

*The Lay Figure***T**HE LAY FIGURE: ON MISSED OPPORTUNITIES.

"If there is one thing that annoys me more than anything else," began the Man with the Red Tie, "it is to see our artists missing, by their own foolish want of enterprise, real chances of gaining credit and popularity."

"It is not every one," returned the Art Critic, "who can recognise a chance even when it occurs, and there are fewer people still who can make anything out of what they know to be an opportunity. Still, I do not think artists are any blinder to their own interests than other men."

"But I think they are!" cried the Man with the Red Tie. "Some kind of artists are worse than others, of course, but hardly any of them do what they might to advance themselves."

"And may I ask which kind of artist you consider the worst in this respect?" inquired the Critic. "Explain your charges; what evidence have you to bring in support of them?"

"Well, I happen to have visited lately certain exhibitions abroad in which the work of British artists has been shown beside that of men of other nations," said the Man with the Red Tie; "and I noticed in the things that came from this country a singular lack of originality. In design and craftsmanship especially we failed conspicuously to hold our own, and we made, I can assure you, a very poor show beside the others. Don't you call this missing our best chances? I do."

"If you had begun by saying what you really meant instead of by making a general attack upon the whole of British art, you would have found me much more ready to agree with you," replied the Critic; "but I did not feel justified in endorsing such a sweeping assertion as you put forward just now. I am quite prepared to admit that our designers and craftsmen have failed for some time past to turn their opportunities to good account. They have lost the power, as it seems to me, to assimilate new ideas."

"I protest!" interrupted the Designer. "You are not justified in saying anything of the sort. Whatever may be said about other forms of art in this country, I am certain that you are wrong in accusing the designers and art workers of any want of judgment. We have great traditions here of decorative art, and we are striving our utmost to uphold them in a worthy manner."

"Traditions! Yes, you have traditions," returned the Critic. "I would not attempt to deny that, but what I say is that you prefer traditions to oppor-

tunities. You are so scrupulous about observing this rule or that formula that you forget there is anything else to be taken into account. Is there nothing new to be done in decorative art?"

"But why should we seek for anything new?" demanded the Designer. "Should we not be satisfied with what we have? Our clients are content with the old styles, which, after all, are the best, so why give them what they neither want nor understand? If you begin to make experiments in decoration you must inevitably offend against good taste, and you must fail in loyalty to the great traditions."

"What you call loyalty I call stupidity," scoffed the Man with the Red Tie; "your loyalty is leading you into a ridiculous position. Other nations do not hesitate to make experiments which, whether they offend against good taste or not, are certainly instructive. Other nations are trying to learn something fresh and to make a break with the past. We refuse to do anything different from what we have done before, and we cannot see that all the rest of the world is getting tired of the stuff we produce. I say we are foolish to neglect all our chances of playing a leading part in what will be the art movement of the future."

"Does the future concern us at all?" asked the Designer. "I think we are very well off as we are; we need not worry ourselves about what may or may not happen in ages to come."

"You prove my point," said the Man with the Red Tie. "The future is not your concern, and you will go on as you are until your opportunities are gone never to return."

"And meanwhile," broke in the Critic, "this country is being left hopelessly behind in the race. What we will not attempt is being done successfully in many other parts of the world. New traditions are being created, new canons of taste are being established, new creeds are springing up, and we must go on bowing down to our old, battered and absurd idols, worshipping them not because they are of any use to us, but simply because they are old. Indeed, we deserve to be despised. We have been asleep so long that, like Rip Van Winkle, we do not realise that a new generation has sprung up which regards us as out of date. Even now, if we really woke up, we should have a hard fight to recover what we have lost, and the longer we delay the more hopeless our task becomes. It is not what may happen in ages to come that concerns us, I quite admit; it is what is happening to-day."

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