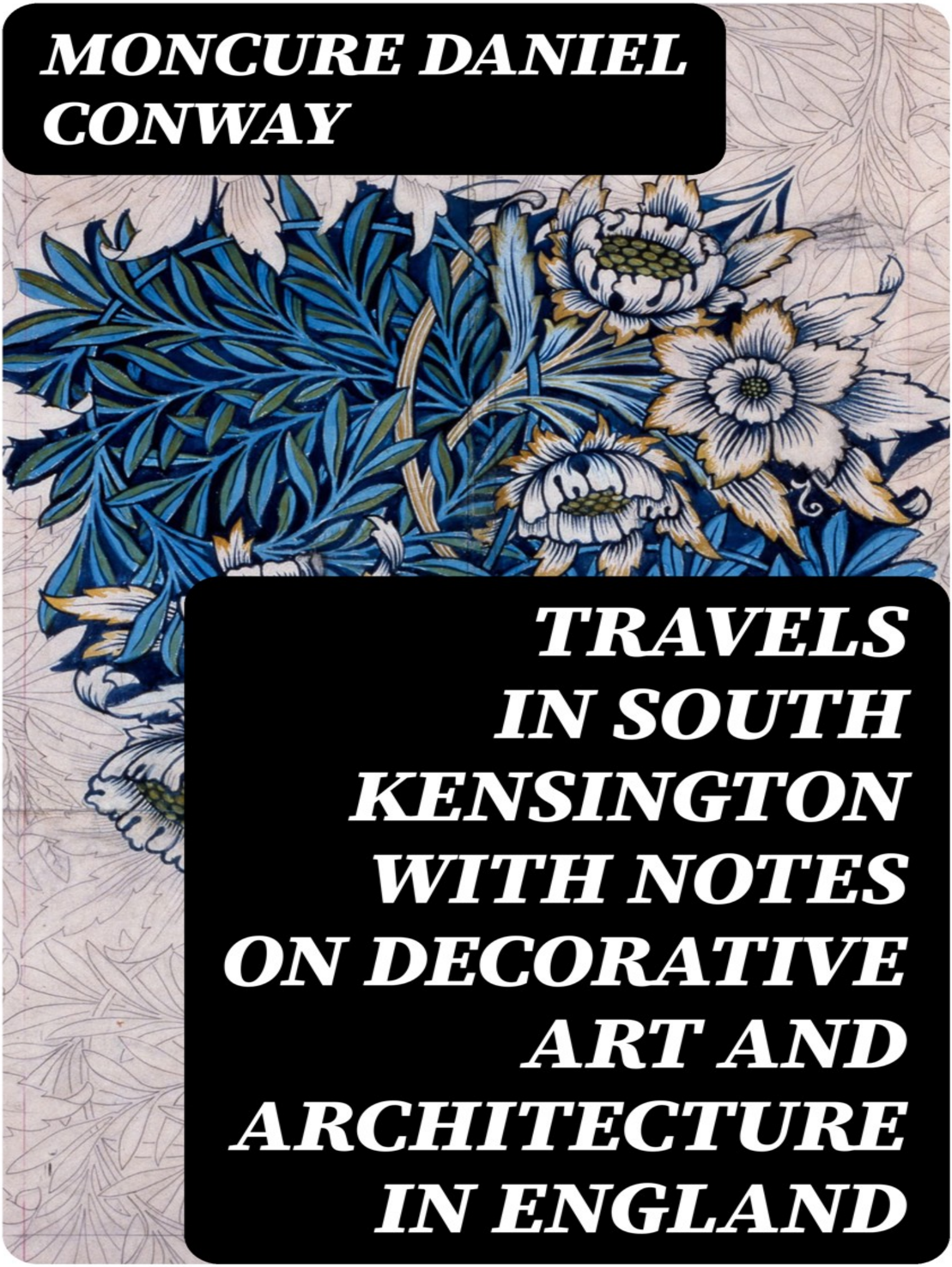
MONCURE DANIEL CONWAY



TRAVELS IN SOUTH KENSINGTON WITH NOTES ON DECORATIVE ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN ENGLAND

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Travels in South Kensington with Notes on Decorative Art and Architecture in England

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ILLUSTRATIONS.

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PROLEGOMENA.

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HOMELY and Comely were sisters. Their parents were in humble circumstances, and depended mainly on the care and economy of these two daughters—their entire family. They were persons of some social position, and it had constituted a problem how they might preserve some relation to the community and at the same time maintain comfort at home: Youth required the former, Age needed the latter. It was settled in a way which this historian cannot commend: the arrangement was that one of the girls should attend to the external, the other to the internal affairs of the family. So soon as this was resolved, there was no difficulty in determining which of the girls should go out and which stay at home. There was about Comely a certain ease and address, as well as personal attractiveness, which seemed to make society her natural sphere; while the shyness and plainness of Homely made the task of remaining at home congenial. Homely was content with homespun clothes in order that Comely might wear silk. Whenever there was a ball or a festival, Comely was sure to come, and Homely stayed at home.

Gradually, however, this distribution of parts appeared not to have the happiest results. Comely grew so fond of the

gay world that her home became distasteful; she demanded, too, more and more of the family resources for her fashionable attire, and the concession deprived the house of everything but the barest utensils. On the other hand, Homely had stayed withindoors so much that she became slovenly, and, as she had to wear her homespun till it was threadbare, in order that her sister might keep up with the fashions, she became unlovely to look upon. Comely came at length to despise her sister. Homely became a peevish drudge. The family by degrees became unhappy, without being very clear as to the cause of their troubles.

One night Comely came home from a ball in unusual agitation. Her sister was aroused to hear the confidence that a lover of rank, handsome and charming, had discovered his interest in Comely. Any differences the sisters may have had were quite forgotten in the renewal of their natural sympathy caused by this incident.

The next morning a messenger arrived to announce that his master, Lord Deeplooke, was on his way to visit Comely and the family in their own home, and would arrive in an hour. Here was a sensation! The two sisters set themselves to work—even Comely using her hands for once—to make the chief room of the house neat. But Comely looked on the blank walls with dismay, and said, “Surely there used to be some pictures.” “Yes,” replied Homely, “but you are wearing the last of them now.” Comely blushed—and the blush was becoming—at this; but the sisters gathered some beautiful flowers and decorated the room as well as they could. When this was attended to Comely was about to repair to her

room to decorate herself, and called her sister to do the same; but Homely declared she already had on her very best gown. Comely was shocked at this, and entreated her sister to conceal herself during the nobleman's visit. This Homely was quite willing to do.

When Lord Deeplooke arrived, Comely met him in the finest array she had next to the ball-dress. She introduced him to her venerable parents; but a shade of anxiety passed over her face when she observed his lordship presently looking around as if he expected some one else. She then remembered that the messenger had announced that he was coming to visit not her alone but the family, and that on the evening before, at the ball, she had casually mentioned her sister. With a quick wit Comely anticipated the inquiry she knew would be made and left the room, remarking, as she did so, "I pray your lordship to excuse me while I seek my sister." Another moment and the two girls were hurriedly investing Homely in Comely's second-best dress.

It was a novel experience for Homely to be dressed in a pretty gown; it was equally novel for her to be introduced to a gentleman, much less a lord; and the two novelties together had an almost transforming effect upon her. Home-work and early hours had kept her in perfect health; her manners had no chance to be other than simple; and as no experiences of fashionable life had made her *blasé*, her face was suffused with an exquisite color, and her eye bright with delight, when she entered the room and was introduced to his lordship.

The reader must not be kept in suspense for another instant. It was not Comely but Homely that Lord Deeplooke

ultimately married. Homely having discovered the secret that lay in a becoming dress, chiefly from its effect on the feeling of the wearer, stoutly refused to be slovenly any more; and all her serviceable virtues, thus set in a fit frame, were found to have touched her countenance into unconventional beauty. On the other hand, Comely, though at first jealous and angry, gradually appreciated the lesson she had been taught. She did not, indeed, forget the magical effect wrought on her sister by a beautiful dress; but she pondered deeply the qualities fostered at home which she had supposed incongruous with such raiment, but now saw particularly harmonious with it; and thenceforth, even before Homely was married, Comely devoted herself to household work. Need I say that in this Comely was far more successful than her sister had been? All the beauty she had seen in the gay world, an occasional visit to which she still enjoyed, now became available. Pictures reappeared on the walls, which her sister had supposed were just as useful without them. Touches of color, a ribbon on the curtain which had hitherto been tied with a string, a hundred refinements which required only a cultured taste, gradually transformed the house, just as Comely’s dress had transformed Homely. For these improvements Comely had been glad to part with her mere finery, though she never forgot that a slovenly mistress makes a slatternly home.

Comely subsequently married an artist, who, beginning life as a sign-painter, was made a knight for the best example of domestic decoration exhibited at the Great Exposition of 18—, a model which, he frankly confessed, was suggested by the house in which he found his bride.

There are, indeed, few words in our language of more peculiar, or even pathetic, import than the word “homely.” It has gradually come to bear the significance of coarseness or even ugliness, as if these were quite appropriate to the home. It is, indeed, fortunate that the home can supply affection for things and persons not very presentable; but it is none the less true that the word has gradually come to represent the impression that beauty is for outside show, and that anything will do for home purposes.

Decoration (*decus*) means the bestowal of honor. Beauty followed honor. Because man honored his deity, grand temples and cathedrals arose and altars blazed with gems; and because he honored the prince and the noble, palaces were decked with splendor. All this time the home remained homely, for religion denied its sanctity and aristocracy despised it as the dwelling-place of a serf. The wealthy called their residences palaces, châteaux, castles, villas, seats, anything but “homes.” The “Home” came to mean some common asylum of the poor. But at last two mighty forces invaded Europe—Democracy and Heresy. Sternly they forbade man longer to spend his strength and his honor on allied Tyranny and Superstition. Then the Arts declined, because the convictions which had inspired them were shaken. Several of the grandest cathedrals were struck by a sort of paralysis and could never get finished, and palaces had to continue their grandeur on terra-cotta and tinsel.

And now the cunning workman, having struck work upon shrines and thrones, began to think of his own mind, so long left vacant that temples might be adorned, of his wife and child, so long stinted that palaces might be luxurious. The

first expression of this new reflection was not outward: it was in the decoration of men's minds with furniture of another kind—with science, poetry, and literature. Enamored of these deeper pleasures, man almost despised and hated the outward arts which symbolized his long thraldom. And perhaps it was necessary that the ancient splendors which invested a departed era should fade, and that man should retire as into an ugly shell to mature the pearl of an inner life. The old artists, artisans, potters—the Bellinis, Angelos, Palissys, Della Robbias—reappeared in Rousseau, Milton, Bunyan—artists of an invisible beauty, disowning Art while frescoing the mind with ideals.

For a time the work of imagination went on in humble dwellings amidst Puritan plainness. But finally, even in the beginning of this generation, it began to be asked in England whether the mind and heart thus formed might not be honored with a fit environment of beauty. To this end London established its great School of Design and Decoration. Thereto have gravitated the fragments of a Past that has crumbled—images, altars, shrines, decorations lavished by genius on ideals ere they hardened to idols; imperial services, jewels, sceptres, wrought before kings became survivals and phantasms. It is England, land of beautiful homes, reviving the art of decoration for the Age of Humanity. She will no longer have the home to be homely. Her call has gone round the world, and temples and palaces deliver up their treasures that they may gather in London, there to teach the millions how they may beautify the latter-day temple, which is the Home, and refine the latter-day king, which is Man.

It is said that the Londoner may be known, in any part of the world where he may die, if his lungs are examined—they being of a sooty color. So much of his great metropolis he is doomed to carry with him wherever he may journey. London itself must forever bear, through and through, the effect of its fogs and its climate. Rain was its architect and Smoke its decorator. But let no one hastily conclude that their work has been all unlovely. John Ruskin has pointed it out as a characteristic of the greatest English artist, Turner, that there was nothing so ugly about England but he could bring beauty out of it; but that fine artist, Necessity, worked long before Turner in transmuting apparent disadvantages to advantages. “It is,” said Charles Kingsley, “the hard gray English climate which has made hard gray Englishmen.” There is as little *terra-cotta* on the Englishman’s house as on his character. It has been determined for him by Rain and Fog that he shall seek his pleasures by the fireside instead of in public gardens and fêtes. What beauty he can afford must be of the interior. Without, gray dirty brick and wall; within, every comfort and refinement: such are the decree of his superficially dismal decorators. Of course the wealthy Londoners have always fought against their hard climatic environment, and against the ever-encroaching ugliness which is the attendant shadow of millions massed together in the struggle for existence on a small island. There are still a few mansions, only a little way from the present centre of London, which attest the fine taste which its wealthy citizens have always tried to cultivate in the direction of architectural beauty. About two hundred and fifty years ago Northumberland House was described as “in the village of

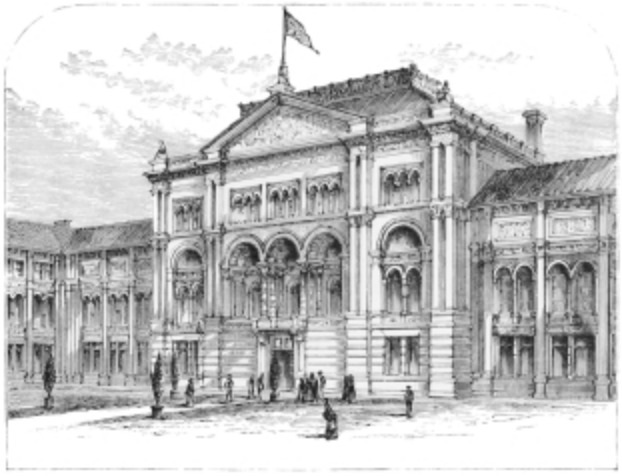
Charing.” That is now Charing Cross, the heart of the metropolis; a street runs over the site of Northumberland House. Where once was Charing hermitage is now a huge hotel and railway station. About two hundred years ago, when the Earl of Burlington was building Burlington House on Piccadilly, about half a mile west of Charing Cross, he was asked why he was building so far away in the country, and replied, “I am resolved to have no house beyond me.” The earl’s resolution was not kept. He lived to find himself amidst a noisy thoroughfare, and now one may travel five miles to the westward of his old country-seat without leaving the avenue of brick and mortar which passes its door. This migration of dwellings to ever-extending suburbs is, indeed, traced in much grander buildings than the tasteful old mansions which are being swallowed up because of their uneconomical occupancy of space: so much general stateliness is secured by the vast increase and diffusion of wealth; but the rarity with which the unique beauties of the older mansions are imitated, and the utter absence of any attempt at individuality in even the wealthiest new quarters—such as Belgrave Square—would seem to indicate that the Londoners have finally adopted it as a creed that external architecture and gardens must no longer be sought for by individuals, but possessed by all in communal forms, as public edifices, squares, and parks. It is now usual, in the new parts of London, for the grandest mansions of a terrace to own a large garden in common, to which each has entrance by a back gate, and to whose maintenance and ornamentation each family contributes a small sum per annum.

In its journey of eighteen centuries, from being that small trading-village mentioned by Tacitus—“not yet dignified with the name of colony”—to its present dimensions, covering 125 square miles, London has been formed by forces of use, by world-historical movements—powers not to be criticised. But we may admire in some of the characteristics of its mighty growth some of that beauty which ever works at the heart of the hardest utility. For example, in its expansion London is said to have swallowed up and built over more than three hundred villages; but in every case the village-green has been spared, and these are now represented by those beautiful and embowered squares which everywhere adorn the metropolis, constitute with the seven large parks its lungs, and make it the healthiest city of the world in proportion to its population. Though the ancient houses built by the wealthy were beautiful, and, wherever remaining, bring such large prices that one wonders why they should not be imitated, yet the homes of the lower classes in old times were far uglier than now. Especially were they made dismal by that barbarous “tax on light,” whose monuments may frequently be observed in windows walled up to avoid the window-tax. The poor had to live in houses illuminated from one or two windows, until the clever gentlemen of the Exchequer perceived the costliness of this means of revenue. As the Swiss mountaineers have come to admire goitres, unless belied by rumor, and as the city man, from having to put up with “high” game, has gradually come to prefer it, so the London builders for a long time placed few windows in houses, and seem to have thought the effect solid and “English,” as contrasted with the light and airy

style of French houses. The newest streets of London show, however, that light on this subject has dawned upon the English architectural mind, through that into the homes of the people, to such an extent that the tax is now upon darkness. It is now accepted as a principle that as Smoke has had its way with the outside of the London habitation, hereafter the first decorator of the interior is to be—Light.

In these fragmentary first pages of a fragmentary work, it has been the author's aim to outline certain general ideas and historical facts, which may illustrate their own illustrations as written in the following pages. It will be best seen, when approached from the historical side, what may be regarded as a necessary factor in English art or architecture, and what may be considered as experiment. This is the more important for the American, who is, in an especial sense, "heir of all the ages," while not limited to the grooves prescribed by any. It is in America that we are to have the great Art of Arts—that whose task is to utilize the Arts of other lands and ages as pigments, to be combined into new proportions for unprecedented effects, and to invest fairer ideals. For America the author has written these contributions toward a knowledge of what has been done, and is being done, in England; but he would prefer now to burn his work rather than have it aid the retrogressive notion that Art in America is to copy the ornamentation or duplicate the work of other countries, much less of other ages. These things can mean for the artists and people of the United States nothing more than culture; and culture means not a mere eclectic importation of select facts and truths, but their recombination, in

obedience to a new vital principle related to a further idea and wider purpose.



SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM.

THE SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM.

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“COME,” said my friend, Professor Omnium, one clear morning, “let us take an excursion round the world!” My friend is a German, and he has such a calm familiarity with the unconditioned and the impossible, that a suggestion which, coming from another, would appear astounding, from him appears normal. This time, however, I look through his spectacles to see if his eyes have not a merry twinkle: they are quite serene. Visions of the Parisian play entitled *Round the World in Eighty Days*, thoughts of Puck and excursion tickets, rise before me, and I gravely pronounce the word “Impossible!”

“But,” says the professor, “Kant declares that it is too bold for any man, in the present state of our knowledge, to pronounce that word.”

“My dear friend,” said I, “it is among my dreams one day to visit India, China, Japan, California; but at present you might as well ask me to go with you to the moon.”

“You misunderstand,” replies Professor Omnium: “I do not propose to leave London. We can never go round the world, except in a small limited way, if we leave London. How much does an excursionist in India see of that country? Only a few cities, a few ruins, and the outside of some old temples, and he only sees a little of them. I stayed in Rome three days once—all the time I had there—trying to get a glimpse of some antiquarian treasures in the Bocca della Verita Church: first day, the church was closed to all outsiders by regulation; second day, the building was occupied by a pious crowd, and services were going on from daybreak to midnight; third day was so dark and rainy that I couldn’t see anything. On my way back I met an archæologist who had been in Nuremberg a week trying to scrutinize an old shrine; he had seen many priests, but only caught glimpses through railings of the shrine (St. Sebald’s, which exists in full-sized fac-simile at South Kensington), and the net result of his journey was represented in fifty photographs, just a little inferior to my own collection of the same—bought in Regent Street. I tell you, sir, there are few greater humbugs than this travelling about to see Objects (with a big O) of Interest. It’s expensive. Somebody says most travellers carry ruins to ruins, but the purses they carry away are the worst ruins of all. A man may well travel to see the world of men and women; but so far as art and antiquity are concerned, he who goes away from London shall have the experience of the boy in the fable, who

dreamed about the beautiful blue hills on the horizon until he left his own flinty hill-side and journeyed to them; he found them flintier than his own, and, looking back, saw his own hill to be bluest after all."

"Ah, then," I put in—when Omnium is talking it is well to put in when one can—"you begin by asking me to go round the world, and end with sneering at all my dreams of India and Japan—"

"Not a bit of it," cried the professor; "but ten thousand people and a dozen governments have been at infinite pains and expense to bring the cream of the East and of the West to your own doors: you turn your back, and pine for the skim-milk. Yesterday I was talking with Dr. Downingrue, an amiable and learned gentleman, who has been an official in the India House here for twenty years, and was lately given furlough for a year. That year he passed in Turkey and Persia. He told me that he wished to see a certain sacred book, written in ancient Zend, curiously illustrated with the most ancient pictures in the world, one of them possibly a portrait of the great Zoroaster himself. It was, he had heard, kept in the archives of the city of Bam Buzel, and he went a journey of three days and nights in a wagon to see and examine its text. Fancy his disgust at finding only an entry that the volume in question had been removed by order of the Shah in 1855, and that the Keeper of the Archives knew nothing whatever of its whereabouts. I took Downingrue by the hand, led him up one flight of stairs, and took down the old Zend book from its shelf there in Downing Street, where it had remained quietly, twenty feet over his head, while he worked twenty years for freedom to go searching for it in

Persia! Now I heard you talking a few evenings ago about your hopes of one day seeing Shiraz and Mecca, the Topes in India, and the great Daiboots Buddha in Japan. I have called this morning to say, firstly, Don't! secondly, Come, go round the world with me here in London! There is in the South Kensington Museum as noble a Buddha as that at Daiboots, which hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have journeyed for weeks to see: you have only to walk fifteen minutes to see it—not a copy either, but the huge bronze itself. You may travel through Mexico, Peru, and Chili for ten years, and in all that time never see one-hundredth part of the vestiges of their primitive life and history which you shall see in the British Museum. Greece?—and be captured by brigands. Professor Newton has Greece under lock and key, from Diana's Temple to the private accounts of Pericles. Assyria?—you go, and find that the human heart of it has migrated; you come back, and George Smith reconstructs it for you—"

There was no sign that Omnium was ever coming to an end: the only way of stopping him is surrender; and it was not long before we were making our pilgrimage through Stone Age and Bronze Age, as recovered by the ages of Iron and Gold, and still more by the ages of Art and Science. The professor held a very positive theory that to travel round the world profitably you must first travel up to it, assimilating its past ages. Two recent stories had taken a strong hold on his imagination: one was about a learned historian of his own Germany, who had resolved that it was essential to the complete culture of his little son that the child should begin where the world began, believe implicitly in its fetiches,

follow them till they changed to anthropomorphic gods and goddesses, these again till the Christian wand transformed them to fairies and demons, and so on. By this means the historian meant that his boy should bear in his individual periods of life corresponding periods in the growth of the race, and sum up at last the long column in a total of rational philosophy; but the boy is now growing old, and at last accounts had got only as far as Roman Catholicism, and there—stuck! The other story which haunted Omnium's mind came from California, and was to the effect that upon the head of a woman in mesmeric sleep there was laid the fossil tooth of a mammoth, whereupon she at once gave as graphic a description of the world the extinct animal had inhabited when alive as could have been given by any paleontologist. "Both good stories, eh?" said the professor, with a hearty laugh; "almost as good as Pilpay's fables: both of them fictitious notions ending in fantasies; but both, so to speak, prophetic types of what real science with real materials enables us to do to-day. We can, indeed, 'interview' the mammoth, as you Americans say; we can hang his portrait on our walls along with our other ancestors; and we can assimilate the education of the human race, not by beginning with being assimilated by its embryonic ages, risking failure to pick through the egg-shell at last, but by bringing to bear the lens of imagination, polished by science, and carrying so a cultured human vision through all the buried City of Forms."

Since the few mornings when I had the pleasure of rambling with my German friend in the museums of London, and listening to his raptures, I have passed a great deal of

time in those institutions, and with a growing sense that his enthusiasm was not misplaced. Indeed, so far as the museum at South Kensington is concerned—to which the present paper is especially devoted—to study it with care, and then stand in it intelligently, must, one would say, convey to any man a sense of his own eternity. Vista upon vista! The eye never reaches the farthest end in the past from which humanity has toiled upward, its steps traced in fair victories over chaos, nor does it alight on any historic epoch not related to itself: the artist, artisan, scholar, each finds himself gathering out of the dust of ages successive chapters of his own spiritual biography. And even as he so lives the Past from which he came over again, he finds, at the converging point of these manifold lines of development, wings for his imagination, by which he passes on the aerial track of tendency, stretching his hours to ages, living already in the Golden Year. There is no other institution in which an hour seems at once so brief and so long. A few other European museums may surpass this in other specialties than its own; though, when the natural history collections of the British Museum are transferred to their magnificent abode at South Kensington, one will find at the door of this museum a collection of that kind not inferior to the best with which Agassiz and others have enriched the Swiss establishments; but no other has so well classified and so well lighted an equal variety and number of departments, and objects representing that which is its own specialty—Man, as expressed in the works that embody his heart and genius.

The museum has been in existence about twenty-five years (1882). Its buildings and contents have cost the nation about one million pounds: an auction on the premises to-day could not bring less than twenty millions. Such a disproportion between outlay and outcome has led some to regard South Kensington as a peculiarly fortunate institution; but there has been no luck in its history. Success, as Friar Bacon reminds us, is a flower that implies a soil of many virtues. If magnificent collections and invaluable separate donations have steadily streamed to this museum, so that its buildings are unceasingly expanding for their reception, it is because the law of such things is to seek such protection and fulfil such uses as individuals can rarely provide for them. I remarked once to a gentleman, who did as much as any other to establish this museum, that I had heard with pleasure of various American gentlemen inquiring about it, and considering whether such an institution might not exist in their own country, and he said: “Let them plant the thing and it can’t help growing, and most likely beyond their powers—as it has been almost beyond ours—to keep up with it. What is wanted first of all is one or two good brains, with the means of erecting a good building on a piece of ground considerably larger than is required for that building. The good brains will be sure to recognize the fact that we have been doing a large part of their work for them at South Kensington. It is no longer a matter of opinion or of discussion how a building shall be constructed for the purpose of exhibiting pictures and other articles. The laws of it are as fixed as the multiplication table. Where there have been secured substantial, luminous

galleries for exhibition, in a fire-proof building, and these are known to be carefully guarded by night and day, there can be no need to wait long for treasures to flow into it. Above all, let your men take care of the interior, and not set out with wasting their strength and money on external grandeur and decoration. The inward built up rightly, the outward will be added in due season."

There is no presumption in the high claims of the curators and architects of the South Kensington Museum for the principle and method of their building. For it must be borne in mind that every difficulty that could conceivably present itself had to be solved by them in its extreme form: they had to deal with the gloomiest and dampest climate and the smokiest city in the world, and, *a fortiori*, they have solved every difficulty that can arise under less dismal skies. Nevertheless, this museum need not rest upon the claims made in its behalf by any authority. No statement can be so instructive and impressive as its own history, so far as that history exists; for, great as is the success it has attained, there is no one aspect of it which, if examined, does not reveal that it is rapidly growing to a larger future. I applied to a man who sells photographs of such edifices for pictures of the main buildings. He had none. "What, no photograph of the South Kensington Museum!" I exclaimed, with some impatience. "Why, sir," replied the man, mildly, "you see, the museum doesn't stand still long enough to be photographed." And so, indeed, it seems; and this constant addition of new buildings, and of new decorations on those already erected, is the physiognomical expression of the rapid growth and expansion of the new intellectual and