Concerning Cheapness

Charles Carroll

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"Hang it all! there goes another!"

"Another what?" said the Pedagogue, looking up from lazy absorption in his easy−chair and the last Review.

"Why, that's the third pair of those dollar gloves of Brown's that I've split within the last week or two, trying to struggle into them in a hurry."

"Sorry for you," as he calmly turned another leaf; "but if I wanted to be unamiable, I should say it served you right for buying cheap things."

"Cheap!" I retorted, testily. "What in poverty's name is a fellow with my salary to do, but buy cheap things or go without?"

"Go without, I should say, unless he can get good ones. You don't seem to have made a very brilliant speculation out of that lot of rat−skin which Brown sells you for kid. By your own showing, you have used up three dollars' worth of the rubbish without a penny's worth of advantage, when for the same money you might have been gorgeous in Jones' or Robinson's, at your last two or three parties, and had something left over that would clean. See here!" he continued, dropping his magazine; "sit down a moment; the evening's young yet; you can't go to the Gunnybags's at eight o'clock, you know. Take another cigarette, and give me one, while I free my mind a bit on one of the delusions of the age. If I can bring you to a right way of thinking, I may save you a few dollars and much bother in the course of the next year, to say nothing of the proud satisfaction of knowing yourself wiser than your neighbors."

Now, my chum, whom I choose to nickname the Pedagogue, was an odd fish, with no little experience of men and things in his queer, out−of−the−way fashion. Cranky and a little irritable sometimes, he was still a good scholar, a cool observer, and something of a thinker. Even when most impetuous or wrongheaded, he was, for all his verbose fluency, generally original, and rarely dull. A long and patient study of the ways and means of making his dollar bill go as far as another man's two, had given him ample right to speak in the premises, and the tone of paradox in his words piqued my curiosity. So drawing another chair to the fire, and handing him my last bundle of "caporal," I propped my patent−leathers on the grate, more Americano, and waited for the stream of talk which was sure to come.

"Cheap! My dear boy," said the philosopher, sending a long stream of amber smoke into the fire−place, and gazing meditatively after it, — " nothing is cheap! There's no such thing as cheapness. I find every one wasting time, labor, thought, heart, and hope, to say nothing of conscience, in the effort to get the good things of this life for less than the market rate. I see, or think I see, that the only price at which anything good can be had, is among the higher, — indeed, excluding certain very glaring cases of ill−judgment, or caprice, — among the highest of the ruling figures. Occasionally a man pays, no doubt, too much for a thing; occasionally, too, by some happy and exceptional chance, he may slip into a 'good thing,' and get full money's worth for materially less than money value; but in the long run, I devoutly believe, that in ninety−nine cases out of the hundred, the more you pay for a thing the better you are served, even in proportion to your price. The attempt to get anything worth having, at less

than the higher ruling figures, as I said before, is futile, and generally ends in spending more in cash, let alone trouble and disappointment, than if you had honestly met the issue and spent liberally at the start.

"In matters of every−day use, most men are fair judges. Any fool knows whether his beefsteak is tender, or his coat fits him; and so I take it as almost an axiom, that where a man sells an article of general use, his commodity is, in the long run, judged on its merits; is sought, consumed, and paid for in pretty accurate correspondence to its real worth. As soon as a workman begins to do good work, he begins to command the market; he can get his price, and be sure he will ask all he can get. There is small chance of a good workman going long unknown. How many mute, inglorious Miltons there may be in the world, I don't know; but I don't believe there are many mute, inglorious Pooles, and Worths, and Delmonicos. Notice, when any one has found what he thinks a clever artisan or furnisher, how anxiously he spreads the information, if only for the little vanity of discovery and the credit of being useful to his friends. And with the inflow of custom, of course comes a rise of prices in the individual case, as in the general market.

"You will tell me, no doubt, that the modest artisan who has a small shop, in a cheap locality, a small or inexpensive family, exceptional facilities for getting his raw material, and the like, can afford to undersell his 'swell' competitor, who has a more expensive establishment and appurtenances. But the simple fact is, that he doesn't; or if so, not for long. Why should he? The man who finds he can turn out as good a shoe, or sewing−machine, or grand piano, as any in the market, is pretty sure, in the first place, to get the customers, and then to ask the highest market price for his goods. After this, he is apt, at least, to forsake his more modest line of business, and turn 'swell' himself. If he stick to his quieter scale of outlay, that is just so much more in his pocket, but no saving to his customer.

"I used, I confess, to think differently, and wasted uncounted trouble in hunting up cheap furnishers. I have scolded about Broadway prices, and ransacked side streets and down−town lanes and corners for cheap tailors, restaurants, apothecaries, grocers, or what not, but always with much the same result. The gain in price was generally slight, the loss in quality, style, finish, durability, and so on, both constant and perceptible. When I occasionally found an article in some by−corner which could fairly be called a bargain, I found I had spent in fussing about it enough time and energy to earn the whole price several times over, — even at the very limited money value which my time bears to me" (glancing at a pile of manuscript on his writing−desk). "People don't sufficiently consider, in this matter," he went on, "how great is the value of mere insurance afforded by high−class, and therefore high−priced, establishments. If I can find, as practically I often can, a butcher who gives me the best of meat nineteen days out of twenty, it is worth a heavy percentage more to me to deal steadily with him at any prices within reason, than to try to bring down my expense account by buying of his cheaper and less responsible rivals, who give me a good article to−day, and then disappoint me to−morrow.

"And that brings me to another view of the matter. Beyond mere evident and momentary use, there are a multitude of more subtle considerations which often constitute the main value of the article; and in matters of higher utility and more aesthetic employment, are pretty sure to do so. Nervous waste and friction are the great bugbears of existence; nervous tonic and economy its prime blessings. And the things which most promote these refined advantages I have generally found to be costly at the outset; though, emphatically, cheapest in the long run. Take, for instance, the vulgar but very necessary business of eating. There are, all over the town, hosts of places where you are offered for a few shillings the same amount of mere ostensible beef and potatoes, salad and pudding, as you get at Delmonico's or 'The Brunswick,' for nearly as many dollars. But, granting that your economical dinner tastes as good as the dear one, — a large assumption, — and that it is equally nutritious, — a still greater, — next comes what I call the nervous element in the matter. I get my Nassau street meal in crush, noise, and hurry, heat and bad air. My waiter is careless or slovenly, my service uncomely or unclean, my whole surroundings uncomfortable. When I pay the outrageous prices of the 'swell' restaurant, I am buying not merely so much carbon and nitrogen, but shining glass and silver, snowy linen, cool fountains and green leaves, trained attendance and quiet, graceful company. The cheap 'feed' stays my hunger, but leaves me with a moral and aesthetic, if not a physical dyspepsia. The parti fin digests better, keeps me personally happy for an hour, and leaves me in good

humor and trim for the evening.

"And Simpson, the bank cashier, who lodged with his family just below me, used to chuckle at the notion of getting for a thousand a year, just as good an apartment as his head director, old Discount, who pays five at 'The Stevens.' But just look at the thing a moment. To get down town from Third avenue above Sixtieth street took Simpson ever so much more time in the morning and hurried him with his rising and his breakfast. Mrs. Simpson had to depend on the cars for all matters of shopping or calling, and, when she walked out, had to run the gauntlet of half a dozen outlying settlements of shabbiness, in which stables, coal−yards, grog−shops, oyster−saloons and tenement−houses were among the less disagreeable features. Anything like starting out, impromptu, of an evening for social visiting, theater or concert, was almost out of the question; and Mrs. Simpson, who had her own little social ambitions, found her visiting−list dropping off, because she was too far off the "beat" of her leisurely and fashionable acquaintance. Altogether, I should say, that the inconvenience and general vexation arising from the situation alone might have been worth two thousand a year to Simpson in mere worry, though in the simple matter of being comfortably and warmly housed, perhaps he was as well off as Discount."

"But it seems to me," I broke in, "that you are preaching a doctrine of unmitigated 'swelldom,' as you would call it yourself. To hear you, one would think that it was impossible to be respectable or comfortable without an outlay of fifteen or twenty thousand a year, that the honest fellow who has to live on three or four had no business among decent people, but must make up his mind to abject privation and humiliation for himself and his family. The lust of the eye and the pride of life, to say nothing of other forms of selfishness, bear a chief part in your social philosophy; and the beauty of simple living and honest content which you used to praise seems to have lost its value. Your doctrine, carried out to the bitter end, would be frightfully demoralizing. To make a handsome income would become the first and whole duty of man, and the poor fellow who can't might just as well put an end to himself at once!"

"Softly, my lad! " said the Pedagogue gravely. "You exaggerate my statement, or rather, you misconceive it. I am not talking morals, but socio−dynamics, as I call it. I didn't say, — did I? — that all these considerations which affect our choice in methods of living are highly laudable or philosophic. I only say that they exist, that they are with most men prime motors in their efforts after the means of expense, and their regulation of the expense when the means are gained. No, no, you mustn't misinterpret me. My system allows plenty of room for frugality, simplicity, good sense, pluck, and self−denial. It doesn't follow that it's necessary, or even desirable, to have all the splendors and luxuries of life, only you mustn't deny that they are splendid and luxurious. What you can't have, go without, of course, like a man, but don't make yourself absurd by trying to believe or make your neighbor believe that you can get around plain natural laws, and buy any good thing without paying its full price in hard cash or hard work. And that reminds me that there is a high moral side to our talk which I have hardly touched on. When we get above mere personal habit and expenditure, and come to education, literature, art, civil administration, government — ah! there we are on different ground. There, I should like to show you, some day when you have time, that there not only is no such thing as cheapness, but never can be or ought to be. I think it might be easy to prove by the simplest economic principles, that a cheap picture must be an abomination, cheap architecture a sham, cheap erudition an absurdity — that we are misgoverned by cheap legislators, misrepresented by cheap diplomates, mistaught by cheap educators, and misled by cheap books. I could illustrate — but bless me! my dear fellow," he broke off, looking at the clock, "I have nearly talked away your evening, and it's time for you to start. And see here!" he called out from the landing, "take my advice and don't take the street−cars. Get a cab at the corner. It's drizzling, you know, and it wont pay to have your first waltz with Miss Gunnybags in a damp tie and muddy boots!

THE LAST PINE.

Where the fallow−colored hill
Juts against a cloudy wreath —
Gray the sky, the ground beneath
White with shreds from winter's quill —

Holds a pine of giant girth
All alone a patience grim
In the ghastly cold, the dim
Sifted light that wraps the earth

Like a soldier strictly charged
Never from his watch to yield:
Long ago was hushed the field,
All his comrades long discharged;

Solid hangs the icy tear,
Numb his arms with creeping frost,
And his senses four are lost
In a bitter strife to bear:

Yet unmoved he keepeth post,
Dim of sight but list'ning still,
Lest across the lonely hill
Call the bugles of the host.

Once upon a silent day
Heaved the tree such breaths profound,
Air was carded into sound;
Thus the pine was heard to say:

"One by one,
Though they towered high and wide,
Sank my brothers by my side;
Fell away my friends of youth
Death on them had never ruth.
One by one
Dropped my warming arms of green,
Till I stand of branches lean;

Straight the woodpecker may shoot
>From my crown to knotted root:
All is done!

"I am past.
Once I dwelt with fellows dear,
Once I felt the green sod near;
Year by year
In the choir of our wood
Crashed a singer where he stood,
And the boughs that rained forever,
Lowest first, then upward ever.