

COMFORT—GRATIFICATION—LUXURY.

BY F. W. FITZPATRICK.

THE world over there is much being written and said about Socialism, the great benefit it would be to humanity, its uplift and what not. And in many lands are there being made serious efforts to put these theories into practice. Everywhere the lodestone of socialism that attracts the masses is the idea that somehow or another the wealth of the world is to be redistributed more "equitably" and that we are all to have a fresh start on an equal footing. The lowly, the unsuccessful, the poor man, will always be ready to listen to the expounding of any scheme whereby they or he are to share the successful man's wealth, for would not that newly and so easily acquired share purchase them the comfort the gratification, the luxury they so much envy the rich man? In every clime, in every age, under every form of government, the desire for those three things, the strife to acquire them and invariably their abuse when once obtained, have been and probably always will be, striking characteristics of the human race. The "pursuit of happiness" that is supposed to be the right of all men is generally interpreted to mean the endeavor, the wish to enjoy the comfort, the gratification, the luxury, that the most luxurious in the land can possibly attain!

Until that most natural desire, that appetite, can be eliminated from man's composition methinks Socialism will have a hard row to hoe. It may be made the means of upsetting existing conditions here and there, but its permanent foothold anywhere is doubtful, it skates, so to speak, upon exceedingly thin ice, and breaking through into the old ways, republican, oligarchic, aristocratic and monarchic, is inevitable.

Luxury has always played a most important part in government. The relation of official luxury and private luxury has al-

ways been a moot question and one that legislators have ever tried to regulate. From the most remote antiquity the state has always exercised upon private life a control, a regulation that at times has been absolutely limitless. It has directed the dress, the table, the entire mode of life, of the people. It has simply always been a question of more or less regulation. Solon but used moderately a privilege, a right that Lycurgus pressed even to the point of destroying all individual liberty. Even in the philosophic view of the matter, Aristotle, the upholder of private rights, seemed to have had no greater conception of the real premises than did Plato, who preached the other extreme. And such government control is not a thing of the past. True, Louis XV was about the last monarch who imposed sumptuary laws, but nevertheless our luxuries are still to a greater or lesser degree controlled by the government today. Under some forms the people pay taxes that literally prohibit luxury, while others are merely taxed upon luxuries. A little thought given to the matter of luxuries, governmental and private, may be of some advantage to us, though it seem but pure theorizing ruminatingly.

Some theologians and many philosophers would have us believe that all men were born equal, absolutely so and that the earth and all it produced belonged to all men equally and that the acquisition of more property by some than by others was a false condition, a species of usurpation, brought about by and a part of government, forgetting that if the products of the land, wealth, are to remain equally divided, some power, some authority must limit each man to the enjoyment of only that which is physically absolutely necessary. Beyond that, there would immediately be some who expended more than others and others who acquired more than the first and the inequality would again be established. Government could alone do this and while some have attempted it, it has never been accomplished. Each form of government contending for its superiority claims that the greatest luxury and abuse exists under the other form. Yet it is doubtful if anyone has any real reason to feel superior to any other. Generally at the inception of each there have been moderation and sane living that have little by little given way to riotousness, if not debauch, that again generally have but shortly preceded the overthrow of that form and the establishment of a new one upon a saner basis.

Let us glance at what has been done in that connection and it may convince us that as long as men are men the same conditions

are bound to obtain, though it may be natural and perhaps praiseworthy to ever and anon engage in the pursuit of the unattainable.

There is perhaps no form of government under which luxury has shown itself in a garb of greater splendor and has been of more pernicious effect than in monarchies, to the point even of having destroyed them. Naturally the very apotheosis of luxury has been under autocracies, despotic monarchies. There it generally assumes the form of disordered phantasies, the realization of the most extravagant dreams by a power great enough to attempt anything, all-powerful and against which no opposition could stand. The very disproportion there is between the undertakings of an ambition that acknowledges no restraint and the limits that it encounters in our very nature makes us understand the unquiet character of despotic luxury, it explains its unmeasured tentatives, its colossal enterprises and its unclean caprices. History gives us enough portraits of such types, a collection of monsters, and does it in so prosaic a manner withal that these monstrous and criminal mountebanks seemed to have yielded to peculiarities, comprehensible eccentricities. Look at Caligula, for instance, who dearly loved the cruel sports of the arena. One day there seemed to be a dearth of criminals to be fed to the animals, but the spectacle must go on, therefore he simply ordered that some of the spectators be seized and thrown into the pit. In the name of luxury, Claudius perpetuated as great atrocities and so did Nero, who varied the order, however, by picking out Senators and officers for sacrifice instead of the haphazard spectator, and Domitian, Commodus and Galerius were equally shining examples of what despots could do in the name of luxury who, satiated with the ordinary, sought the inconceivable. And Rome was not alone in this. Everywhere despotism was alike in its disordered fatuousness, only the accessories, the frills were varied. In China, the Emperor Cheou-sin, 1,100 years before the Christian era, built a temple to debauchery, where even his wife passed days and nights in devising the super-refinements of luxury, in the guise of infamous, voluptuousness and atrocious sufferings of sacrificed victims. Under a later dynasty Yeow-wang and his worthy spouse, Pao-sse, continued in like manner until the invasion of the Tartars gave them something else to think about. And what Roman Emperor ever paralleled the career of the terrible "reformer" Hoang-ti? He first corrected many grave abuses, destroyed his predecessors' despotic rule, and lived in Spartan simplicity until the craze for luxury seized him, too, and

we read of the ten thousand horses in his stables and the ten thousand concubines in his harem. His funeral carried out as he directed, was a fitting sequel to his life. Three thousand men were immolated upon his tomb that their fat might serve to keep the funereal torches alight thereabout for the requisite number of months' mourning. Indeed, history, I firmly believe, has underestimated, rather than exaggerated the part that luxury and cupidity have played in the crimes of despotism.

A peculiarity of all this is that one would think that despotic luxury would have the very contrary effect upon people than that which it had. Instead of being disgusted with the results of and what was seen of this luxury, the people sought to emulate it from afar.

Under other than despotic forms of monarchy, there has always been fostered a nobility, an aristocracy that has kept but a step behind, if it has not gone ahead of the monarch himself, in the matter of luxury. An hereditary hierarchy surrounds, supports and to a certain extent contains the monarchy, while a despotism is nothing but one master over a nation of equals. Under monarchies generally, until comparatively recent times, the excesses and extravagances of the ruler have been masked, the sting taken from them, as it were, by the prodigal feasts and fetes and spectacles given by the monarch to the people. All that sort of thing has kept the proletariat in good humor and the same tactics were followed by the courtiers and barons and the lesser lights who all gave largesse to their retainers and serfs and vassals.

In all of this it is interesting to follow the influence that woman has had upon luxury. Her influence has been more far-reaching and baneful under so-called Christian and Occidental rulers than in the Oriental and other forms of despotic monarchies. In the latter woman has been part of the luxury, but as a servant, as a slave. True in polygamous countries where women were sold and fattened for the market, the maintenance of courtly harems was a most costly luxury, but nowhere has a woman played the important part in court affairs, has been so costly a luxury to the nation as well as the kings as were the favorites of some of the kings in Western Europe. Someone may say that despots have been known to raise certain of their concubines to even the throne itself, but, with rare exceptions, those women have never really reigned. Their example has never spread the contagion of luxury, they seldom exercised any influence whatever in politics. The court

favorites particularly of France, propagated and corrupted luxury by the influence of their courts upon the cities, they usurped governmental privileges, their secret intrigues, their deals made a very traffic of public affairs, affected the whole political situation and indeed were the causes, (oftentimes, but the mere caprice of some enchantress), of war and terrible international upheavals.

Luxury has tainted everything social and economic, our arts, all. Decadent absolute monarchies have given us marvelous specimens of architecture and other arts, colossal temples and monuments and generally tainted with the same spirit that luxury instilled in everything else, in that the art was simply riotously resplendent, garishly decorative, a mere display of wealth, always at the cost of good taste. Constitutional and other monarchies in their earlier stages have given us splendid and robust memorials of those times but as they grew more luxurious so their arts became effeminized, extravagant, and another period of decadence is marked. An overthrow, a return to virile, sturdy manliness, governmental and private, the infusion of new blood or the incursion of so-called barbarian peoples, then more ease and comfort, then luxury, then decay!

Strange, too, what a part religion has had to play in this. After each revolution or the reform of any people the habits of life have been severe, hard even, and in accord therewith the beliefs of such periods generally reverted to more primitive forms of religion; life was reduced to the essentials. Public monuments were few, and those plain in character. The temple only was made beautiful. Then the ceremonial robes of the priests became more gorgeous and the people clothed themselves in finer raiment upon church-going occasions, and, little by little, the habit of luxury was formed and grew. Feudal aristocracy gave vent to its luxurious inclinations by its large number of retainers and servants, a sturdy, but almost exaggerated hospitality, its hunts and its races, the pomp of its military retinues, its tourneys. That was feudal aristocracy. Its successor of today also entertains lavishly and but replaces the tourneys and joustings with brilliant balls and operas and lucullian banquets. England secures the continued enjoyment of luxury to its select by its law of entail by which the nobility insures the perpetuation of its wealth and exclusiveness and station and privileges by entailing them all to their heirs.

Commercial aristocracies have differed in their luxury from the landed aristocracies in that in all their extravagance there is a

species of economy. As a rule, the wealth has been acquired through severe toil, and habits of mind have been formed that make for their expended wealth. The habits of the merchant act as a corrective upon the tastes that would otherwise be merely luxurious. It is not in their nature to remain idle. Much as the warriors of old they have either to keep on winning victories, or become the vanquished, the losers. If they stop acquiring wealth they are ruined. Venice was one of the best examples of a commercial aristocracy and these points I have just enumerated obtained there in marked degree. But in course of time, a generation or two, such an aristocracy soon gets upon the same plane as the old-fashioned court nobility, where there was more vanity than real pride. The value of money is forgotten, mere prodigality rules and it is just as fashionable to be in debt as it is to gamble and they all do that.

Even in our democracies luxury plays an important role. In the church the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are taken by its votaries; in the republics of old and even in the more modern ones, the vows of equality, fraternity and liberty were and are theoretically made but are never kept. True, the abolition of titles, crown-lands and special privileges that exaggerated luxury has tended to moderate it. With slavery has disappeared one of the most poisonous sources of abusive luxury. Free and responsible labor has its own correctives and has always held in repugnance the tendency to excessive luxury on the part of the employers. But we have seen a new form of luxury grow up that, in the abstract, is not better than the monarchial and aristocrat ones and that in all likelihood, will eventually lead to the same decadence and ruin that we have noted in the others. Twenty-five years ago we looked upon certain writers as croakers and false prophets because they told us of dangers they foresaw; the great concentration of wealth, all-powerful "captains of industry" holding the labor in a species of bondage, exploiting it without mercy and preventing it from tasting the slightest particle of luxury. It was said then that the birth of such a class was impossible; that never again would the excesses of the ancient aristocracies be equalled and that we were assured a continued diffusion of capital and a spreading of national wealth so that all would have comfort and but few would be justified in indulging in extravagance (the latter assertion all too true!) Industry and democracy were to go hand in hand. Each demanded liberty and light, and each had for its object the benefiting of the

great mass of humanity. The development of industry was to have created a vast amount of business with all the people and benefiting them all. Industry was to become the rival of art and art was to find expression in industry.

That was as it was supposed to be. What have we actually? To what excess of luxury have the democracies of our own time reached? As a matter of fact in a democracy where all men are supposed to be equal, is not the temptation to strain toward the attainment of luxury greater even than under any other form of government? In most others, the plain people are born so and seem quite content to remain so. With us, no limit is placed to our attainments and we have seen to what point some men have reached through their own unaided efforts and it is most natural that we should all endeavor to attain that same point, even if to do so we realize that we must scramble over our brothers, our equals! In practice, equality signifies the desire to rise. Who cares about equality in poverty, in obscurity? Our eyes are not turned in that direction. The equality we desire is that of being with—our superiors. We have no ancient monopolies, no privileged classes, no concentration of civil and military employment, no favoritism in the commercial lines as “special makers to the king” and what not, all that is well enough. But wealth still exists. Wealth may be acquired. One man has more ability to acquire it than the other and there lies the root of the prime cause of inequality, in the very nature of man itself.

Perhaps by education we may convince our people, two or three generations hence, that true happiness is not necessarily found in wealth, in the enjoyment of great luxury, that there is a higher plane of life, that service to one's fellows is nobler far and conduces more to one's own beatitude than any mere gratification of one's animal appetites. All that is possible. But to me it seems a good deal like rainbow chasing, and certainly an attainment of the far-distant future. Socialism is of benefit and far be it from me to do anything to detract from its laudable aspirations, but, and without feeling at all pessimistically inclined, it seems to me that Liberty, Equality and Fraternity have been perverted, twisted and turned until they are made to read Comfort, Gratification, Luxury, to which History has always added Deterioration, Degeneracy and Extinction, then a Renaissance and another run over the same gamut, an orderely and continued turning of the Wheel of Life—Mayhap that Wheel while turning on its center, is likewise moving ahead, progressing in the true sense of EVOLUTION.