

THE DECLINE OF SWAGGER.¹

WE shall not, we hope, be accused of knocking another nail into the coffin of Respectability if we venture to point to the decline of swagger as one of the signs of the times. No doubt the change is somewhat recent, and the transition hardly complete. But we may take it as established that, for the moment at any rate, swagger is not the fashion. No doubt the consciousness of personal merit and possible superiority is as strong in human nature as ever. But most people are contented to acquiesce in the knowledge of the fact, and are willing not only to forego the particular form of its expression which is known as "swagger," but even to live without expressing it visibly at all. The most obvious and disagreeable form of self-assertion, which consists in making other people conscious of their inferiority by intensely unpleasant and supercilious behavior, has, of course, been dead and done with as a social claim for half a generation. High-born and wealthy heroes of the old novelists, who were too great to speak at the breakfast-table, and "turned to flog a morsel to their dogs with an air of high-bred nonchalance," exist no longer in fiction, and very rarely in life. Mr. Grandcourt was perhaps the last of them. But swagger in its minor and more amusing manifestations is also dying; and though it is premature to write its epitaph, we may call attention to some of the symptoms of its decay. One of the later forms of swagger, much affected by men of the bachelor leisured class, and especially by the much-abused "lotus-eaters" of club-land, was the *nil admirari* attitude. It had quite a vogue for a time, and in addition to conveying an impression of superiority, saved a great deal of trouble. Older men who had seen life were spared the effort of hearing about it again; and young men who had not were able to convey the impression that they had. This form of swagger had positive merits in a negative form. It is still in use as a weapon against a bore, but as a fashionable cult it exists no longer. It is as dead as wigs and powder.

Soldiers, for instance, are now among the quietest of men, not marked off by any mannerisms of dress or demeanor from other well-bred and agreeable gentlemen. No doubt "competition," in place of purchase, has somewhat reduced the number of men of private fortune who hold her Majesty's commission. But even if that consideration could account for the difference, the change is only partial, and the cavalry is still a service mainly officered by men of means. But the heavy "plunger" swagger which once distinguished these gentlemen in their relations to men in less fashionable professions has almost disappeared, except among a few of the very old stagers who cannot unlearn, and the very young ones who have not learned better. Some evidence of the change of manner among soldiers may be found in their increased popularity in general society—among men, that is; for it may be doubted whether the other sex quite shares the satisfaction with which men hail the absence of the military swagger. Sir Thomas de Boots no longer comes in "scowling round the room according to his fashion, and a face which is kind enough to assume an expression which seems to ask, 'And who the devil are you, sir?'" as clearly as if the General had himself given utterance to the words." On the contrary, he as a rule makes himself exceedingly pleasant, claims no more attention than is spontaneously rendered to him and his known position in the service, and perhaps forgets to fill his glass while engaged in explaining the theory of the *Kriegspiel* to some inquiring youngster.

¹ London Spectator.

Among minor types we may notice that the scholastic swaggerer whom Thackeray denounced among his university snobs has almost, if not quite, disappeared—partly, perhaps, because scholars are now turned out by the hundred instead of by half-dozens, and their monopoly of a certain kind of knowledge is broken; partly because good taste has grown with knowledge, and scholars may also be men of the world. No doubt, with wisdom cometh understanding; but we wish that those men of the age, the "scientific gentlemen"—scholars are rather down in the world just now—could discern the signs of the times in the matter of swagger. At present they possess, with Jews, mushroom financiers, and very successful tradesmen—the Egerton Bompuses of the day—almost a monopoly of the amount of obvious and positive swagger visible. Whether in public controversy or social intercourse, the scientific person sometimes swaggers with unquenchable energy. In those public discussions which lend such piquancy to the columns of the *Times* in the dull season, he still delights to pounce from his hygienic mountain home on some wretched disputant, and show him up as an ass—and a fraudulent ass—in that strong native Saxon, undimmed by "pedantry" and "silly compliance," which less gifted minds call education and courtesy. And if some weak controversialist writes in the victim's defence to say that, after all, what was in the poor man's mind was perhaps so-and-so, how promptly some other scientific person takes up the cudgels and knocks the nonsense out of him! These sterling qualities have so endeared him to the social circle that the mere reference to a "professor"—an honorable title which seems to be monopolized by the expounders of natural science—is usually enough to drive any number of plain men half frantic. No doubt society has itself to blame in a measure for the tyranny of the professors. It overestimated the value of the "facts" which they knew, before they could be weighed and compared with other forms of information. The modesty of Faraday, with his mild formula, "It may be so," and of Darwin—who was a country squire as well as a biologist—are forgotten in the swagger of the new men. But swagger, though not confined to parvenus, is, after all, the parvenu's besetting temptation; and the "scientific men" are the parvenus of knowledge.

Swagger, nowadays, is mainly limited to people living in little worlds of their own. Contact with the big world and realities rubs it away. Petty country squires, buried in remote neighborhoods, often give themselves airs most comical to behold by those capable of comparing what they are with what they claim to be. The bumptious scientific gentlemen who have made their class a byword, the bloated financier, and the overgrown shop-keeper, even when success is attained, are only on the verge of the world where their training should begin. Their time has been otherwise, and, let us hope, more profitably, occupied; and if they do not reform, their children probably will, and will do their best to reclaim their erring parents. For there is no lesson which that increasingly wise young person, the young man on his promotion, has laid more to heart than that "swagger," or, as he prefers to call it, "side," does not pay; and whatever his private opinion as to his own merits, he distinguishes very clearly between the swagger which does not pay and judicious self-advertisement which does. Moreover, being an educated young person with some claims to good taste, he is discriminating even in the means he takes to advertise himself, having recourse only as a last and doubtful resource to self-assertion or eccentricities of dress and manner.