

THE PHILOSOPHY OF DYE.

A TALE.

EDITED BY ARTHUR FRATHERSTONE.

PART I.

VANITY.

He was walking in the Burlington Arcade. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. He paused to contemplate his imperfections in one of those lengthy mirrors that adorn the pilasters between the shops. He was scarcely satisfied with the result. He might be eight-and-thirty. He was exceedingly handsome. But one indication of approaching age marred his redolent beauty, and this was his very grey hair. For my part I thought it improved him: but then the hair did not happen to be mine; and, consequently, I was not a judge. Whether the hair in itself was an ornament, from its grey disposition, or not was less a question to my friend than the age which the colour disclosed. And as, of course, I could not possibly tell what age he might wish to appear, I was only a judge of the colour, from my point of view, not his. One thing, at least, was certain, that, whatever the colour of the hair, it adorned a head and countenance which were strikingly serene and fine. Not strictly, perhaps, intellectual; not the head of a Newton or a Locke, but the pledge of distinctive character, with largeness of soul, if not mind. The head was a head which said—and the countenance said the same thing—"I think, but not to great purpose. I have the highest ambition to be something great, but not the force to achieve it. I aspire to ideas beyond the reach of any one, and therefore necessarily of myself. I have the finest conceptions of the infinitely Should-Be; but my achievements are abnormally normal. In short, I am a man of theory, with just nine hundred a year."

Such a man was Algernon Stapleton.

He united the weak and the strong to a point that was absolutely typical. At breakfast he would originate the most splendid ideas, which by dinner he had totally forgotten. He would begin a book on some giant subject, and write the first page or preface, but the effort so exhausted his fund of power that completion was out of the question. He would plan a method for relieving the poor from every hardship and wrong; but he worked out the method as he walked to his tailor, and it ended in his ordering a coat. He would arrive at the conclusion that a lucid intellect depends on ascetic life; but he encouraged the view over a bottle of champagne, and woke next morning with a headache. Thus it will be seen that, though a superior man, he was eminently wanting in ballast. And this is perhaps, that popular want which is suggested by the Burlington Arcade.

I joined my friend Stapleton on this pregnant morning; but first I watched him from afar as he gazed into the mirror, adoring. (The reader will have noticed in the Burlington Arcade a popular weakness which pervades the loungers, to look at themselves in the mirrors.) Possibly, however, he might be saying to himself, "Mon Dieu, comme je me regrette!" Whichever it was, he stood long. Bewailment or pleasure was distinctly spun out beyond the limits of taste. He might vastly admire his elegant form; if so, that concerned but himself. He might profoundly deplore the freckles of age; if so, the public would not care for it. The occupation of pondering oneself in a mirror, though adapted to the interior closet, is quite unfitted to an arcade; and many persons obviously thought so while passing poor Stapleton on the Walk.

I stood to contemplate. I was anxious to see how long human vanity—or, let us put it, human regrets—could keep a man staring into a mirror in the middle of the Burlington Arcade. Vanity, we know, is the master passion of most of the greatest of men; but vanity that advertises itself in a mirror is an error in tactic and taste.

Presently, while still he was wrapped in self-depreciation or praise, there peered beside him into the mirror a very beautiful girl. She was exactly seventeen years old. (I knew it.) She smiled with exquisite sweetness, with adolescent play and innocence, as she contemplated the glass—or him. She looked into Stapleton's face. She said to him by her eyes, by her smile and light, "O vain, but handsome man!" Stapleton caught the observation. He read it in the syllables of the face. Imaged and writ on that lovely countenance, those words were very quill-penned.

He turned to look. As he did so the face moved away; and, joining a lady of more mature years, the girl remarked to her friend: "What a remarkably handsome man that must have been—before his hair turned grey."

II.

Stapleton heard that remark.

I was standing, perhaps, three yards from him just as the words were uttered.

I was anxious that he should not suspect that I had been the spectator of his folly. My conscience smote me for not having abbreviated the period of his reckless advertisement. I ought to have stopped him from publishing to the world the fact that he was so human. He might, perhaps, be doing what many would have done had they had the courage to be silly; but vanity hides vanity with the vainest of veils, which, indeed, is the vainest part of all.

Now here I have a remark to make, which I am sure the reader will pardon. I was desperately in love myself. Moreover, I was in love with the very young lady who had made this comment on Stapleton. I had met her at an evening party just one month before. I too well remembered her. Alas! she had forgotten me. The reader will therefore acutely appreciate my own very painful sensibilities. Had she deigned to admire me, as I peered into the mirror, reflecting, it is certain I should have easily forgiven her; but nothing can be more galling, in love, than to hear another admired.

Stapleton, when he heard her remark, stood for a moment mute. He seemed lost in the tremendous power of the flattery plus the reproach. Then, giving utterance to the terrible echo, which came up from the depths of his soul, he murmured feebly but sadly, "Before his hair turned grey!"

It was done. With those words had sunk into his soul a new regret and ambition. He would dye! But one thing was wanting, as she had said, to complete his remarkable beauty—dark hair.

He turned. As he turned he saw me. Transfixed with the new idea which that moment had entered his soul, he seemed as if hardly he knew me. With a gaze that was absent, yet meaning, an expression that was painfully lost, he said—not one single word.

He took my arm. I was silent. I waited till he should

disclose the abysmal purpose of his mind. I suspected exactly what was coming. I knew my friend Stapleton, and I could truthfully augur the current operations of his will. I had not one minute to wait. With a burst of unwonted inspiration—unwonted in the rareness of the theme—he asked me, spasmodically and fiercely, "What is your opinion of Dye?"

I was equal to the greatness of the occasion. I replied, very briefly but emphatically, "Bosh!"

"You are an idiot!" he continued. (That was rude.)

"Hair-dye is a symbol. It is the material rendering of a popular principle and practice. All men dye—but not their hair. It is purely a question of what they dye. Every man and woman dyes something. Some dye their characters—most do. Some dye their fortunes, that they may appear to be richer than they are. Some dye their vices, that they may pass for being good. Some dye their parents, their origin, their family. Some dye their profession, their business, their trade. The shopman dyes his goods by false announcement. The barrister dyes his client, his cause, or his defence. The Member of Parliament dyes his politics, his speeches, his addresses. The clergyman dyes his sermons, his views, and even piety. Women dye their morals—by propriety. Professors dye their ignorance. Merchants dye their cargoes—to make big fortunes. Dye, sir, is the principle of life. I am astonished at your superficiality. I should have thought you a man of greater observation than to monosyllabize your contempt of dye by 'Bosh!' Why, every one who has studied life and men must know that, without the use of dye, society could not hold together for even half an hour. Men would be kicked out of every drawing-room who should dare to show themselves without it. Pulpits would be empty; Parliament unvoiced; the bar unswayed; the shops all shut; the City waste. Sir, the man who dyes his hair pays but his humble compliment to the supreme conviction of the age—that man was born to dye, and that without it he cannot live."

(I have said that Stapleton was a remarkable man.)

"No one," I replied, "is better able than yourself to poetize a folly."

"Now there you wrong me again. Folly is the absence of thought. What I have said is reason. It is the laying bare the great foundations of the Real. You are not a shallow man, and yet you scoff at Fact."

"Pardon me," I answered, "it is one thing to admit a fact, another to approve it. You talk of dyeing as a merit, whereas at most, as it appears to myself, it can be only a veil."

"I am not prepared to agree with you," responded the gifted Stapleton. "Society has its science, which is the mutual adjustment of things as they are, with the least amount of offence. Admit that the Fall has permeated every rank and stratum of society, and it then becomes a duty to protect ourselves by seeming to be perfect. We are not perfect. Every man and woman is imperfect—mentally, ethically imperfect. Now, moral dye is that religious substitute which takes the place of rank disedification. Good heavens! you would not have men seem what they are, nor women either? You must have dye. The only question is, how to use it with the least amount of lying."

"But what has this to do with hair-dye?" I remarked. "Your rhapsodies are carrying you away from your text, and landing you in visionary ethics of most impossible nonsense."

"Ah! you have no mind," he continued, very much irritated at my comment. "You cannot grasp a principle. What I am trying to drive into your head—but you are so amazingly dull—is the great and deep-lying truth that all men dye, and that the very most fictional part of their dyeing is that they deny it. Why, take that poor unfortunate woman, Madame Rachel. That woman was a type of London. She was the very apostle of the public truth that all men dye, but that none have the courage to confess it. She ought to have had a statue erected to her in Trafalgar Square, by an admiring, a grateful, and an appreciative nation. She ought to have been homaged by both Houses of Parliament as the great Pythagoras of dye, who had the courage to follow as a profession what others secretly espouse. She boldly proclaimed—what every one practises—the principle of dye. She worshipped, though at a mighty distance, the dukes and duchesses; the senators, bishops, and high clergy; the merchant princes, leaders of fashion, and the bar, in daring, but in the most humble manner, to offer homage to their fictions by practising her own. Madame Rachel was the great apostle of the age. She taught by symbols, yet proclaimed the truth. 'You dye,' she said to the nineteenth century; 'permit me just to dye your faces, since you have already dyed, without my aid, your hearts and consciences, your minds, your morals, and your souls.'"

"I think that a glass of sherry," I replied, "would be refreshing after that."

And leaving the Arcade we strolled back to my chambers, and pursued the soft amenities of life in two very comfortable arm-chairs.

III.

Now, shall I confess it? Yes, I began this story expressly to make reparation, and though I have lingered long upon the threshold, it is only to show what a superior man poor Stapleton was, and therein to exalt my own meritorious confession.

I saw he was determined to dye—but why?

The truth was, that beautiful girl who had seen him in the Burlington Arcade had got into his head—and hair. He had heard the remark, "What a handsome man that must have been, before his hair turned grey," and, being a man of inductive thought, or deductive, productive, or what you will, he instantly determined to dye. That beautiful little face—oh, it was so beautiful!—peering beside him in the mirror, had fascinated his head—and hair. He loved that girl! (This was very painful to me.) I did not tell him that I knew her. I am sorry for this now. I thought he would never discover her—never see her again; and as I had been introduced, and passed an evening in her society, I was secretly decided that nothing should escape me to let out who she was. Stapleton could talk of no one else. "I have seen," he said, so soon as we were seated in my chambers, "the most beautiful face this morning I ever saw in my life." And then he went off to describe her features, her ineffable charm and youth, her hair, that was glittering gold (O pregnant and disastrous theme!) her childish way and innocence, and her exquisite pettiness of style. I listened as one who was inhaling from afar the perfumes of an unknown garden. "If I could get an introduction to her," he exclaimed, "I would sacrifice half my income." (He might sacrifice the whole if he liked, but he should not be introduced by me.)

The very next morning I was walking in the Burlington Arcade—fascinated, no doubt, by yesterday—when I saw, to my unspeakable horror, Stapleton talking to her! In

conceivable wildness and effrontery! Not merely gazing, not merely imbibing, from a respectful and contemplative distance, the exhalations of her pictorial beauty but actually talking, conversing, laughing! Oh! this was too much. How could he have got an introduction? The thing was absolutely impossible. I must knock him down.

"Ah! Walter," he said to me, with masterly cheeriness and complacency, "how do you do?"

Now, Christianity has some excellent ideas. Forgiving an enemy, and loving him, is, of course, a beautiful precept. To have forgiven Stapleton, and to have loved him, at that particular moment would have been, doubtless, superbly heroic. There may be men who could do it. I do not say there are not, but I most emphatically assert that I am not of the kind. I should reverence the man with almost worship who could rise to such mystic level; canonization would be inadequate to his merits. But as a matter of fact—and I can speak only for myself—I am not the man to whom posterity will point as having achieved that incredible perfection.

It transpired that the lady had dropped her purse, that Stapleton had picked it up, that her gratitude was almost boundless, that Stapleton had used his opportunity, that his volubility of utterance had been pushed to its utmost, that politeness—of which he was a master—had swung open the gates of acquaintance, and that his extraordinary charm (for I deny not he had it) had broken down barriers of decorum, and trampled into dust introduction.

I was savage as virtue when it finds itself galled, as meekness when it loses its aim. The Decalogue had a right to complain of my temper on that wretched morning. I was inspired by one simple feeling—revenge!

And this was the way I took it.

IV.

We were sitting next morning in Stapleton's rooms, discussing personal beauty.

Stapleton, who was always superb in his manipulation of nonsensical themes, hazarded, in regard of dye, some new and startling views.

This was exactly what I wanted. Stapleton, as he was, stood supreme among conquering men. His soft grey hair gave a tone and mellowness to a face that was brimful of soul. It was just such a face as a girl loves to look on; parental in the breadth of its heart, juvenile in the instinct of life, buoyant with infantine hilarity, yet nurtured with an ocean of calm. The combination is seductive and rare. Stapleton had it.

I knew it was useless for me to fight against such a man as Stapleton. I might be younger by at least fifteen years; but what have years to do with conquest when Stapletons mar the way? Stapleton could talk; Stapleton could induce; Stapleton could ravish the ears of a girl with flooding power and thought. I could not. I could only do—what most men can do—talk well enough to let out the secret that I had very little in me to let out. I could reveal by effort the wantings of mind. I was not Stapleton: O hated but gifted enemy! how shall I crush you in the dust?

One way lay open before me—to make poor Stapleton ridiculous.

The thing was ready to hand. He would dye: he should.

I remarked that morning as we sat in Stapleton's chairs, but two days after he had seen The Beauty: "The only thing, Stapleton, that spoils your appearance is the equivocal colour of your hair. If you were to dye your hair you would be the serene man that could sun the humanity of town."

"You think so? I am glad to have your opinion. I was afraid you would be adverse to the merits of Art, at least to that branch which is tinctural."

"Adverse! I approve it. What you were talking of two days ago, was dye considered as a virtue. Therein I was unable to follow you; but when you place its merits on a purely art footing I am with you *to the hilt*. Dye is the renaissance of age, the rejuvenization of time. When successfully pursued it has merit—the merit of conquering nature."

Stapleton looked at me, incredulous. He fancied I was rallying his weakness; but I preserved equanimity of face, though I was glorying in future fiasco.

"Now what dye should you chiefly recommend as an incipient essay in art?" continued my tincturing friend. "Rosseter has merit on the score of its principle, which is to 'restore' (professedly) not dye. Of course that is nonsense; but the idea of 'restoring' is, perhaps, less repulsive to the artistic and natural mind than the sudden transition from white to jet-black, proposed by transmuting compounds."

I replied, only delighted that he should dye at all, that I had a great regard for Rosseter; that I was at school with one of his sons (Heaven forgive the invention!); that I considered him a virtuous man, and above mere charlatan chicanery. "Rosseter be it," I gaily advanced. "I will try a bottle with you; it will amuse me, but not change my hair."

"Sir," (wrote Stapleton, snatching up his pen) "you will be so good as to send me, secured from public observation, a bottle of your Hair Restorer, for which I enclose three and ninepence."

"Your obedient Servant,"

ALGERNON STAPLETON.

"To Rosseter, Esq." This letter I posted that morning. Oh! would that I had not done so.

PART II.

FIASCO.

I was alarmed on receiving about three days afterwards the following letter from Stapleton:

"Dear Walter,"

"Come at once. I am very, very ill."

"Yours,"

A. S."

I hastened to Stapleton's rooms. There I found him stretched on a sofa, looking the picture of misery. "Good gracious!" I said, "what has happened?"

He gurgled and gasped a reply. His face was expressive of utter disgust, even more than of positive pain. He asked me—and these were the first words he spoke—"What are the ingredients of Rosseter's dye—do you know?"

I said I believed it was an innocent compound of sulphur, and water, and glycerine, with a sediment of acetate of lead to secure the colour. I could not speak as a *savant*, for I did not understand such matters; but my opinion, though feebly gleaned, was that acetate of lead was a poison, if taken in very large quantities. From external application, however, no sort of harm could be dreaded.