

**THE GLASS OF
FASHION; SOME
SOCIAL REFLECTIONS**

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The glass of fashion; some social reflections by Harold Begbie

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HAROLD BEGBIE

**THE GLASS OF
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THE GLASS OF FASHION

SOME SOCIAL REFLECTIONS

BY

A GENTLEMAN WITH A DUSTER

AUTHOR OF "THE MIRRORS OF DOWNING STREET"

How old is that?

The cymbals crash,
And the dancers walk;
With long silk stockings,
And arms of chalk,
Butterfly skirts,
And white breasts bare;
And shadows of dead men
Watching 'em there.

—*Alfred Noyes.*

"You ask me if I am going to 'The Masquerade' ?
I am at it: Circumspice."—*Cornelius O'Dowd.*

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PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

IN a letter to Mary Gladstone, the painter Burne-Jones, who was also an idealist, broke into lamentation over the quarrels and trivial animosities which too often exist between men of genius.

My dear [he exclaimed], if twelve of these men would hold together for one ten years the whole aspect of the world would be changed—and twelve men did once hold together and the whole face of the world *was* changed.

Gift of Dr. E. C. Moore

What might not happen to this world, let us ask ourselves, if the two great Commonwealths, which have inherited, with the language of Shakespeare and Wyclif, the moral idealism of Milton and Lincoln, held together for a generation—not for any political end, however worthy, nor to impose their military power upon mankind, even in the cause of universal disarmament, but merely to define, make manifest, and exalt the moral values of human life?

Because I believe such a unity is possible, nay, is in the nature of things, I, heartily wishful for the moral comradeship of America and earnestly seeking the

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intellectual alliance of America, venture in true friendliness and with all due respect to address this personal word to the American reader of my book, *The Glass of Fashion*.

I would say to him: Since the questions with which this pamphlet deals are questions of importance to your country as well as to mine, do not, I pray you, let its English setting stand in the way of your American attention. For the same contagion of materialism which is attempting to destroy us is also attempting to destroy you, and the same depression of a false science which is weighing down the human spirit in these British Islands is also weighing down the human spirit in your United States of America.

You, too, have your Repingtons and Margots; and you, too, have the same heroic but ineffectual goodness which here in England vainly seeks to stem the monstrous flood of modern animalism. We are both of us cursed by the same inheritance from the last century, the inheritance of a scientific falsehood—that “nightmare of waste and death,” as Samuel Butler called it, which is “as baseless as it is repulsive.” We are both held by the same philosophical paralysis which has crept over the human mind ever since the dark and disfiguring shadow of Darwinism fell upon the fields of life. In both of us the cancer of cynicism (that arrest of the moral tissues, that check in spiritual development) preys upon the divine faculties of our humanity whereby

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alone we can respond to the joy, wonder, and beauty of existence. With you, as with us, life has lost its way, and neither for you nor for us can there be hope of coming into our true inheritance until we have recovered those title-deeds to immortality which our fathers threw away when they set out to wander in the wilderness of this false materialism.

If, then, there is hope of a Renaissance in England, there must also be hope of a Renaissance in America. And the same spirit which can give this new birth to England can also give a new birth to America. Therefore let us take counsel together, and if we come to a like decision in this great matter, let us set out as one spirit to change the face of the world.

Now this is my conviction: Out of the stagnant fen of materialism into which humanity seems at this time to be fast sinking, with all the glories of its mechanical achievements and all the splendours of its earliest poetic enthusiasms, like a sun that has had its day, we can be lifted only by one of those great waves of moral enlightenment which in the first century of our dispensation saved mankind from the darkness of paganism and in the sixteenth century rescued Europe from the clutches of an iron dogmatism.

If we would live we must overthrow the false science which is destroying us, as the fathers of Christianity overthrew paganism, and the fathers of the Renaissance overthrew authority. In both of those great epochs of

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the past, humanity escaped from the prison-house of a tyranny into the open country of freedom. Life, feeling itself at the point of death, flung itself far forward into an untrodden future. With us it must be the same. We cannot niggle with the oppression which is destroying us; we must throw it off, throw it far from us, and go forward to a new dawn in human history.

To this end I suggest that we should look at Fashion, which shows us the set of the human tide more strikingly than any other manifestation of contemporary thought. I suggest that we should take Fashion seriously. I suggest that we should take the measure of the leaders of mankind, those who set the fashion of daily life, whose influence is the moral climate in which we breathe and form our opinions. I argue that if their measure does not square with the highest hopes of the human race, and does not square with the deepest needs of the human spirit, then we must put those leaders away from us, and find others more worthy of man's place in the universe. This can be done only by right-thinking, but right-thinking which is militant.

With you, as with us, the fashion of daily life is set by those who have sacrificed to a false science, almost without thought, the one great secret of joy, namely, *faith in a creative purpose, faith in man's immortality*. It is that secret we must recover for mankind, and we can recover it only by making remorseless war on this false science. It is useless to make war on luxury, or to

make war on folly, or to make war on the odious ugliness of materialism. We must make war on the thought which brings such spiritual malformations into existence. Right thinking, armed with the sword of truth, must destroy wrong-thinking drunk with the dope of Circean lies.

Our first reason for making war on that false thought is this: it is destroying us; our second reason, that it is not true.

Darwinism not only justifies the sensualist at the trough and Fashion at her glass; it justifies Prussianism at the cannon, and Bolshevism at the prison-door. If Darwinism be true, if Mind is to be driven out of the universe and accident accepted as a sufficient cause for all the majesty and glory of physical nature, then there is no crime of violence, however abominable in its circumstances and, however cruel in its execution which cannot be justified by success, and no triviality, no absurdity of Fashion, which deserves a censure: more—there is no act of disinterested love and tenderness, no deed of self-sacrifice and mercy, no aspiration after beauty and excellence, for which a single reason can be adduced in logic.

On these grounds alone Darwinism is condemned; but it is condemned also on scientific grounds. Darwinism explains only the least interesting changes and modifications in physical structure: it does not explain the movement of life or its manifest direction towards