DUTIES OF THE CONSUMER.  ✩ BY RHO FISK ZUEBLIN

As the world grows up, experience makes it take back many of the sayings of its youth. We have had flimsy adages purporting to sum up moral lessons, and with a touch of fervor we were besought to believe that "beauty is only skin deep." We must now know that beauty, rather, goes to the core, betokening cleanliness, right being and soundness of heart; while physiologists are daily impressing us with the reactive powers of form and color, powers of bestowing rest, refreshment and stimulus, establishing the thorough-going relation of beauty, both as cause and effect, to physical life. Unlike the moral being of the past, we may no longer free ourselves from burdens of choice or decisions with the lazy phrase: "merely a matter of taste," since a new occasion has taught a new duty, and the consumer stands face to face with new commandments.

The consumer relates himself in two distinct ways to his material world, first in the choices he makes, and then in the use he makes of these choosings.

We have been negatively taught that beggars should not be choosers, and have virtuously taken unto ourselves a certain portion of contentment in passively accepting the gifts the gods, or the goddesses, provide. In later years, however, we have been told that our virtues as consumers are different, that we ourselves are responsible parties in our selections, and owe debts of intelligent appreciation to our material world. First, then, we are called upon to be choosers. But it is appallingly easy to be "lost in the crowd," and to forget our name, and to feel quite sure it is only Tom, Dick, or Harry. We, together with all else, "fall into anonymity." We are unconvinced and unable to name our own preferences and ideals, those "new names" of personal choice and acquisition which life and opportunity should give to each one of us. We do not really know ourselves. In our sorry haste we forget to become acquainted with our own natures and our own real wishes, and delude ourselves into thinking that doing as our neighbors do is our own personal expression of the joy of life. Beside this awful anonymity there is a sort of absent-feelingness, perhaps a Puritan legacy, which ought to give way to responsiveness to all beauty and become a constant consciousness of environment. We should have the subjective ability of owning our possessions, of
DUTIES OF THE CONSUMER

having them belong to us, and only this art of appreciation and feeling of welcome to their gifts of aesthetic richness can make them truly ours. I know a woman who squanders her possibilities for actual feeling and enjoyment by frequently exclaiming: “Isn’t that pretty?” “How lovely this is!” —and when challenged, immediately recants, saying: “No, I wasn’t thinking much about it.” This is in truth an absent-feelingness, and makes a fatal waste of potential pleasure in lively appreciation and choice.

Of course we know the dangers of assertive and opinionated individuality in art matters, and grant that personal choice can easily run riot. There is the eager feminine frenzy which Mr. Ade has so pithily and pitilessly characterized in his Moral: “There is no place like home, and some husbands are glad of it.” Mr. Ashbee lets an Englishman give a discouraging picture of his position in the following description: “I’m a plain man and I know what I want!” Admirable aphorism! But truly paraphrased as follows: “I’m an ignorant man; I know what suits my ignorance, and I’m very proud of it.” And Mr. Howells adds his satirical commentary on the American woman who, he asserts, when shopping, looks either sordid or silly.

Yet this must not mean the relinquishment of the pursuit and the blowing out of the candles. But being choosers, we must learn to be better choosers. Part of the trouble is a feature of to-day’s educational problem, since the transitional phase of many products, the changing processes as related to material and use, have, for the time being, put first hand knowledge and personal touch far from many individuals and left them unequal to the task or the joy of choosing. Many forms of instruction we used to find in the home through its own activities; now those have been banished and we have lost track of their values and meanings; but the next generation will have regained this knowledge and insight in their school training, and our children will easily rise to the situations which now disturb and confuse the consumer. In our present struggle with the question, we are commanded by three counselors: the economist, the artist and the philosopher, who, in moments of inspiration or zeal, speak regarding the whole duty of the buyer in the art world.

The modern economist, like Hobson, or Smart, impresses upon us the power and need of qualitative consumption, and declares forcibly the growing influence for good the consumer may have upon the mar-
DUTIES OF THE CONSUMER

ket. In such scientific pages we find as simple and strong a statement even as this: “You may increase the wealth of the nations far more effectually by educating the consumer than by increasing the efficiency of the producer.” In response to such teaching, organizations have been founded informing and enabling men, and particularly women, to become considerate and worthy consumers: organizations such as the National Consumers’ League, the Outdoor Art League, and Housekeepers’ Associations. There have been established Consumers’ Leagues, pledged to demand certain qualities in the goods they buy, for the sake of the makers. Union labels similarly stand for excellence which the consumer is supposedly bound to respect through his own choices.

But in more everyday language than that of the economist we have been exhorted by such men as Morris, Walter Crane, Ashbee, and all the leaders of the Arts and Crafts Movement, to take thought and to take time to become instructed, and then self-assertive regarding the things we admire and choose because of their beauty. They enforce the need upon the consumer of becoming informed, of being willing and painstaking in his quests. Suggesting and urging the proper education, Ashbee has somewhere written: “Regarding the education of a noble youth, Rabelais says in wisdom, as fit for the twentieth as for the fifteenth century, ‘Went they likewise to see the drawing of metals, or the casting of great ordnance, so went they to see the lapidaries: the goldsmiths and cutters of precious stones; the alchemists, money coiners, weavers, velvet makers, watch makers, looking-glass makers, printers, organists, dyers, and other such kind of artificers; and everywhere learnt and considered they the industry and advancing of the crafts.’”

Morris vehemently warns us against being “ignorant and noseled” about the arts, saying: “I ask you to learn what you want, and to ask for it; in which case you will both get it and will breed intelligent and worthy citizens for the commonweal.”

Alert to such yearnings or possibilities in the consumer, there have been corresponding opportunities offered him. Really intelligent and conscientious buying in the art-world has been made much easier in the last ten years. The arts and crafts exhibitions have proved a help in this particular, and now in many cities there is an increasing number of permanent exhibits of good workmanship in all the crafts. Of recent fame and eulogy is the Bradstreet Crafthouse in Minne-
DUTIES OF THE CONSUMER

apolis, where, in surroundings wholly fitting their beauty, one may see well displayed examples in many arts. It has been ecstatically called an “apocalypse of sale,” and represents the appropriate and sympathetic housing of things of intrinsic beauty for sale. There is another phase of the influence which is making it more possible for the consumer to be a rational chooser. Art classes and art lectures are now given the salespeople in some of the art departments of large commercial enterprises, a well-known firm of Chicago having done this quite elaborately for the men and women in their pottery rooms. Another house in the same city has established very attractive show and sales rooms and indicates the spirit of the times in a kindly solicitude for the consumer, with, of course, ulterior hopes. In editing its business pamphlet, one leaflet is called “The Fitness of Things,” which, although a simple business announcement, might well be called “A Consumer’s Symphony:” “To govern selection by excellence rather than expense; to prefer simplicity; to make use serve beauty, and beauty usefulness; to believe in goodness, abhor sham, make surroundings contribute to life; in short to conserve, even in the midst of commercial stress and strife, those eternal verities which make for advanced living; these things are a part of the Ideal and the Working Plan of this store. The intent of the store is that what you buy here shall fit your needs; not merely that you shall be satisfied to keep the purchase, but that it shall satisfactorily serve a real purpose, useful and artistic, in your home. We want you to take advantage of our interest in the fitness of things to the extent of freely using the store, its contents and our counsel in working out a right result in home furnishing.” In New York City, last winter, there was issued an elaborate prospectus of “A class in practical art, decorating and house furnishing, for salesmen, furnishers, manufacturers, purchasers,” the first purpose of which was to make a salesman successful and valuable in his position through real knowledge of the problems involved in his departments, one of the questionable texts being: “the purchaser’s extremity is the salesman’s opportunity!” Art collections and art museums through better classification of their exhibits, and through explanatory lectures, are constantly adding educational features which make their art treasures more instructive and helpful to citizens.

Thus we find that aside from the consumer’s own necessary reading and thinking and seeing, the commercial world, having some
educational ideals of its own, is making a response. In all these teachings and practices we shall come to know that real choosings mean a personal comprehension of comparative values. We have thought that to command valuable services means money power, but it means much else, it means a power of wisdom above rubies, and it becomes a great act of beneficence.

Even so speak the men of science and the men of the market, but the philosopher goes still further in pointing the moral of consumption, and in our perplexities gives us an uplifting and imperative call to prayer. C. Hanford Henderson has written: "Resignation, renunciation, sacrifices, contentment, the whole catalogue of aesthetic abdications are urged by those who have never caught sight of the splendor of life; but it is a coward doctrine, and has in it no element of the divine. . . . . To attain less than the best that is possible is unaesthetic, that is, immoral. Life is not an affair for any modesty of purpose. That is a shabby bit of laziness. Life is an adventure, quite worthy of the superlative. To have the strongest and most beautiful body, the most intelligent and accomplished mind, the most reverent and sympathetic spirit—to wear the most pleasing clothes; to inhabit the most beautiful house; to work in the most charming garden; to produce the most admirable wares; to establish with others the most ideal relations,—this is the formula for a daily life into which the philosophic idea literally translates itself. It is a good motto: 'Le meilleur, c'est assez bon pour moi.'"

Having thus learned from these three wise men, the economist, the artist and the philosopher, that we must choose well, what must we do with our possessions? The first, and perhaps, after wasting many words, the only answer to this question is like unto the other commandment: Be users.

The first word, therefore, in thinking of use, does not belong to the nursery "Don’ts;" making one too chary and alarmed for the sacred care of his possessions even to secure from them the just gratification and help they should give their owner. The first plea is to use them, to make them work hard, to yield to you freely of all of their delightful possibilities, in making for comfort, in being grateful to eye and mind. Our senselessness has become stereotyped in our accepted words of housekeeping and housekeeper. The supreme merit is the forever keeping; the supreme eulogy is for faithful genuflexions to the spirits of camphor, rather than for the truly economic
DUTIES OF THE CONSUMER

woman who secures from the house and its belongings the best there is in them to serve family and social uses. This in the end brings the honor due to the household stuff, and the greater power both of usefulness and usableness to the householders. A recent communication in handicraft emphasized this necessary relation between use and beauty in our surroundings, in saying: “What possible use have we for most of these ‘things’ with which our houses are filled, and from which it is inconceivable that we should ever derive the slightest satisfaction, except in that perfectly vulgar form which accompanies the mere sense of possession? And could anything be more pitiable as a confession of industrial sin than the way in which we ransack every corner of the world to collect as curiosities the adjuncts of healthier and simpler lives than our own? Why can we not learn the perfectly easy lesson that the homely, charming objects produced by people who live closer to nature than we do are more interesting than ours, simply because the life to which they correspond and whose needs they reflect is simpler, and the relation between the needs and their satisfaction more direct?”

And in this consistent using of things we should welcome as honorable scars the normal markings of life. In spite of all our praises and yearnings for youthful beauty in human beings, we really do respect and admire those faces which show life lines, and bear witness to splendid service in the world. The bloom of inexperience and ingenuousness that charms at sixteen, in one who has seen many more summers, could stir only a shudder. In spite, too, of all our proud boasting and of our ability in polishing, covering up, and making over, and our general deceptive practices, the world does like the signs of use in its furnishings. We are partial to the baby’s bitings in the old silver spoon; the Éton desks are sacred through the boyish knives of English heroes; and all legitimate, normal wear honors an object. Howells testifies to this really human character in our belongings in referring to the “state of preservation far more heart-breaking than any decay . . . . since all earthly and material things should be worn out with use, and not preserved against decay by any unnatural artifice.”

As we demand and admire this serviceableness and honorable age in people and things, and urge use, so should we demur at signs of hard use or abuse. Just how our earth’s beauty is defaced through ruthless methods, the sacrifice of our trees, and the insane wrecking
of natural beauties and glorious scenery at the stained hands of the advertiser, are aesthetic wrongs against which the consumer, above all others, should enter a most forcible protest.

Here again it may be necessary for us to take a lesson or two, and learn to be users. The mere using in a direct and firsthand way is not so easy after all, for "the power to consume has some first relation to ability and merit," and to use things well we must be about some becoming business that is making our life worth while in itself. Morris has well counseled us in regard to our furnishing and our living: "The arrangement of our houses ought surely to express the kind of life we lead, or desire to lead: our houses should look like part of the life of decent citizens prepared to give good, commonplace reasons for what we do." By our use we must express our own life and make these activities clearly represent it, and tend to enrich and ennoble it. Very often the reason why one does not admire other people's houses is the personal feeling of discomfort in them, in not seeing just how one could adapt his own doings to these rooms, how one could carry on his own businesses of life there, or, indeed, how these arrangements and furnishings belong to the activities and doings of the people who do live with them. For this very lack of relativity, many houses, big and little, elaborate and plain, are disappointing to the stranger. They fail to explain themselves. We look around in uncomfortable, unconscious query: Where do they sit to read, retire to rest, withdraw to write, gather to converse, stand up to work, where are the signs of life? Again the furnishings suggest simply emptiness of life, showing nothing but foolish interests and occupations, only vain drudgery for housemaids, and entanglement for any real sociability. Alas! In these houses we cannot see where or how the people live. With such an active and assertive standard we soon find that the popular phrase "worse than useless" stands for emphatic condemnation.

Not only should our possessions show our life and interest in life, because they are intimately related to our activities, but they should tend to enrich and enlarge our horizon. Any individual with tinges or twinges of personal ambition is disturbed with the problem of comparative virtues and conflicting interests, the relative importance of material or mental cobwebs, of domestic or intellectual confusion. These simple daily crisscrosses often bring thoughts which lie deep enough for a woman's tears. With an exhilarating sense of freedom
one often thinks of Thoreau’s annual bonfire as an easy prescription for some of life’s complications. Yet such heroic treatment reveals the fact that the summons to plain living and the other mandates of the simplification of life are hard sayings. We should not clutter our lives with many things. We must harmonize our possessions that they may become of actual service to us, and we must so cherish them in return that we know their good parts and beneficent points. Here we do well to remember Ruskin’s word: “A thing is worth precisely what it can do for you, not what you choose to pay for it.”

There are further lessons, too, in learning to be users. Though often we fancy ourselves hard pressed by our belongings in our care of them, we remain positively ignorant of many of our possessions. Our public benefits and the blessings of commonwealth are increasing fast, and it behooves us, as honest and capable democrats, to embrace our coming duty, and, at least, to teach our children to use our galleries and libraries and parks, and to be at home in our art world.

In thus becoming real and skilled choosers and in making serviceable uses of our possessions, we shall put down the “tyranny of things” and learn the “gentle art of living,” and, mayhap, we shall discover that in beauty’s behest lies another of those perfect laws of the Lord which have power of converting the soul.

I DO not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few. No, rather than art should live this poor, thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible, for a brutality that they will not struggle with rather than this, I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile, as I said before I thought it possible she might do; rather than the wheat should rot in the miser’s granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark.

WILLIAM MORRIS IN “THE LESSER ARTS.”