

# THE CHEERFUL CLAN

BY AGNES REPPLIER

## I

Now that the Great War is a thing of the past, there is no longer any need to be cheerful. For years a valorous gayety has been the rôle assigned us. For years we struck a hopeful note, whether it rang true or false. For years the plight of the world was so desperate that we dared not look straight ahead, lest the spectre of a triumphant Germany smite us blind. Confronted with a ruthlessness which threatened to extinguish the liberties and decencies of civilization, we simply had to cast about us for a wan smile to hide from apprehensive eyes the trouble of our souls.

Now the beast of militarism has been chained, and until it is strong enough to break its fetters (which should be a matter of years), we can breathe freely, and try to heal our hurt. True, there is trouble enough on every side to stock a dozen worlds. The beauty of France has been unspeakably defiled. The heart of Belgium has been pierced. The flower of British youth has perished. Italy's gaping wounds have festered under a grievous sense of wrong. Russia seethes with hatred and strife. In this country we see on the one hand a mad welter of lawlessness, idleness, and greed; and, on the other, official extravagance, administrative weakness, a heavy, ill-considered burden of taxation, and shameless profiteering. Our sense of proportion has been lost, and with it our power of adjustment. We are Lilliput and Brobdingnag jumbled up together,

which is worse than anything Gulliver ever encountered.

But this displacement of balance, this unruly selfishness, is but the inevitable result of the world's great upheaval. It represents the human rebound from high emotions and heavy sacrifices. The emotions and the sacrifices have met their reward. Germany cannot — for some time to come — spring at our throat. If we fail to readjust our industries on a paying basis, we shall, of course, go under, and lose the leadership of the world. But we shall not be kicked under by the Prussian boot.

Therefore cheerfulness is no longer obligatory. We can shut the door in the faces of its professional purveyors — who have been making a good thing of it — and look with restful seriousness upon the mutability of life. Our intelligence, so long insulted by the sentimental inconsistencies which are the text of the Gospel of Gladness, can assert its right of rejection. The Sunshine School of writers has done its worst, and the fixed smile with which it regards the universe is as offensive as the fixed smile of chorus-girls and college presidents, of débutantes and high officials, who are photographed for the Sunday press, and who all look like advertisements of dentifrice.

Popular optimism — the kind which is hawked about like shoe-strings — is the apotheosis of superficiality. The obvious is its support, the inane is its ornament. Consider the mental atti-

tude of a writer who does not hesitate to say in a perfectly good periodical, — which does not hesitate to publish his words, — ‘Nothing makes a man happier than to know that he is of use to his own time.’ Only in a sunburst of cheerfulness could such a naked truism be shamelessly exposed. I can remember that, when I was a child, statements of this order were engraved in neat script on the top line of our copy-books. But it was understood that their value lay in their chirography, in the unapproachable perfection of every letter, not in the message they conveyed. Our infant minds were never outraged by seeing them in the authority of print. Those were serious and self-respecting days, when no one sent our mothers a calendar with three hundred and sixty-five words of cheer, designed to jack up the lowered morale of the family. The missionary spirit was at work then as now; but it mostly dropped tracts on our doorstep, reminding us that we might be in hell before to-morrow morning.

The gayety of life is a saving grace, and high spirits are more than the appanage of youth. They represent the rebound of the resilient soul from moods of dejection, and it is their transient character which makes them so infectious. Landor’s line, —

That word, that sad word, Joy, —

is manifestly unfair. Joy is a delightful, flashing little word, as brief as is the emotion it conveys. We all know what it means, but nobody dares to preach it, as they preach three-syllabled cheerfulness, and gladness, which once had a heroic sound, the ‘gladness that hath favour with God,’ but which is now perilously close to slang. The early Christians, who had on a large scale the courage of their convictions, found in their faith sufficient warrant for content. They seem to have lived and

died with a serenity, a perfect good humor, which is the highest result of the best education. But when Mr. Shaw attempted to elucidate in *Androcles and the Lion* this difficult and delicate conception, he peopled his stage with Pollyannas, who voiced their cheerfulness so clamorously that they made persecution pardonable. No public could be expected to endure such talk when it had an easy method of getting rid of the talkers.

The leniency of the law now leaves us without escape. We cannot throw our smiling neighbors to the lions, and they override us in what seems to me a spirit of cowardly exultation. Female optimists write insufferable papers on ‘Happy Hours for Old Ladies,’ and male optimists write delusive papers on ‘Happiness as a Business Asset.’ Reforming optimists who, ten years ago, bade us rejoice over the elimination of war, — ‘save on the outskirts of civilization,’ — now bid us rejoice over the elimination of alcohol, — save on the tables of the rich. Old-fashioned optimists, like Mr. Horace Fletcher, put faith in the ‘benevolent intentions’ of nature — nature busy with the scorpion’s tail. New-fashioned optimists like Professor Ralph Barton Perry (who may not know how optimistic he is) put faith in the mistrust of nature which has armed the hands of men. Sentimental optimists, the most pervasive of the tribe, blur the fine outlines of life, to see which clearly and valorously is the imperative business of man’s soul.

For the world of thought is not one whit more tranquil than the world of action. The man whose ‘mind to him a kingdom is’ wears his crown with as much uneasiness as does a reigning monarch. Giordano Bruno, who had troubles of his own, and who knew by what road they came, commended ignorance as a safeguard from melancholy. If, disregarding this avenue of

escape, we look with understanding, and sometimes even with exhilaration, upon the portentous spectacle of life; if we have tempers so flawless that we can hold bad hands and still enjoy the game; then, with the sportsman's relish, will come the sportsman's reward, a reward, be it remembered, which is in the effort only, and has little to do with results.

The generous illusions which noble souls like Emerson's have cherished undismayed are ill-fitted for loose handling. Good may be the final goal of evil, but if we regard evil with a too sanguine eye, it is liable to be thrown out of perspective. In the spring of 1916, when the dark days of the war were upon us, and the toll of merchant ships grew heavier week by week with Germany's mounting contempt for admonitions, I heard a beaming gentleman point out to a large audience, which tried to beam responsively, that the 'wonderful' thing about the contest was the unselfish energy it had awakened in the breasts of American women. He dwelt unctuously upon their relief committees, upon the excellence of their hospital supplies, upon their noble response to the needs of humanity. He repeated a great many times how good it was for *us* to do these things. He implied, though he did not say it in rude words, that the agony of Europe was nicely balanced by the social regeneration of America. He was a sentimental Rochefoucauld, rejoicing, without a particle of guile, that the misfortunes of our friends had given us occasion to manifest our friendship.

## II

It has often been asserted that unscrupulous optimism is an endearing trait; that the world loves it even when forced to discountenance it; and that 'radiant' people are personally and perennially attractive. Mr. Robert

Louis Stevenson said something of this kind, and his authority is invoked by sentimentalists who compile calendars, and birthday books, and texts to encumber our walls. They fail to distinguish the finely tempered spirit which carried Mr. Stevenson over the stony places of life, and which was beautiful beyond measure (the stones being many and hard), from the inconsequent cheerfulness which says that stones are soft. We cannot separate an author from his work, and nowhere in Stevenson's books does he guarantee anything more optimistic than courage. The triumph of evil in *Thravn Janet*, the hopelessness of escape from heredity in *Olalla*, the shut door in *Markheim*, the stern contempt in *A Lodging for the Night*, the inextinguishable and unpardonable hatreds in *The Master of Ballantrae*, even the glorious contentiousness of *Virginibus Puerisque* — where in these masterful pages are we invited to smile at life? We go spinning through it, he admits, 'like a party for the Derby.' Yet 'the whole way is one wilderness of snares, and the end of it, for those who fear the last pinch, is irrevocable ruin.'

This is a call for courage, for the courage that lay as deep as pain in the souls of Stevenson, and Johnson, and Lamb. The combination of a sad heart and a gay temper, which is the most charming and the most lovable thing the world has got to show, gave to these men their hold upon the friends who knew them in life, and still wins for them the personal regard of readers. Lamb, the saddest and the gayest of the three, cultivated sedulously the little arts of happiness. He opened all the avenues of approach. He valued at their worth a good play, a good book, a good talk, and a good dinner. He lived in days when occasional drunkenness failed to stagger humanity, and when roast pig was within the income of an

East India clerk. He had a gift, subtle rather than robust, for enjoyment, and a sincere accessibility to grief. His words were unsparing, his actions kind. He binds us to him by his petulance as well as by his patience, by his entirely human revolt from dull people and tiresome happenings. He was not one of those who

. . . lightly lose  
Their all, yet feel no aching void.  
Should aught annoy them, they refuse  
To be annoyed.

On the contrary, the whimsical expression of his repeated annoyance is balm to our fretted souls.

For the friend whom we love is the friend who gets wet when he is rained on, who is candid enough to admit failure, and courageous enough to mock at it. When Jane Austen wrote to her sister that she did not have a very good time at a party, because men were disposed not to ask her to dance until they could not help it, she did more than make Cassandra smile: she won her way into the hearts of readers for whom that letter was not meant. We know the 'radiant' people to whom all occasions are enjoyable, who intimate — with some skill, I confess — that they carry mirth and gayety in their wake. They are capable of describing a Thanksgiving family dinner as mirthful because they were participants. Not content with a general profession of pleasure in living, 'which is all,' says Mr. Henry Adams, 'that the highest rules of good breeding should ask,' they insist upon the delightfulness of a downcast world, and they offer their personal sentiments as proof.

Dr. Johnson's sputtering rage at the happy old lady is the most human thing recorded of his large and many-sided humanity. A great thinker who confronted life with courage and understanding was set at naught, and, to speak truth, routed, by an unthinking,

but extremely solid, asseveration. And after all, the old lady was not calling for recruits, she was merely stating a case. Miss Helen Keller, in a book called *Optimism*, says very plainly that if she, a blind, deaf mute, can be happy, everyone can achieve happiness. Now there is not a decent man or woman in the country who will not be glad to know that Miss Keller is, as she says she is, happy; but this circumstance does not affect the conditions of life, as measured by all who meet them. The whole strength of the preaching world has gone into optimism, with the result that it has reached a high place in man's estimation, and is always spoken of with respect. Even the *Atlantic Monthly* gave us a Christmas sermon on the pursuit, and — if we can lightly pardon the unpardonable — the capture of happiness.

Are we then so sunk in dejection, so remote from the splendid and unconscious joy which the struggle for life gave to the centuries that are over? Time was when men needed the curb, and not the spur, in that valorous contention. 'How high the sea of human delight rose in the Middle Ages,' says Mr. Chesterton, 'we know only by the colossal walls they built to keep it within bounds.' Optimism was as superfluous as meliorism when the world was in love with living, when Christianity preached penance and atonement for sin, striving by golden promises and direful threats to wean man from that unblessed passion, to turn the strong tide of his nature back from the earth that nourished it. There was never but one thorough-going optimist among the Fathers of the Church, and that was Origen. He too preached pardon for the unpardonable, and looked forward confidently to the final conversion of Satan. His attitude was full of nobleness because he had suffered grievously at the heathen's

hands; but not even by the alchemy of kindness is evil transmutable to good.

The Stoics, who proposed that men should practise virtue without compensation, were logically unassailable, but not persuasive to the average mind. It does not take much perspicuity to distinguish between an agreeable and a disagreeable happening, and once the difference is perceived, no argument can make them equally acceptable. 'Playing at mummies is one thing,' says the sapient tanner in Kenneth Grahame's *Headswoman*, 'and being executed is another. Folks ought to keep them separate.' On the other hand, the assurance of the Epicureans that goodness and temperance were of value because they conduced to content was liable to be set aside by the man who found himself contented without them. 'The poor world, to do it justice,' says Mr. Gilbert Murray, 'has never lent itself to any such bare-faced deception as the optimism of the Stoics'; but neither are we disposed to recognize enlightened self-interest as a spiritual agency. It may perhaps be trusted to make a good husband or a good vestryman, but not a good human being.

A highly rational optimist, determined to be logical at any cost, observed recently in a British review that sympathy was an invasion of liberty. 'If I must sorrow because another is sorrowing, I am a slave to my feelings, and it is best that I shall be slave to nothing. Perfect freedom means that I am able to follow my own will, and my will is to be happy rather than to be sad. I love pleasure rather than pain. Therefore, if I am moved to sorrow against my will, I am enslaved by my sympathy.'

This is an impregnable position. It is the old, old philosophy of the cold heart and the warm stomach. I do not say that it is unwise. I say only that it is unlikely.

For our quarrel with Christian Science is, not that it prefers Mrs. Eddy to Æsculapius, or her practitioners to his practitioners; not that it sometimes puts us to shame by rising superbly above our froward nerves, and on less happy occasions denies the existence of a cold which is intruding itself grossly upon the senses; but that it exempts its followers from legitimate pity and grief. Only by refusing such exemption can we play our whole parts in the world. While there is a wrong done, we must admit some measure of defeat; while there is a pang suffered, we have no right to unflawed serenity. To cheat ourselves intellectually in order that we may save ourselves spiritually is unworthy of the creature that man is meant to be.

And to what end? Things are as they are, and no amount of self-deception makes them otherwise. The friend who is incapable of depression depresses us as surely as the friend who is incapable of boredom bores us. Somewhere in our hearts is a strong, though dimly understood, desire to face realities, and to measure consequences, to have done with the fatigue of pretending. It is not optimism to enjoy the view when we are treed by a bull: it is philosophy. The optimist would say that being treed was a valuable experience. The disciple of gladness would say it was a pleasurable sensation. The Christian Scientist would say there was no bull, though remaining — if he were wise — on the tree-top. The philosopher would make the best of a bad job, and seek what compensation he could find. He is of a class apart.

If, as scientists assert, fear is the note which runs through the universe, courage is the unconquerable beat of man's heart. A 'wise sad valor' won the war, at a cost we do well to remember; and from unnumbered graves comes a stern reminder that the world can hold

wrongs which call for such a righting. We for whom life has been made, not safe, but worth the living, can now afford *le bel sérieux* which befits the time and occasion. When preachers cease pointing out to us inaccessible routes to happiness, we may stop the chase long enough to let her softly overtake us. When the Gospellers of Gladness free us of their importunities, our exhausted spirits may yet revive to secret hours of mirth. When we frankly abandon an attitude of cheerfulness,

our Malvolio smile may break into sudden peals of laughter.

What have we gained from the past six years if not zest for the difficulties and dangers ahead of us? What lesson have we learned but intrepidity? The noble Greek lines upon a drowned seaman sound in our ears, and steady us to action:—

A shipwrecked sailor, buried on this coast,  
Bids you set sail.  
Full many a gallant bark, when he was lost,  
Weathered the gale.

## 'BEAUTY IS GATHERED LIKE THE RAIN ON HILLS'

BY DOROTHY LEONARD

BEAUTY is gathered like the rain on hills:

Here sinking into reservoirs of moss,

Whose beryl stars are guardians of loss,

And there a cowslip-hidden pool it fills.

Or if, uncisterned by the earth, it spills

In thin cascades where staircased ledges cross

A lonely hill-road, careless, cold winds toss

Its spray on granite fields that no man tills.

Diminish as it may, or disappear

From barren pastures, beauty cannot fail

While there are crevices to drink its dew.

Following, following down, like springs in shale

Or vanished old sea-sand, it filters through

Lost littorals of dream, and issues clear.