

## A GLARING DEFECT IN SANITARY ADMINISTRATION AND THE DANGER TO HEALTH ARISING THEREFROM.

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THE merit of consistency is never in this country very conspicuous, and there are in the complex civilization of the present day so many cross-currents and contending influences that this lack of consistency is to a certain extent unavoidable. We try to act for the best, but when all is said it is but a sorry result that sees the light of day. But it is impossible in some cases to pass over gross breaches of consistency—breaches which are glaring, and stare one in the face at every turn. To one of such inconsistencies I would now draw attention, for it is an increasing evil, and one by no means free from danger to health.

If anyone will take the trouble to walk from Tottenham Court Road to Oxford Circus on any day of the week up to ten o'clock in the morning, he will have his attention arrested by a state of things more suitable to the habits of the primeval savage than to those of the inhabitants of the most important city in the world. About every hundred yards he will observe a red cart, which is the receptacle for what is, by a euphemism, described as the "dust" of the houses accumulated during the previous twenty-four hours.

"Dust" is, of course, a comprehensive term, but, used in the most elastic sense of which the word is capable, I defy anyone to include the contents of these vehicles under this designation. A close inspection of the matters removed is prohibited by one's sense of smell, but it is quite safe to say that potato-peelings, grease, kitchen refuse, bones, stale bread, rotten vegetables, all kinds of filthy paper, are included in the unsavoury mess which finds its way into the "dust" cart.

Before attaining this vehicle it will be noticed that these matters are placed in more or less dirty galvanized collectors, which are arranged along the edge of the pavement next the gutter. The condition of these receptacles will be accurately gauged by the abominable odour they give out should the wind happen to set so that the passer-by gets to leeward, and this odour is not by any means confined to the vessel when full; it is equally prominent when empty.

As the imaginary pedestrian wends his way, every now and then a load of "dust" will be taken from some house, and the bucket, with a considerable amount of force, will be pitched, mouth downwards, on the heap already accumulated in the cart, the result being the production of a thick cloud of evil-smelling dust (this time the genuine article), which diffuses itself both laterally and vertically, and certainly attains the height of bedroom windows. Great deliberation is exercised in removing the accumulations, and it is no uncommon thing to see one of these carts in the same position for twenty minutes, half an hour, or even longer. When at length the cart is filled, it is slowly withdrawn, being practically always uncovered: for when a covering is attempted, it is of such a scanty nature that it tends to make the contents of the vehicle rather more obvious than when these are patent in all their hideous nakedness.

I said that this process can be seen any day of the week. I ought to have excepted Sundays. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that the spectacle will be over by ten o'clock; indeed, there would seem to be no time-limit within which this disgusting operation is required to be performed, for it is no uncommon thing to find the process going on at four or five o'clock in the afternoon.

These, then, are the facts, and it seems well to comment on them with the view of pointing out that such a method of dealing with refuse is unworthy of a civilized community, and is also fraught with danger to health.

First with regard to the matter from the point of view of civilization. What is the mode of procedure adopted in those towns which are conspicuous for their attention to matters of health, and to the troublesome details which such attention implies? We all know how bright, cheerful, and clean are Paris and Brussels. In these towns do we see such sights as these to which I have just drawn attention? Most of us have driven across Paris when, arriving at one of the southern termini, it has been necessary to proceed to the Gare du Nord or the Gare de l'Ouest at a very early hour in the morning. It cannot fail to strike anyone how systematically and how thoroughly the sanitary measures which form the subject of this paper are performed. By seven o'clock the receptacles on the pavement are all emptied, and by eight o'clock there is not a trace of the process of removal to be observed. It is the same at Brussels, and, indeed, in almost every great Continental city.

In London, owing to the ineradicable laziness of the people, to a sublime indifference to matters of health (I speak of the people),

and to a total want of organization and system, the senses of sight, smell, and taste are outraged every day of the week. At a time when the removal of the "dust" has not even commenced in London, the whole business has been completed in Paris. Therefore, before the working part of the day has commenced, before the shops are getting into the routine of the day, and before the streets are filled with people, the necessary scavenging has been performed.

I have now dwelt upon the question as repugnant to the æsthetic sense. But there remains another and far more important aspect of this matter. The smell given off by these carts, and the diffusion in every direction of their contents, is plain and palpable to every passer-by. It is certainly a matter for comment, that at this time of day, when the world is talking of bacteria, bacilli, and of the claims of micro-organisms to be the whole and sole cause of disease, the distribution of disease germs goes on merrily under the very eyes of those who interest themselves in such theories, and in a manner strictly preventable. The irony of the position is almost comical, and the situation is a most striking illustration of what I have said concerning the inconsistency of the English race. What in the name of common-sense is the use of leading a crusade against bacilli, tubercular and others, while at our very doors the wholesale dissemination of these same bacilli is permitted every day? For that the collections of filth and rubbish removed by these carts must in the nature of things contain immense numbers of tubercle bacilli goes without saying. It is no unusual thing to see the air obscured by the dust arising from these collections, and it is certain that this most filthy powder is absorbed by the lungs of those passing by at the time.

Now, there are always a large number of cases of obscure febrile attacks, sometimes described as "febricula," aberrant forms of sore throat or intestinal disturbance, of which it is really impossible to state the mode of origin of the symptoms. Again, after operations, wounds not seldom "go wrong," and this in spite of every possible care and precaution. Is it not conceivable that in all such cases pollution of the air may have much to do with the appearance of such symptoms? When it is remembered that these so-called "dust" carts are at work practically the whole day in all parts of London, that no precautions are taken to prevent the dissemination of their contents in the form of dust, that these contents are more or less putrid and made up largely of decaying animal matter, and that there would seem to be a tendency to make the removal of refuse most active just at the times when the

streets are most crowded both with carriages and foot-passengers, it is really not to be wondered at that cases of poisoning do occur.

That diphtheria and enteric fever may be acquired in this manner is my firm conviction, and should any serious epidemic visit the Metropolis, such as plague, there can be no doubt that this filthy habit of "dust" removal would of necessity have to be discontinued at once in its present form.

The condition of things being as stated, it is simply extraordinary that attention is not directed to the abuse. It is not a case in which any special knowledge of matters of health is required; the facts are patent, glaring, and self-assertive. It would really seem that dwellers in London are in this matter not only lost to all sense of the fitness of things and external decency, but that they must also be devoid of the sense of smell. Anyone who has been unfortunate enough to pass one of these argosies when the wind was setting towards him, will, should his olfactory sense be in good order, take very good care to run no second risk of this kind. But it is not, indeed, an easy matter to avoid this risk. Quite recently, walking between Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Circus, I encountered no less than five of these red abominations, all busily engaged in diffusing micro-organisms.

It is perfectly grotesque to observe the attempt to keep up the form of sanitary conformity while the substance is utterly neglected. In the recent hot weather, when the removal of "dust" was proceeding briskly at all hours under a blazing sun, it was not unusual to notice, in perhaps every sixth street, a water-cart discharging a pink-coloured fluid into one of the gutters. This, of course, was with the object of disinfecting that particular gutter, and all the time the most offensive odours were being disseminated in the same street by perhaps half a dozen "dust" carts. All this shows a most lamentable want of centralization, of definiteness of purpose, and of common-sense. If a little less talking about sanitation and the evil effects of micro-organisms, and a good deal more action on sound sanitary principles, were the rule, it would not be necessary to call attention to a condition of things which, so far as I know, is characteristic of the largest, the richest, but by no means the most enlightened, city in the world.

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