

SHODDY ARISTOCRACY.

FREQUENTLY, if not generally, the undercurrents in political and social life are of far more ultimate importance in determining a nation's destiny than the well-boomed "movements." If I were the editor of a big newspaper, I would have a column headed "Undercurrents," on which I would keep a shrewd man engaged in culling from the press of the world, reflective of what people are thinking and saying and doing, not in great senates and assemblies, but in small coteries and social salons. We owe our very existence to an apple eaten by an inquisitive woman on a summer afternoon; and most epochs have been born of episodes. The study of undercurrents would often save us from the surprise we feel on opening our morning papers and finding large-typed telegrams about collapses of foreign governments, commercial disasters, and other violent crises in the affairs of men. Bolts do not shoot from out the blue, and the world will not come to an end in the twinkling of an eye.

There is in the *New York Truth*, an American society paper, note of an undercurrent too amusing to be permitted to pass without comment. Fortune-building has been going on apace on the other side of the Atlantic, and millionaires may almost be said to be "three a penny," in Gilbertian phrase. And, says the *New York* paper:—

"Luxury once obtained, the craving for distinction soon follows. A man with the revenue of a dozen dukes does not relish the humble title of plain mister, and if he were modest enough of himself, his wife would not permit him to rest content. Even now the great dames of our republic move heaven, earth and hell to buy titles for their daughters, and this is but a first stage towards carving titles for themselves."

And there is talk of laying a corner-stone of the future Empire. The very mention of such a thing is enough to make Paine and Washington turn in their graves, but it is not only mentioned but seriously proposed. There is an unmistakable undercurrent of desire of a ginger-bread titled aristocracy. What foolery or knavery is this? Has old *Aesop* any readers in the Republic? and is the fable of the daw that strutted in the peacock's feathers forgotten?

There is nothing more contemptuously ridiculous than the spectacle of a young and vigorous nation, with a history of its own to carve out for itself, wishing to make itself a mere imitative echo of an older form of civilisation. If our British aristocracy were merely a thing of to-day and yesterday, it would not be worth preserving for an instant. But it is a picturesque, powerful, and reverent institution, the growth of centuries, the effervescence of a mighty past, having its roots deep down in a glorious history. Its founders became aristocrats because they possessed great qualities which made them stand above their fellows—qualities of courage and daring, of might of arm and strength of will. They may have known little of what we call ethics, but according to their times they were pre-eminently great. The history of the British aristocracy is a history of great human character, whether we esteem it in all its phases or not. It grew as the nation grew. But what could a ready-made, scrambled-together American aristocracy be but a shoddy, spavined, cockeyed caricature, coronetted with dollars and robed with greenbacks, and stuck up like an Aunt Sally at a country fair, to be shied at by the satirists of every nation in Christendom?

What the American people want is not an aristocracy of millionaire tallow candlemakers and soap-boilers, grocers and oilmen, stock-jobbers and railway speculators, but an aristocracy of character. Deservedly or not, American people have made for themselves a reputation for excessive acuteness, cunning, and grasping avariciousness. If there were more character and less cash in the Republic, probably we should hear nothing of a strong undercurrent of desire for a shoddy aristocracy. Meanwhile English papers might render the States a service if they would prevent any very considerable portion of the people there from making further fools of themselves in this direction, by laughing at them.

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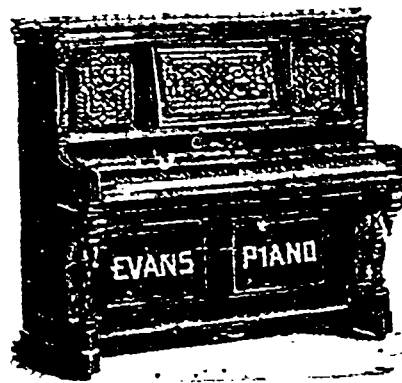
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