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Thomas A. Morris

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WESTERN STYLE OF LIVING

BY BISHOP THOMAS A. MORRIS¹

I have been carefully observing the mode of living among the people of the western states for a period of forty years. Great changes have appeared during that time. Of the fifty-two years of my life, thirty have been spent in the employment of an itinerant preacher, affording me the best practical means of information. Moreover, I am the son of a western pioneer, who was in the celebrated battle at Point Pleasant in 1774, and subsequently identified with the Indian wars, till Wayne's treaty of 1795. Of course it is matter of much interest with me to note the changes in the society of the far-famed west; and it may be of some little interest to the readers of the Repository to see some of those changes briefly pointed out. I shall limit myself chiefly to a few items pertaining to the style of living, which may serve to remind us that, while the real wants of man are comparatively few and simple, the imaginary ones scarcely have any bounds. I shall, however, not take into the account the wealthy aristocrat, with his costly mansion, Turkey carpets, silver plate, and thousand dollar carriage; nor the extremely poor man, who lives in a wretched hovel, on a floor of earth and sleeps on his bundle of straw. They are both exceptions to the general rule. My few observations shall have reference to the great mass of western population.

What is now considered an ordinary outfit for housekeeping? A domicil with parlors, hall, chambers, sitting-room, dining-room, kitchen, and cellar. To furnish these apartments, there must be Scotch or Brussels carpets, hearth-rugs, brass-mounted andirons, window-blinds, ornamented or cushioned chairs, rocking-chairs, sofas, sideboards, bureaus, wardrobes, cloak-racks, wash-stands, elegant bedsteads,

¹The Ladies Repository, and Gatherings of the West. A monthly periodical devoted to literature and religion, Cincinnati, Ohio, VI:130 (1846).

with testers or canopies, dressed with curtains and valance, dressing-tables and mirrors, breakfast-tables and dinner-tables, with their tea sets and dinner sets of China and Britannia, and silver spoons, beside cooking stoves, etc. Now this may answer for a commencement, as far as it goes; but who would ever think of keeping house without a centre-table, richly covered, on which to lay the nice little volumes done up in gilt and morocco? which, however, being intended as mere ornaments, are fortunately seldom or never read. Or who could endure to see a parlor so naked, and out of all fashion, as not to have some mantle ornaments, such as artificial flowers, with glass covers, or some specimens of conchology and geological formations? Beside, the walls must not only be papered, but beautiful with portraits, landscapes, etc. These commonplace notions amount to quite a clever sum, though they are as few and economical as western people of this day, who make any pretension to being *stylish*, can well get along with. Indeed, they form only a part of the numerous and indispensable fixtures of modern housekeeping. Again, to procure the viands, such as are in keeping with this array of furniture, and maintain a force requisite to serve up and hand them around, and keep all the affairs of the household in order, will cost another round sum—to say nothing of parties and extras.

With this modern style, I shall take the liberty of briefly contrasting the early style of living in the western country. When a young married couple commenced housekeeping, from thirty to forty years ago, a very small outfit sufficed, not only to render them comfortable, but to place them on an equality with their friends and neighbors. They needed a log cabin, covered with clapboards, and floored with wooden slabs, in western parlance called puncheons, and the openings between the logs closed with billets of wood and crammed with mortar, to keep all warm and dry—all which a man could erect himself, without any mechanical training, with one day's assistance from his neighbors to raise the logs. Usually, one room answered for parlor, sitting-room, dining-room, kitchen, and dormitory, while the potato hole under the puncheons, formed, of course, by

excavating the earth for mortar, was a good substitute for a cellar. As to furniture, they needed a stationary corner cupboard, formed of upright and transverse pieces of boards, arranged so as to contain upper, lower, and middle shelf, to hold the table ware and eatables. In order to comfort and convenience, it was requisite, also, to have the following articles: one poplar slab table, two poplar or oak rail bedsteads, supplied with suitable bedding, and covered with cross-barred counterpanes of homemade, one of which was for the accommodation of visitors; six split-bottomed chairs, one long bench, and a few three legged stools were amply sufficient for themselves and friends; a half a dozen pewter plates, as many knives and forks, tin cups, and pewter spoons for ordinary use, and the same number of delf plates, cups, and saucers for special occasions; also, one dish, large enough to hold a piece of pork, bear meat, or venison, with the turneps [sic], hommony [sic], or stewed pumpkin. All this table ware was kept in the corner cupboard, and so adjusted as to show off to the best advantage, and indicated that the family were well fixed for comfortable living. When the weather was too cold to leave the door or the window open, sufficient light to answer the purpose came down the broad chimney, and saved the expense of glass lights; and as for andirons, two large stones served as a good substitute. The whole being kept clean and sweet, presented an air of comfort to the contented and happy inmates. It is true the cooking was usually done in [the] presence of the family, but was soon dispatched, when the Dutch oven and skillet were nicely cleaned and stowed under the cupboard, and the long handled frying-pan hung upon a nail or peg on the side of the door, while the water pail was situated on the other, and the neat water gourd hanging by it. For mantle ornaments they had the tin grater, used in grating off the new corn for mush before it was hard enough to grind, and the corn-splitter, being a piece of deer's horn, very useful in parting large ears of Indian corn for the cattle. The parlor walls were sufficiently beautified by the surplus garments and Sunday clothes

hung all around on wooden pins, the sure tokens of industry and prosperity.

In regard to property, if a man owned an axe, wedge, hoe, plough, and a pony to pull it, and a bit of ground to cultivate, or a few mechanics' tools, he asked no more; and if his wife had a spinning-wheel, a pair of cards, a loom, and plenty of the raw material of flax, cotton, and wool, she was content. In those days keeping her own house was a small part of a woman's work—it was only needful recreation from her steady employment; for she carded, spun, colored, wove, cut and made clothes for all the family. Ladies of the first respectability then vied in honorable competition, to manufacture the finest and most tasty dresses for themselves, and the most handsome suits for their husbands, sons, and brothers, in which they all appeared abroad with more exquisite pleasure than people now do in imported satin and broadcloth, and with far more credit to themselves and honor to their country. For coloring materials they used the bark of walnut, hickory, maple, and sycamore trees, together with copperas, indigo, sumach, paint-stone, etc.; and in carding for a fancy suit of mixed, they worked in scraps of colored flannel and silk to variegate the texture. Those were the days of pure republicanism, true patriotism, and real independence. All the money a man needed was enough to pay his tax and buy his salt and iron. When he needed marketing, he gathered fruit from his orchard, vegetables from his garden, and took a pig from the pen, or a lamb from the fold; or if he had neither, he took his gun and brought in wild meat from the woods. He raised his own breadstuff, and ground it on the hand-mill, or pounded it in a mortar with a sweep and pestle, and relished it the better for his toil in preparing it. Coffee was not then used, except as a luxury on particular occasions, by a few of the wealthy. Milk was considered far preferable. For tea they had sage, spicewood, mountain birch, and sassafras, which they regarded then, and which I still regard as altogether preferable to black tea, young hyson, or imperial, both for health and the pleasure of taste. Supplies of saccharine were easily obtained from the sugar tree or bee-gum, and

those who had neither, gathered wild honey from the bee tree. When medicine was needed, they obtained it from their gardens, fields, or forests; but they had little use for it. Children were not then annoyed with shoes and boots, or hats and bonnets—they went barefooted and bareheaded. It was no uncommon thing to see small boys trapping for birds or hunting rabbits in the snow without shoes or hats, and small girls playing about the yard in the same condition—all the very pictures of health. Reared under that system, young men were able to endure the toils of a frontier life, or brave the perils of a hard campaign in the service of their country. Young ladies needed no paint, the rosy cheek being supplied by the flush of perfect health. In those days I never heard of dyspepsy, bronchitis, or any of the fashionable diseases of this generation. Doctors were then scarce amongst us, and had but little to do [?]. If a man was afflicted with pain or catarrh, and felt chilly, he drank herb tea, wrapped himself in a blanket, and slept with his feet before the fire. If he was sick, he abstained from food. If he had a slight fever, he drank tea of snakeroot, mountain ditney, or other sudorifices, till he started the perspiration. Or if he had a severe attack of settled fever, after exhausting his simple remedies, he laid himself in a cool place, drank abundance of cold water, his wife or sister fanned him with the wing or tail of a turkey, and he committed himself to the keeping of a kind providence, without being plied with blisters or dosed with poison. Calomel, the Samson of fashionable remedies, was scarcely known here in those days, and people usually retained their teeth and jaw bones unimpaired, even to old age, or while they lived.

Many people, such as would be thought Solomons of this day, assume that their fathers and mothers were deplorably ignorant, but without any sufficient proof or satisfactory reason. People possessed at least as much common sense forty years ago as their posterity do at present. If they had fewer opportunities for improvement, they made better use of them; if fewer books, they were better ones, or better read; so that, while our fathers and mothers knew less of newspapers, novels, and annuals, they understood more of

the Bible, useful history, and practical life. One fact is palpable, and should not be overlooked nor forgotten, that is, the present generation, with all its rage for education and improvement, cannot show any more eloquent preachers, learned jurists, able statesmen, or successful generals, than those which lived in the days of our fathers. What improvement there is in morals, if any, is attributable to the Gospel. That the "age of improvement" has produced vast changes in the manners and usages of society, is admitted; but whether for the better or worse, is another question, and one which would admit of much argument on both sides. While the modern style of living affords more luxury and elegance than the former style, it is attended with more expense and trouble, and exerts a more corrupting influence on society—leads to more idleness, vanity, crime, and wretchedness. The pleasure of social intercourse is, I believe, not increased, but diminished. One example on this item must suffice. Call on a friend at her own house, and she is locked up. You must first apply at the pull of the door-bell, or the knocker; then wait a long time for the servant; and if not repulsed at once by the fashionable cant, "Too much engaged," or the fashionable falsehood, "Not at home," you must next send your name and request for an interview; and after waiting from a quarter to half hour longer, you may obtain an audience at last, though dearly bought with loss of time and sacrifice of feeling. Whereas, under the usage of former days, so soon as you knocked on the door, you heard the familiar response, "Come in;" then, by pulling the string which hung outside, you raised the wooden latch, stepped into the family circle, met with a welcome reception, received a hearty shake of the warm hand of friendship, and, being seated, felt perfectly at home as long as you chose to remain. Such were the days of simple-hearted, honest friendship, when social life was unembarrassed by the affected and heartless etiquette of modern times.

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