

Standard Household Effect Co.

William Dean Howells

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LITERATURE AND LIFE The Standard Household–Effect Company

by William Dean Howells

THE STANDARD HOUSEHOLD–EFFECT COMPANY

My friend came in the other day, before we had left town, and looked round at the appointments of the room in their summer shrouds, and said, with a faint sigh, I see you have had the eternal–womanly with you, too.

I.

Isn't the eternal–womanly everywhere? What has happened to you? I asked.

I wish you would come to my house and see. Every rug has been up for a month, and we have been living on bare floors. Everything that could be tied up has been tied up, everything that could be sewed up has been sewed up. Everything that could be moth–balled and put away in chests has been moth–balled and put away. Everything that could be taken down has been taken down. Bags with draw–strings at their necks have been pulled over the chandeliers and tied. The pictures have been hidden in cheese–cloth, and the mirrors veiled in gauze so that I cannot see my own miserable face anywhere.

Come! That's something.

Yes, it's something. But I have been thinking this matter over very seriously, and I believe it is going from bad to worse. I have heard praises of the thorough housekeeping of our grandmothers, but the housekeeping of their granddaughters is a thousand times more intense.

Do you really believe that? I asked. And if you do, what of it?

Simply this, that if we don't put a stop to it, at the gait it's going, it will put a stop to the eternal–womanly.

I suppose we should hate that.

Yes, it would be bad. It would be very bad; and I have been turning the matter over in my mind, and studying out a remedy.

The highest type of philosopher turns a thing over in his mind and lets some one else study out a remedy.

Yes, I know. I feel that I may be wrong in my processes, but I am sure that I am right in my results. The reason why our grandmothers could be such good housekeepers without danger of putting a stop to the eternal–womanly was that they had so few things to look after in their houses. Life was indefinitely simpler with them. But the modern improvements, as we call them, have multiplied the cares of housekeeping without subtracting its burdens, as they were expected to do. Every novel convenience and comfort, every article of beauty and luxury, every means of refinement and enjoyment in our houses, has been so much added to the burdens of housekeeping, and the granddaughters have inherited from the grandmothers an undiminished conscience against rust and the moth, which will not suffer them to forget the least duty they owe to the naughtiest of their superfluities.

Yes, I see what you mean, I said. This is what one usually says when one does not quite know what another is driving at; but in this case I really did know, or thought I did. That survival of the conscience is a very curious thing, especially in our eternal–womanly. I suppose that the North American conscience was evolved from the rudimental European conscience during the first centuries of struggle here, and was more or less religious and economical in its origin. But with the advance of wealth and the decay of faith among us, the conscience seems to be simply conscientious, or, if it is otherwise, it is social. The eternal–womanly continues along the old lines of housekeeping from an atavistic impulse, and no one woman can stop because all the other women are going on. It is something in the air, or something in the blood. Perhaps it is something in both.

Yes, said my friend, quite as I had said already, I see what you mean. But I think it is in the air more than in the blood. I was in Paris, about this time last year, perhaps because I was the only thing in my house that had not been swathed in cheese–cloth, or tied up in a bag with drawstrings, or rolled up with moth–balls and put away in chests. At any rate, I was there. One day I left my wife in New York carefully tagging three worn–out feather dusters, and putting them into a pillow–case, and tagging it, and putting the pillow–case into a camphorated self–sealing paper sack, and tagging it; and another day I was in Paris, dining at the house of a lady whom I asked how she managed with the things in her house when she went into the country for the summer. 'Leave them just as they are,' she said. 'But what about the dust and the moths, and the rust and the tarnish?' She said, 'Why, the things would have to be all gone over when I came back in the autumn, anyway, and why should I give myself double trouble?' I asked her if she didn't even roll anything up and put it away in closets, and she said: 'Oh, you mean that old American horror of getting ready to go away. I used to go through all that at home, too, but I shouldn't dream of it here. In the first place, there are no closets in the house, and I couldn't put anything away if I wanted to. And really nothing happens. I scatter some Persian powder along the edges of things, and under the lower shelves, and in the dim corners, and I pull down the shades. When I come back in the fall I have the powder swept out, and the shades pulled up, and begin living again. Suppose a little dust has got in, and the moths have nibbled a little here and there? The whole damage would not amount to half the cost of putting everything away and taking everything out, not to speak of the weeks of discomfort, and the wear and tear of spirit. No, thank goodness I left American housekeeping in America.' I asked her: 'But if you went back?' and she gave a sigh, and said:

'I suppose I should go back to that, along with all the rest. Everybody does it there.' So you see, my friend concluded, it's in the air, rather than the blood.

Then your famous specific is that our eternal–womanly should go and live in Paris?

Oh, dear, not said my friend. Nothing so drastic as all that. Merely the extinction of household property.

I see what you mean, I said. But what do you mean?

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Simply that hired houses, such as most of us live in, shall all be furnished houses, and that the landlord shall own every stick in them, and every appliance down to the last spoon and ultimate towel. There must be no compromise, by which the tenant agrees to provide his own linen and silver; that would neutralize the effect I intend by the expropriation of the personal proprietor, if that says what I mean. It must be in the lease, with severe penalties against the tenant in case of violation, that the landlord into furnish everything in perfect order when the tenant comes in, and is to put everything in perfect order when the tenant goes out, and the tenant is not to touch anything, to clean it, or dust it, or roll it up in moth-balls and put it away in chests. All is to be so sacredly and inalienably the property of the landlord that it shall constitute a kind of trespass if the tenant attempts to close the house for the summer or to open it for the winter in the usual way that houses are now closed and opened. Otherwise my scheme would be measurably vitiated.

I see what you mean, I murmured. Well?

Some years ago, my friend went on, when we came home from Europe, we left our furniture in storage for a time, while we rather drifted about, and did not settle anywhere in particular. During that interval my wife opened and closed five furnished houses in two years.

And she has lived to tell the tale?

She has lived to tell it a great many times. She can hardly be kept from telling it yet. But it is my belief that, although she brought to the work all the anguish of a quickened conscience, under the influence of the American conditions she had returned to, she suffered far less in her encounters with either of those furnished houses than she now does with our own furniture when she shuts up our house in the summer, and opens it for the winter. But if there had been a clause in the lease, as there should have been, forbidding her to put those houses in order when she left them, life would have been simply a rapture. Why, in Europe custom almost supplies the place of statute in such cases, and you come and go so lightly in and out of furnished houses that you do not mind taking them for a month, or a few weeks. We are very far behind in this matter, but I have no doubt that if we once came to do it on any extended scale we should do it, as we do everything else we attempt, more perfectly than any other people in the world. You see what I mean?

I am not sure that I do. But go on.

I would invert the whole Henry George principle, and I would tax personal property of the household kind so heavily that it would necessarily pass out of private hands; I would make its tenure so costly that it would be impossible to any but the very rich, who are also the very wicked, and ought to suffer.

Oh, come, now!

I refer you to your Testament. In the end, all household property would pass into the hands of the state.

Aren't you getting worse and worse?

Oh, I'm not supposing there won't be a long interval when household property will be in the hands of powerful monopolies, and many millionaires will be made by letting it out to middle-class tenants like you and me, along with the houses we hire of them. I have no doubt that there will be a Standard Household-Effect Company, which will extend its relations to Europe, and get the household effects of the whole world into its grasp. It will be a fearful oppression, and we shall probably groan under it for generations, but it will liberate us from our personal ownership of them, and from the far more crushing weight of the moth-ball. We shall suffer, but

I see what you mean, I hastened to interrupt at this point, but these suggestive remarks of yours are getting beyond Do you think you could defer the rest of your incompleting sentence for a week?

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Well, for not more than a week, said my friend, with an air of discomfort in his arrest.

II.

We shall not suffer so much as we do under our present system, said my friend here won't be a long interval when household property will be in the hands of powerful monopolies, and many millionaires will be made by letting it out to middle-class tenants like you and me, along with the houses we hire of them. I have no doubt that there will be a Standard Household-Effect Company, which will extend its relations to Europe, and get the household effects of the whole world into its grasp. It will be a fearful oppression, and we shall probably groan under it for generations, but it will liberate us from our personal ownership of them, and from the far more crushing weight of the moth-ball. We shall suffer, but—”

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II.

—“We shall not suffer so much as we do under our present system,” said my friend, completing his sentence after the interruption of a week. By this time we had both left town, and were taking up the talk again on the veranda of a sea-side hotel. “As for the eternal-womanly, it will be her salvation from herself. When once she is expropriated from her household effects, and forbidden under severe penalties from meddling with those of the Standard Household-Effect Company, she will begin to get back her peace of mind, and be the same blessing she was before she began housekeeping.”

“That may all very well be,” I assented, though I did not believe it, and I found something almost too fantastical in my friend's scheme. “But when we are expropriated from all our dearest belongings, what is to become of our tender and sacred associations with them?”

“What has become of devotion to the family gods, and the worship of ancestors? Once the graves of the dead were at the door of the living, so that libations might be conveniently poured out on them, and the ground where they lay was inalienable because it was supposed to be used by their spirits as well as their bodies. A man could not sell the bones, because he could not sell the ghosts, of his kindred. By-and by, when religion ceased to be domestic and became social, and the service of the gods was carried on in temples common to all, it was found that the tombs of one's forefathers could be sold without violence to their spectres. I dare say it wouldn't be different in the case of our tender and sacred associations with tables and chairs, pots and pans, beds and bedding, pictures and bric-a-brac. We have only to evolve a little further. In fact we have already evolved far beyond the point that troubles you. Most people in modern towns and cities have changed their domiciles from ten to twenty times during their lives, and have not paid the slightest attention to the tender and sacred associations connected with them. I don't suppose you would say that a man has no such associations with the house that has sheltered him, while he has them with the stuff that has furnished it?”

“No, I shouldn't say that.”

“If anything, the house should be dearer than the household gear. Yet at each remove we drag a lengthening chain of tables, chairs, side-boards, portraits, landscapes, bedsteads, washstands, stoves, kitchen utensils, and bric-a-brac after us, because, as my wife says, we cannot bear to part with them. At several times in our own lives we have accumulated stuff enough to furnish two or three house and have paid a pretty stiff house-rent in the form of storage for the overflow. Why, I am doing that very thing now! Aren't you?”

“I am—in a certain degree,” I assented.

“We all are, we well-to-do people, as we think ourselves. Once my wife and I revolted by a common impulse against the ridiculous waste and slavery of the thing. We went to the storage warehouse and sent three or four vanloads of the rubbish to the auctioneer. Some of the pieces we had not seen for years, and as each was hauled out for us to inspect and decide upon, we condemned it to the auction-block with shouts of rejoicing. Tender and sacred associations! We hadn't had such light hearts since we had put everything in storage and gone to Europe indefinitely as we had when we left those things to be carted out of our lives forever. Not one had been a pleasure to us; the sight of every one had been a pang. All we wanted was never to set eyes on them again.”

“I must say you have disposed of the tender and sacred associations pretty effectually, so far as they relate to things in storage. But the things that we have in daily use?”

“It is exactly the same with them. Why should they be more to us than the floors and walls of the houses we move in and move out of with no particular pathos? And I think we ought not to care for them, certainly not to the point of letting them destroy our eternal-womanly with the anxiety she feels for them. She is really much more precious, if she could but realize it, than anything she swathes in cheese-cloth or wraps up with moth-balls. The proof of the fact that the whole thing is a piece of mere sentimentality is that we may live in a furnished house for years, amid all the accidents of birth and death, joy and sorrow, and yet not form the slightest attachment to the furniture. Why should we have tender and sacred associations with a thing we have bought, and not with a thing we have hired?”

“I confess, I don't know. And do you really think we could liberate ourselves from our belongings if they didn't belong to us? Wouldn't the eternal-womanly still keep putting them away for summer and taking them out

for winter?"

"At first, yes, there might be some such mechanical action in her; but it would be purely mechanical, and it would soon cease. When the Standard Household–Effect Company came down on the temporal–manly with a penalty for violation of the lease, the eternal–womanly would see the folly of her ways and stop; for the eternal–womanly is essentially economical, whatever we say about the dressmaker's bills; and the very futilities of putting away and taking out, that she now wears herself to a thread with, are founded in the instinct of saving."

"But," I asked, "wouldn't our household belongings lose a good deal of character if they didn't belong to us? Wouldn't our domestic interiors become dreadfully impersonal?"

"How many houses now have character–personality? Most people let the different dealers choose for them, as it is. Why not let the Standard Household–Effect Company, and finally the state? I am sure that either would choose much more wisely than people choose for themselves, in the few cases where they even seem to choose for themselves. In most interiors the appointments are without fitness, taste, or sense; they are the mere accretions of accident in the greater number of cases; where they are the result of design, they are worse. I see what you mean by character and personality in them. You mean the sort of madness that let itself loose a few years ago in what was called household art, and has since gone to make the junk–shops hideous. Each of the eternal–womanly was supposed suddenly to have acquired a talent for decoration and a gift for the selection and arrangement of furniture, and each began to stamp herself upon our interiors. One painted a high–shouldered stone bottle with a stork and stood it at the right corner of the mantel on a scarf; another gilded the bottle and stood it at the left corner, and tied the scarf through its handle. One knotted a ribbon around the arm of a chair; another knotted it around the leg. In a day, an hour, a moment, the chairs suddenly became angular, cushionless, springless; and the sofas were stood across corners, or parallel with the fireplace, in slants expressive of the personality of the presiding genius. The walls became all frieze and dado; and instead of the simple and dignified ugliness of the impersonal period our interiors abandoned themselves to a hysterical chaos, full of character. Some people had their doors painted black, and the daughter or mother of the house then decorated them with morning–glories. I saw such a door in a house I looked at the other day, thinking I might hire it. The sight of that black door and its morning–glories made me wish to turn aside and live with the cattle, as Walt Whitman says. No, the less we try to get personality and character into our household effects the more beautiful and interesting they will be. As soon as we put the Standard Household–Effect Company in possession and render it a relentless monopoly, it will corrupt a competent architect and decorator in each of our large towns and cities, and when you hire a new house these will be sent to advise with the eternal–womanly concerning its appointments, and tell her what she wants, and what she will like; for at present the eternal womanly, as soon as she has got a thing she wants, begins to hate it. The company's agents will begin by convincing her that she does not need half the things she has lumbered up her house with, and that every useless thing is an ugly thing, even in the region of pure aesthetics. I once asked an Italian painter if he did not think a certain nobly imagined drawing–room was fine, and he said 'SI. Ma troppa roba.' There were too many rugs, tables, chairs, sofas, pictures; vases, statues, chandeliers. 'Troppa roba' is the vice of all our household furnishing, and it will be the death of the eternal–womanly if it is not stopped. But the corrupt agents of a giant monopoly will teach the eternal–womanly something of the wise simplicity of the South, and she will end by returning to the ideal of housekeeping as it prevails among the Latin races, whom it began with, whom civilization began with. What of a harmless, necessary moth or two, or even a few fleas?"

"That might be all very well as far as furniture and carpets and curtains are concerned," I said, "but surely you wouldn't apply it to pictures and objects of art?"

"I would apply it to them first of all and above all," rejoined my friend, hardily. "Among all the people who buy and own such things there is not one in a thousand who has any real taste or feeling for them, and the objects they choose are generally such as can only deprave and degrade them further. The pictures, statues, and vases supplied by the Standard Household–Effect Company would be selected by agents with a real sense of art, and a knowledge of it. When the house–letting and house–furnishing finally passed into the hands of the state, these things would be lent from the public galleries, or from immense municipal stores for the purpose."

"And I suppose you would have ancestral portraits supplied along with the other pictures?" I sneered.

"Ancestral portraits, of course," said my friend, with unruffled temper. "So few people have ancestors of their own that they will be very glad to have ancestral portraits chosen for them out of the collections of the company or the state. The agents of the one, or the officers of the other, will study the existing type of family face, and will

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select ancestors and ancestresses whose modelling, coloring, and expression agree with it, and will keep in view the race and nationality of the family whose ancestral portraits are to be supplied, so that there shall be no chance of the grossly improbable effect which ancestral portraits now have in many cases. Yes, I see no flaw in the scheme," my friend concluded, "and no difficulty that can't be easily overcome. We must alienate our household furniture, and make it so sensitively and exclusively the property of some impersonal agency—company or community, I don't care which—that any care of it shall be a sort of crime; any sense of responsibility for its preservation a species of incivism punishable by fine or imprisonment. This, and nothing short of it, will be the salvation of the eternal—womanly."

"And the perdition of something even more precious than that!"

"What can be more precious?"

"Individuality."

"My dear friend," demanded my visitor, who had risen, and whom I was gradually edging to the door, "do you mean to say there is any individuality in such things now? What have we been saying about character?"

"Ah, I see what you mean," I said.