

"I care not who knows it," says the greatest story-teller of them all, "I write for the general amusement." And it is because he amused all the world, beginning with himself, so well, that his fellow men have loved him so much (and after the perverse unhumorous way of mankind, have made a classic of him, and force their children to read him — with notes). But funnily enough, a little boy I know of happened to get the most education out of his books in quite another way. He used to pass a bookseller's shop in Edinburgh, and stopped to gaze at the first page of a book exposed to view in the window; he became absorbed, and stood with his eager little face pressed against the glass till he had devoured every word on the two pages, and then walked reluctantly on to school. But the bookseller, who happened to be a very human being, had seen the greedy little eyes, and he turned the leaf, so that on the way home the boy read two pages more of the story; and every day four more until he had read the whole book.

It was *Waverley*, and of course it was "part of his education," though he did not think so. Who would not be educated by loving those gentle females with "ringlets betwixt brown and flaxen," and those brave simple knights and very royal kings? Many admirable things are told in the life of the great romancer, but best of all is the fact that when he came into the room his children and their friends (notwithstanding that the young of the human race are the shyest and most suspicious of all the wild animals) never stopped playing leap-frog, or flirting, or any other game they were engaged in; he was permitted to join if he felt like it, or to look on, but the game never stopped — and this when he was honored by the world as something between a god and a great prince; when

he had invented the art of romantic fiction and almost created a country. No wonder so many ladies proposed to him, though he was old and lame and in broken financial circumstances. Here was the ideal man, who had the world at his feet, and who could come into the room and join in the fooling of the young people without (I can think of no better expression than my brother's, though they may have had a different word for it at Abbotsford) — without "gumming" the party. The ladies did right to marry him if they possibly could.

I do not know what became of my lad of definite desires. Certainly he got what he wanted. He may be a great philosopher or a good gardener; he may be only a millionaire if his aim continued to be as narrowly material; but is there not in the unprofitable longing to swing everlastingly on a gate, the germ of a hope that he may have become a poet?

THE DOMESTIC PESSIMIST

THE pessimist, as a friend or neighbor, is not a problem. He is rather a relief to the monotony of life. His lamentations that all is wrong with the nation and the church and the world may be somewhat depressing at first hearing, but presently they come to be appreciated as an agreeable provocative to one's sense of humor. Mrs. Mundy, in Mr. E. F. Benson's *Paul*, is a delightful example. This lady, in painting a water-color of a Mediterranean bay, had managed to infuse something of her own melancholy into the radiant Italian sunshine. "One felt that it might begin to rain any minute."

But the pessimist within the home is another matter. Here it is not a question of an occasional conversation, but of a persistent obsession. When some one to whom we are bound by close

relationship and strong affection looks invariably upon the dark side of every plan that affects the fortunes of the family, it becomes more than a joke. The ethical textbooks, so generous in their advice concerning rare predicaments, give us little or no help in this everyday perplexity.

The situation I have in mind is not one in which the pessimist possesses the deciding authority or can even cast a vote. If his opinion were law, the result might be painful, but our course would be clear. The difficulty arises when there is involved no consideration of obedience, but rather the avoidance of friction. Perhaps the most frequent instance is that of parents who have somehow contracted a fixed idea that the children they have brought into the world are doomed to be unlucky or unwise in everything they attempt. This feeling may not reveal itself, or even exist, during the disciplinary period; it begins to appear when the sons and daughters acquire their independence and take their own place in the world. The apprehension of evil is thus the more pathetic because it goes with an absolute helplessness to modify the programme which causes such grave forebodings.

Sometimes, as in Mr. Gosse's *Father and Son*, this anxiety is produced by divergence in religious belief. In the case of R. L. Stevenson, the strained relations due to this cause were complicated by disagreement as to the choice of a career. "The father," Dr. Kelman tells us, "had apparently taken it for granted that every generation of Stevensons would accept its destiny in engineering and the Northern Lights. The son had other views, and cared for nothing but literature." The temporary adoption of "the uncongenial compromise of the law" only resulted in the disappointment of both the parties to it. As regards professions, it may

be accepted as a general rule that no father holding what is practically a life appointment can easily be persuaded to look other than gloomily upon the prospects of a son who disregards security of tenure for the sake of the greater opportunities offered by a free career. Or perhaps it is a marriage that converts into a certainty the parent's growing suspicion that his children will never acquire the capacity of sound judgment. I once knew the head of a large household who so much resented the marriage of his sons and daughters that he refused to attend the wedding of any one of them. Yet he was so far from being pessimistic about matrimony in general, that he was accustomed to advocate a tax on bachelors.

When the cloud of apprehension has once settled down, everything that happens only darkens its hue, and no rift is possible through which the silver lining may be seen. The other day a young man of my acquaintance thought it worth while, before embarking on a somewhat strenuous enterprise, to get himself overhauled by a physician. He was told, to his disappointment, that his general health was by no means so robust as he had supposed, and that he would do well to adopt certain precautions, if not to give up his projected scheme. The comment of his father, on hearing of the medical report, was: "I wish you had seen another doctor as well. He might have — detected some additional symptoms."

But where, you will ask, is the ethical problem? It is not the mere difficulty of cultivating a cheerful mood when one's own discouragements are reflected back, so to speak, by the mirror of a pessimistic friend. That is a trouble, no doubt; but there are well-known alleviations of it within reach. The real embarrassment has to do, not with our own comfort or peace of mind, but with our friend's. We know

that to acquaint him with certain facts concerning ourselves — facts that in our judgment are not discreditable — will cause him suffering. Shall we make them known to him, or shall we withhold them? Not every one can screw his courage up to so bold a course as was taken by the late Sir James Seeley. For many years, it is reported, he concealed and even denied the authorship of *Ecce Homo*. A well-known literary critic has testified to having heard him deny it on three separate occasions during one evening. This was deliberately done out of consideration for the susceptibilities of his father, a strict Evangelical. After his father's death Seeley avowed the book as his own.

The case would be a great deal simpler if it were simply a question of reserve in communicating the story of one's blunders and failures. But a little experience is enough to show the need of caution in reporting successes also. The domestic pessimist has an amazing capacity for peculiar interpretation. You must beware of raising his standard of expectation too high. This month, perhaps, you are exhilarated by an exceptional stroke of good fortune, and you pass on the news of it in the hope that it may do something to induce a more cheerful outlook. That is all very well, but if you are not able to produce next month an equally gratifying piece of intelligence you will learn that you are on the down-grade. How a normally pessimistic attitude may be made more gloomy by an occasional streak of irrational optimism, followed by an inevitable disappointment, is illustrated in the experience of a friend of mine, who not long ago was appointed assistant manager of a certain business. At the time, the manager himself was in failing health, and would clearly need a successor before long. My friend's appointment — a quite satisfactory one in itself — carried with

it, however, not the least prospect of promotion; and indeed the peculiar circumstances of the business made it in the highest degree unlikely that his own qualifications would be thought sufficient for the higher post. Presently he discovered by accident that his father, an inveterate pessimist, had somehow got it into his mind that this appointment meant the reversion of the managership at the first vacancy. By dint of repeated and detailed explanations, my friend dispelled, as he thought, the erroneous conclusions the old gentleman had drawn. After a year or two the manager resigned. No applications were invited, and an outsider was promptly chosen to fill his place. The assistant manager felt no grievance at being passed over. But the father's reception showed that, in spite of all the argument, his unfounded expectations had continued with him all the time. The disappointment was so severe that it made him actually ill.

If there can ever be such a thing as a dilemma, it surely arises in circumstances of this kind. A policy of reserve or accommodation is hateful. It makes the conscience uneasy with the suspicion that in the course we are pursuing we are sailing perilously "near the wind." Can we diverge even to this extent from absolute truthfulness without injury to our self-respect? There is a risk, too, in some cases that the disturbing news may reach our friend after all from some other source, with the inevitable result of our being reproached with lack of candor, and the possible result of an alienation of sympathies. On the other hand, there is the certainty that complete frankness will disturb the peace of mind of those we love and esteem, without doing either them or us any good. And, if we do tell them the facts, shall we really be telling them the truth, after all? For

we know that our story will have to pass through the distorting medium of their gloomy imaginations before it makes its impression upon them, and that, whatever we say or refrain from saying, it is flatly impossible to produce upon their minds a fair picture of the real situation. Here we are evidently entangled in a casuistical thicket. Will some professional moralist, who is also a man of the world, be good enough to extricate us?

SHRINKAGE IN DIET

THIS is a leaf from my Book of Lamentations, offered to all "contributors" who, like myself, know too much. A cryptic mole by nature, I am in the full blaze of latter-day investigation. I live with the most fearless and gallant rider of a hobby on our planet of curios — a Pure-Food Expert. He rides it bare-back; and at times it rears its front hoofs broncho-wise, and with its hind ones stirs a dust to tease the eyes of non-quadrupedantic oncomers. I was formerly one. I footed it, hugging my illusions and defying Science. It was an impious challenge. I was doomed to know, — I who should have come to my own, in the morning twilight of the world, when the haze was on the hills. Time was when I felt the exhilaration of the road; when with pores open, digestion good, I was the yokel of cheerful Ignorance. I am no longer a wise fool. I have given hostages to health — I who had it without seeking. By "taking thought," I have parted from my twin, Contentment. My body still jogs on the road, but my mind is dizzying on an aeroplane. I have married the rider of the hobby!

When a girl, I played the rôle of fair Ellen carried off by young Lochinvar. We decamped on a saw-horse. It was symbolic of my fate. For the hobby sometimes takes that wooden and in-

dustrial form. Then I mount it too. We make up in noise what we lack in speed, and many are deceived thereby. We shout and spur and apply the cudgel as Stevenson did to his donkey, and seem to be going somewhere. We do not get there, but that is to my liking. I am neither a coming woman nor a going one, but just stationary. The saw-horse phase suits my timorous nature and my home-keeping wits. I am not dispositioned to ride a Rosinante or a Pegasus, at each of which classics the hobby takes a turn. Then I am left low — as to my tenement of clay. I sit a groundling with my soul elate, and watch the flying feet of the courser without a desire to shout, "Whoa!" I am afraid of a live horse — there, it is out! — and I live with the least cowardly equestrian of my time. Let me prove it.

Before this present age, so blinding with superfluous light, I sat me down to a rasher of bacon, a steak smothered in onions, or a Deerfoot sausage in a snowdrift of mashed potato, with the gustatory innocence of a Bobo. So blissful was my ignorance that wisdom seemed to me the supreme folly. But the serpent came into my garden and proved me a daughter of Eve. Having tasted of the tree, I sought Adam and found him in a Socratic state of mind. He had already mounted his high horse Interrogation, and was sniffing afar the field upturned by the rake, when Chief Wiley blew his bugle.

Away went Gilpin, neck or nought,
 Away went hat and wig;
 He little dreamt, when he set out,
 Of running such a rig.

No; I'll say that for my rider — "'t was sore against his will" that he made the dinner wait to be inspected and certified. To that pass it soon came in our once cheerful home. Then for a season, repose for horse, rider, and pedestrian, under the protective symbols "U. S."