intolerably crowded. Society was becoming dull.

In 1880, however, came the Dissolution and the tragic fall of Disraeli, and the sudden triumph of the Whigs. How great was the change that came upon Westminster thenceforward must be known to any one who has studied the annals of the incomparable Parliament of 1880 and the succeeding years. Gladstone, with a monstrous majority behind him and revelling in the old splendour of speech that neither the burden of age nor six years' sulking had made less; Parnell, pale, deadly, mysterious, with his crew of wordy peasants that were to set at naught all that had been held sacred by the Saxon—the activity of these two men alone would have sufficed to raise this Parliament above all others. What of young Randolph Churchill, who, despite his halting speech, foppish mien and rather coarse fibre of mind, was yet the most brilliant parliamentarian of the century? What pranks he and his little band played upon the House! How they frightened poor Sir Stafford and infuriated the Premier. What of the eloquent atheist, Charles Bradlaugh, pleading at the Bar, striding forward to the very mace, while the Tories yelled and mocked at him,

him, hustled down the stone steps with the broadcloth torn to tatters from his back? Imagine the existence of God being made a party question! I wonder if such scenes can ever be witnessed again at St. Stephen's as were witnessed then. Whilst these curious elements were making themselves felt in politics, so too in Society were the primordia of a great change. The aristocracy could not live by good-breeding alone. The old delights seemed vapid, waxen. Something new was wanted. And thus came it that the spheres of fashion and of art met, thus began the great social renaissance of 1880.

Be it remembered that long before this time there had been in the heart of Chelsea a kind of cult of Beauty. Certain artists had settled there, deliberately refusing to work in the ordinary official way, and "wrought," as they were wont to put it, "for the pleasure and sake of all that is fair." Swinburne, Morris, Rossetti, Whistler, Burne-Jones, were of this little community—all of them men of great industry and caring for little but their craft. Quietly and unbeknown they produced their poems or their pictures or their essays, read them or showed them to one another and worked on. In fact, Beauty had existed long before 1880. It was Mr. Oscar Wilde who first trotted her round. This remarkable youth, a student at the University of Oxford, began to show himself everywhere, and even published a volume of poems in several editions as a kind of decoy to the shy artificers of Chelsea. The lampoons that at this period were written against him are still extant, and from them, and from the references to him in the contemporary journals, it would appear that it was to him that Art owed the great social vogue she enjoyed at this time. Peacock feathers and sunflowers glittered in every room, the curio shops were ransacked for the furniture of Annish days, men and women, fired by the fervid words of the young

Oscar

Oscar, threw their mahogany into the streets. A few smart women even dressed themselves in suave draperies and unheard-of greens. Into whatever ballroom you went, you would surely find, among the women in tiaras and the fops and the distinguished foreigners, half a score of comely ragamuffins in velveteen, murmuring sonnets, posturing, waving their hands. "Nincompoopiana" the craze was called at first, and later "Æstheticism."

It was in 1880 that Private Views became necessary functions of fashion. I should like to have been at a Private View of the Old Grosvenor Gallery. There was Robert Browning, the poet, button-holing a hundred friends and doffing his hat with a courtly sweep to more than one duchess. There, too, was Theo Marzials, poet and eccentric, and Walter Sickert, the impressionist, and Charles Colnaghi, the hero of a hundred tea-fights, and young Brookfield, the comedian, and many another good fellow. My Lord of Dudley, the *virtuoso*, came there leaning for support upon the arm of his fair young wife. Disraeli, with his lustreless eyes and face like some seamed Hebraic parchment, came also and whispered behind his hand to the faithful Corry. What interesting folk! What a wonderful scene! A chronicler of the time thus writes of it:

"There were quaint, beautiful, extraordinary costumes walking about—ultra-æsthetics, artistic-æsthetics, æsthetics that made up their minds to be daring, and suddenly gave way in some important point—put a frivolous bonnet on the top of a grave and glowing garment that Albert Dürer might have designed for a mantle. There were fashionable costumes that Mrs. Mason or Madame Elise might have turned out that morning. The motley crowd mingled, forming into groups, sometimes dazzling you by the array of colours that you never thought to see in full daylight. . . . Canary-coloured garments flitted cheerily by garments of the saddest green. A hat in an agony of pokes and angles

angles was seen in company with a bonnet that was a gay garland of flowers. A vast cape that might have enshrouded the form of a *Mater Dolorosa* hung by the side of a jauntily-striped Langtry-hood."

Of the purely æsthetic fads of Society were also the Pastoral Plays at Coombe Wood, and a very charming fad they must have been. There was one specially great occasion when Shakespeare's play, "As you like it," was given. The day was as hot as a June day *can* be, and every one drove down in open carriages and hansoms, and in the evening returned in the same way. It was the very Derby Day of æstheticism. "To every character in the play was given a perfectly appropriate attire, and the brown and green of their costumes harmonised exquisitely with the ferns through which they wandered, the trees beneath which they lay, and the lovely English landscape that surrounded the Pastoral Players." It must have been a proud day for the Lady Archibald Campbell, who gave this fête, and for E. W. Godwin, who directed its giving. Fairer to see than the mummers were the guests who sat and watched from under the dark and griddled elms. The women wore jerseys and tied-back skirts. Zulu hats shaded their faces from the sun. Bangles shimmered upon their wrists. And the men of fashion wore light frock-coats and light top-hats with black bands, and the æsthetes were in velveteen, carrying lilies.

Nor does it seem that Society went entirely to the æsthetes for instruction in life. There was actively proceeding, at this time, an effort to raise the average of aristocratic loveliness, quite independently of the æsthetes. The Professional Beauty was, more strictly, a Philistine production. What exactly this term, Professional Beauty, signifies, how any woman gained a right to it, we do not and may never know. It is certain, however, that there

there were at this time a number of women to whom it was applied. They received special attention from the Prince of Wales, and hostesses would move heaven and earth to have them at their receptions. Their portraits were exhibited in every shop. Crowds assembled before their door every morning to see them start for Rotten Row. Mrs. Langtry, the incomparably beautiful, Mrs. Wheeler, who always appeared in black, and Lady Lonsdale, afterwards Lady de Grey, were all of them famous Professional Beauties. We may doubt whether the movement, symbolised by these ladies, was quite in accord with the dignity and elegance that always should mark the best society. Any effort to make Beauty compulsory robs Beauty of its chief charm. But, at the same time, we do believe that this movement, so far as it came of a real wish to raise a practical standard of feminine loveliness for all classes, does not deserve the strictures that have been passed upon it by posterity. One of its immediate consequences was the incursion of American ladies into London. Then it was that these pretty little creatures, "clad in Worth's most elegant confections," first drawled their way into the drawing-rooms of the great. Appearing, as they did, with the especial favour of the Prince of Wales, they had an immediate success. They were so wholly new that their voices and their dresses were mimicked *partout*. The English beauties were very angry, especially with the Prince, whom alone they blamed for the vogue of their rivals. History credits the Prince of Wales with many notable achievements. Not the least of these is that he discovered the inhabitants of America.

It will be seen that in this renaissance the keenest students of the exquisite were women. Nor, however, were men wholly idle. Since the days of King George the noble art of self-adornment had been sadly neglected by them. Great fops, like D'Orsay,

D'Orsay, had come upon the town, but never had they formed a school. Dress, therefore, had become simpler, wardrobes smaller, fashions apt to linger. In 1880 arose the sect that was soon to win for itself the title of "The Mashers." What exactly this title signified I suppose no two etymologists will ever agree. But we can learn clearly enough from the fashion-plates and caricatures of the day what the Mashers were in outward semblance, from the lampoons what was their mode of life. Unlike the Dandies of the Georgian era they made no pretence to any qualities of the intellect, and, wholly contemptuous of the æsthetes, recognised no art save the art of dress. Much might be written about the Mashers. The Music Hall was unknown to them, but nightly they gathered at the Gaiety Theatre. Nightly the stalls were fulfilled with row after row of small, sleek heads, surmounting collars of monstrous height. Nightly in the *foyer* were lisped the praises of Kate Vaughan, her graceful dancing, or of Nellie Farren, her matchless fooling. Never a night passed but the dreary stage-door was surrounded by a crowd of fools bearing bouquets and fools incumbent upon canes. A strange cult! I used to know a lady whose father was actually present at the first night of "The Forty Thieves," and fell enamoured of one of the *coryphées*. By such links is one age joined to another.

There is always something rather absurd about the past. It is easy to sneer at these Mashers, with their fantastic raiment and vacuous lives. It is easy to laugh at all that ensued when first the mummers and the stainers of canvas strayed into Mayfair. To me the most wonderful moment of the pantomime has always seemed to come when the winged and wired fairies begin to fade away and, as they fade, clown and pantaloon tumble on joppling and grimacing. The social condition of 1880 fascinates me in the same manner. Its contrasts are irresistible.

Perhaps,

Perhaps, in my study of the period, I may have fallen so deeply beneath its spell that I have tended, now and again, to exaggerate its real importance. I lay no claim to the true historical spirit. I fancy it was a red-chalk drawing of a girl in a mob-cap, signed "Frank Miles, 1880," that first impelled me to research. To give an accurate and exhaustive account of the period would need a far less brilliant pen than mine. But I hope that, by dealing, even so briefly as I have dealt, with its more strictly sentimental aspects, I may have lightened the task of the scientific historian. And I look to Professor Gardiner and to the Bishop of Oxford.