

At times the author has not much to say that has not been said before, but he usually has something, and that something is worth seeking in his pages.

Mr. Newman's best trait is his candor. It is probably the best trait that any critical writer can possess. It is fatal to critical honesty for the author to be committed to a theory or a plea. Mr. Newman

is refreshing in his confession of facts. He accepts them and reasons from them, but never tries to ignore or overthrow them because they war against his own notions. His scholarship is good and his point of view established favorably for perspective. He writes frankly of old and new masters, and his comments are stimulating to the mind of the reader.

AS TO OLD HOUSES

BY EVELYN SCHUYLER SCHAEFFER

SOMETIMES it seems a pity that we cannot have a Society for the Prevention of Indignity to Old Houses. They might be taken apart and their elements redistributed — anticipating nature; or in some cases they might be burned. But, since some of us will always love money, and the rest of us will always need it, we are not likely to do anything which will entail a financial loss.

Some years ago I used to see in a Southern city an old family mansion, decayed and melancholy, its front door gazing sadly down the open strip between the cocky little houses which had been built on what had been its lawn, and its windows looking into the back yards of those houses. The people who had owned it, one of the former "first families," still lived in the city and kept boarders in a rented house. I wondered if they could ever bring themselves to walk that way. I am reminded of this by my recent visit to my friend, Miss Cynthia, whose house burned down a short time ago.

On my way to call on her I passed the old place, and, leaning on the fence, watched the men at work, removing the débris. The ground had already been sold. The flagged walk leading up to the house was still there, and the plants and shrubs still blossomed and smelt sweet in the long flower-beds on each side; but

the box borders were broken down and the beds were trampled. The bench under the lilacs, where so many courtships were carried on, now served to hold workmen's coats and dinner pails; and the arbor vitæ hedge, which had screened us so well from the passers-by, had great gaps here and there. I remembered the good times I had had there in my many visits as child and as young girl: the front parlor, with its formal air of readiness for callers, and the back parlor with its open fire and easy-going, inviting aspect; the library with its mahogany bookcases, and the dining-room with the large round table, and the good things that used to come in from the big kitchen; and the two spare rooms over the front and back parlors. It was a matter of religion with that generation to reserve their best apartments for their guests. There stood the widest and heaviest mahogany bureaus, with their drawers, big and little, their narrow tops primly set out with starched white dimity covers, the marble-topped washstands with the finest sets of sprigged china bowls and pitchers, the chintz-covered chairs and the window-curtains to match. Who of us does not know those spare rooms of the past?

Nowadays customs are different. Long visits are no longer the fashion, and we take the best rooms for ourselves. Some

of us overflow into our guest rooms (we don't call them spare rooms any more), and fill up the closets and bureau drawers. A few of us do not empty them for guests, except a few hooks, perhaps, and one bureau drawer; a *very* few of us simply lock all the drawers, and when our unsuspecting guest, fancying that she is for the time being in her own room, tries to open one to lay in some of her belongings, she finds herself a stranger in a strange land and restricted to the narrow confines of her trunk. This house had always been large enough for everybody, and for everybody's belongings. Every orphan niece or cousin, to the remotest degree, had come here to be married, and had had the famous wedding-cake, made from the family recipe and baked in the old brick oven. I myself — but I was getting an unmanageable lump in my throat, and I hurried away to call on Miss Cynthia.

I found her, alas, in a boarding-house, but wonderfully unchanged. She is the dearest little old lady in the world, and so pretty, with her white side-curls, blue eyes, delicately finished features and fair skin, the cheeks faintly tinged with pink, — last vestige of the roses of youth. The tiny lace cap which is her concession to old age, and the white kerchief over the plainest of black gowns, complete an effect which is at once precise and exquisite. She took me into her room, where were a few familiar things, saved from the flames.

"No, you must n't pity me," she said, in answer to the look on my face. "My dear, I thank God every day for that fire. Let me tell you. You can imagine, perhaps, how I loved that old house — I — the last of my family. Nobody nearer than cousins, my dear. Not much like what it was when you used to visit us." She sighed, and was silent for a moment.

"Well," she went on, "the house never seemed empty to me, — I could almost fancy them all there, — and I kept it all just as it used to be. But my income grew smaller and smaller, — interest is so low now, — and it was harder and harder to get along. I did a great

deal of work myself, and I did n't really mind. I don't look very strong, but I always say that what I lack in strength I make up in determination, — and the old house took the place of father and mother and brothers and sisters to me. So you see I did n't mind; and I expected to stay there to the end of my days. But then came that failure, and I had no income at all left, and so of course I knew I must part with the house.

"Oh, I have friends, and Robert in particular, — you know his mother and I were great friends. Well, he wanted me to stay there and let him take care of me. It was sweet of Robert. But you know, my dear, I was n't brought up that way. You remember mother. I could n't accept it possibly, as long as there was any other way. So I said I would sell. It was n't so very easy, after all, for people seem to like to build their own houses, especially large ones, and I was afraid the place would have to be cut up into lots, — fancy our house elbowed into a back yard! But at last Robert found a man and brought him and his wife to look at it. I took them about, and they liked it so much that I was pleased and more than half forgot what they had come for. I think I must be growing old. And then the woman, — she was a big, fair, stupid woman, the kind they call 'motherly.' Now *why*, my dear, do they always call a large woman motherly? Mother was small. This big woman walked into mother's room. It was just as it had always been when she was alive. Do you remember it?"

Indeed I did. A room typical of that little old lady, Miss Cynthia's mother. A touch of austerity in its crisp, immaculate white curtains and covers and primly set chairs and tables, and more than a hint of gayety in the Dresden ornaments of the mantel and dressing-table. I could shut my eyes and see the climbing white rose thrusting its blossoms in at the window where the old lady sat with her book on her knee.

"Well," pursued Miss Cynthia, "she went and looked out of the south window,

and she said, 'I shall take this room for my nursery.' Then I knew what it was going to be to sell the house. However, it had to be done, and I went to work to get ready. You never saw anything like that attic, and what to do with the things I did n't know. Things that nobody else could care much for, and things that I did n't want anybody else to have. I gave away cradles and cribs and little chairs to the Children's Home, — I rather like to have the poor little children use them, — and out in the back yard I made a bonfire of my own youth, — dolls and ball dresses all burned together. But the letters were the worst — and it was they that set fire to the house. You never saw so many. Letters from nobody in particular, you know; not the kind to be kept as valuable records, just the unimportant letters that go so far to make the happiness of a family, and that ought to be destroyed as soon as they are answered. But somehow we always found it so much easier to put everything in the attic. For weeks I spent my evenings looking them over and burning them in the fireplaces. It was pretty dreary work. I thought I was very careful, but the last night I was so tired and discouraged that I suppose I failed somewhat in caution, though I don't know how. At any rate, I woke up and found the house on fire. We saved the portraits and silver and some other things, — most of the things that I had left in my will to my cousins and their children; but last of all, before I went downstairs for the last time, I took a candle and went into mother's room and said good-by to it. I did n't touch a thing — I just shut the door and left it to the kind fire. It's as real to me as ever, but no one else can go into it.

"And now I feel," she concluded, "that the old house is safely laid to rest out of harm's way — that it and all the memories which were bound up in it are beyond desecration. I shall not live forever, and it is such a comfort to have it all settled before I die. It is the nearest thing possible to taking it with me."

But we cannot all have our houses burn when we are done with them, and our problem still confronts us, — these houses which are so much more permanent than we. We abandon them and leave them to their fate; and if it is because we cannot help it, if we care, we stay away forever from the place that knew us of old.

And it is not only houses, but less bulky belongings, that trouble us, — Things. For we do not all possess old family houses, but we are all subject to the tyranny of Things. As if it were not enough to break our hearts over people, — over death, separation, and misfortune, — we must needs be fond of Things as well, which certainly adds something to the hardships of life. For Things, while outlasting men, — who of us has not felt that poignancy of wonder that a bit of wood or paper should outlast the hand whose touch gave it its value? — yet are subject to many accidents of loss or breakage and are, moreover, apt at times, dear as they are, to become such an incubus as to make their possession more trying than their lack. If we take them from the houses of which they have grown to be a part, and place them in strange surroundings, it seems like offering them an indignity, and for a time we feel uncomfortable in their presence. I think Miss Cynthia was wise when she closed the door of her mother's room and left it to the fire.

One comes back to the old, trite, yet ever-recurring reflections on the incongruities of life, and thinks how, ever since man ceased to be a nomad, his progress in civilization has been marked by greater accumulations of impedimenta and vaster heaps of débris; how we spend our best efforts of mind on our bodies; and how, from this Cult of the Material, we pass at a jump into a condition which, so far as we know, or fancy we know, anything about it, is an immaterial existence, and yet, we imagine, a superior existence to this. Meantime we continue to be fond of our Things and to mourn over the fallen estate of our old houses.

THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

A READER'S CONFESSIONS

During my boyhood I could never eat peas. It was beyond me to imagine how anybody could eat them. Beans? — yes, indeed, that was another story. In the green stage, both beans and pods, they were among the choicest of summer delicacies. Baked beans, too (but I think we said “bake beans,” as we surely said “string beans,” and as to this day I say “roast beef,” not “roasted beef” — what is grammar between courses?), — baked beans, too, I ate, though with something less of relish. But peas — faugh! I would as soon have eaten I know not what.

It may have been “a childish ignorance;” there were plenty to tell me so; but to all such my reply was ready: “They don't *taste* good.”

And now, a certain number of years having elapsed, peas to my better instructed palate are nothing less than a luxury. To what was the change due? That is to ask more than I can answer. You may say that Time, which is supposed to make us over new once in so often, brought the alteration about. Or you may say it was Destiny. What *I* say is only this: that some years ago, I have no recollection how or when, I happened upon the discovery that old things were passed away, and what I formerly distasted now tasted good. As far as the appetizing nature of peas is concerned, this is all I know on earth, and all I need to know.

Other similar gastronomic revolutions I have experienced in the course of my long career at the table. And all have been welcome. A new dish is a new pleasure, and marks a date. Every one does its modest but appreciable part to keep life from degenerating into that tedious thing, an old story. Perhaps every one contributes its mite to keep the wheels

a little longer running. A varied diet is good for us, the doctors say. They know very little about it, I suspect, but it is a point in favor of their theory, I must admit, that Nature seems to have taken it upon herself to insure a varied diet.

Well, the life is more than meat, and I have spoken of peas and beans, not in the way of allegory, to be sure, yet not for their own sakes, neither, — though both are spoken of in a more than respectable connection, unless I misremember, in the best of old books, — but as a convenient and becoming prelude to a paragraph or two touching revolutions in taste of another and perhaps more elevated sort, — I mean in the matter of books.

One of the most striking of these, in my own case, has to do with the *Sentimental Journey*. It was perhaps fifteen years ago that a friend looked at me with astonishment, “a wild surmise,” I might almost say, when I remarked indifferently that I had been running the book over, but could see nothing in it. He is a polite man, my friend; he said little, a mere word or two of soft disclaimer; but it was plain to see he was shocked.

I ought to have accepted his feeling as a kind of compliment, a testimonial, all the better for being indirect, to my general reputation as a reader. “*You*,” his look said, “to speak in that way.” And I am proud to think now that his look was justified; for now, fifteen years afterward, though I could not make oath to having ever read it through, I should be straitened to name half a dozen books that I take down oftener than this same *Sentimental Journey*.

I still find it rather insubstantial. If Sterne ever had any ideas, he was pretty careful not to let his pen into the secret of them. He was an artist. He knew what he was about. Ideas were not in his line. They would have spoiled the brew. As