

LUCK

WILBUR LARREMORE

THERE is no better illustration of happy chance than Goethe's dying words. One of his earliest, and in some respects still his best biographer, George Henry Lewes, sentimentalizes the falling of the curtain: "His speech was becoming less and less distinct. The last words audible were 'More Light!' The final darkness grew apace, and he whose eternal longings had been for more light, gave a parting cry for it as he was passing under the shadow of death." Goethe's semi-conscious "cry" was as purely the voice of the failing body as Benjamin Franklin's fully conscious "A dying man can do nothing easily." Greater good luck no man ever had than, without realizing that his lips moved, to utter what as metaphorically summarizing his own great career has become one of the world's famous apothegms.

It may be suggested that Goethe's last utterance was not a sporadic but a culminating piece of good luck. Certainly no one more than he warmed both hands before the fire of life. Those who believe in luck, either as a personal attribute or an independent force—and there are many of them—may contend that this supreme darling of fortune enjoyed the favor of the jade—who is not a *fickle* jade after all—to the very end.

Recalling the large number of important achievements occurring in the teeth of demonstration by faultless logic that they were impossible, it is no longer safe to hiss out of the scientific forum any theory that has some plausible considerations in its favor. Quite recently the Horatios of the medical profession have been compelled to recognize a very homely phenomenon, undreamed of in their philosophy, in the person of the "typhoid-carrier." He or she has the malignant potency of a swarm of tsetse flies. She may or may not have had typhoid fever herself, but she has the occult capacity of absorbing its germs and spreading them broadcast. Similarly, certain exceptional persons have the repute of being luck-carriers. If the "lucky" man play cards he uniformly holds good hands. His "crazy" finan-

cial speculations in the end refute the wisdom of experts and rivals, and often when he attempts explanation one is reminded of the recipe of a Virginia Mammy for a delectable dish—"You put in flour till you have enough, a little milk and not too much butter." One need not be more intolerant of faith in Luck than was Lord Bacon of the belief of some persons in the potency of the Evil Eye as the malignant dart of Envy, which he naïvely passes by for the present, "though not unworthy to be thought on in fit place."

In all humility, then, conceding that as the secret of the typhoid-carrier probably will be discovered, that of the luck-carrier possibly also may be, we may offer suggestions appropriate to the present state of our ignorance. He who succeeds in action, but talks like "poor Noll," is a man of boldness and initiative, whether in declaring a trump or hazarding a fortune. Unrealized by himself, he was born with his mental processes adjusted in happy resultant. He has that combined gift of acute perception and rapid reasoning which passes under the name of woman's intuition, as if it were found only on one side of a Quaker meeting.

The difference between Alfred Tennyson and Charles Tennyson Turner was one of brain and nerve cells and the mentality of the average man of efficiency, or the humblest luck-carrier, is as inscrutable as that of Goethe. Chance is a factor in all careers and especially in those of men who know themselves and recognize opportunity when it comes their way. The phenomena of "luck," that is, the successes of men who habitually embrace opportunity, are ascribable to personality that has a distinctive physical basis, recondite as it may be. The "lucky" man is taken to be one to whom only happy chance systematically occurs; but intimate acquaintance often gives a clue to his potentiality. And even with those who never disclose anything further than the apparent ability to guess right, it may safely be assumed that "luck" is occult personality.

Nevertheless, the persuasion that some individuals are especial favorites of fortune is held by a large proportion of average Caucasians and it even obsesses many persons of superior gifts and education. Luck is unconsciously or semi-con-

sciously conceived as a force not ourselves that makes for our good or our discomfiture. It is akin to the fatalism of Greek tragedy and of Calvinism. Superstitions with materialistic paraphernalia have melted away as the masses of the people acquired the general truths of physical science. Belief in witchcraft, for example, which is very ancient and for a long period was practically universal, was rendered vulnerable by such stage properties as its broom-stick aeroplanes. Faith in luck has encountered less destructive criticism because intangibility of method leaves more for the imagination. It has even served as an outlet for the vast inheritance of superstitious sentiment which has been dislodged from one cherished stronghold after another. The disposition that formerly created humanistic gods and angels, accepts in their place a vague, mystical dæmon of foreordination.

A recent re-reading of Huxley's controversial essays aroused feelings equally divided between marvel and amusement. It was hard to realize that within the period of little more than a generation that had elapsed since they were written such a transformation of the average mental attitude has occurred as to make the learned professor's arguments seem like tilting with windmills. But while many of the narratives at which the logic of demolition was aimed are now regarded as myths, the myth-making faculty and tendency—the inheritance of thousands of generations—still survives. The educated man of to-day looks upon the theological beliefs of his grandfather very much as the latter did upon the fetichism of the "benighted heathen." None of us, however, ever grows to real intimacy with a fellow-mortal without recognizing his anthropomorphic heredity as well as his particular credulities. Yet perhaps the only universal superstition is that of each man that he is not superstitious.

If a man go to Monte Carlo with all his money in one pocket and a loaded revolver in the other, resolved that he will not continue to live unless his fortunes are bettered and realizing that he is merely taking a chance, his conduct, though unethical, is perfectly rational. Such cases, however, are not very common and not very significant.

The gaming table is more frequently sought from love of

excitement or danger. But the zest of risk and adventure dies out with advancing years, while the passion of gambling—as inveterate as any bodily propensity—fastens its tentacles on youths and retains them on grey-beards. The gamester persists over the green cloth or at the “ticker” because he expects to gain money. The motive is a combination of hope and superstition, the strength of the former element being in direct proportion to that of the latter. Habitual gamblers do *not* trust to the hazard of a die. They are an abjectly superstitious class of persons, constantly resorting to auguries and charms to foretell the fluctuations of luck or to propitiate what they conceive as an actual, if not indeed a sentient, entity. Whether Charles James Fox himself shared in the obsession is not specifically recorded, but certainly his fellow-players for high stakes at Almack’s turned their coats inside outwards for luck. Many persons who never play cards for anything more valuable than a “prize,” offer talismanic appeals for good luck essentially the same as those of a naked Hottentot. Stories have appeared in the newspapers from time to time, without contradiction, of the custom of eminent financiers to consult clairvoyants, astrologers, or palmists before betting on the tape.

There is no intrinsically ethical quality in gambling. If persons who can afford it wish to add to the zest of a game of chance by a substantial stake, it is their affair only, and not society’s. The practical effects of gambling, however, attach to it a grave immorality. It is one of the most fixed and universal passions because it is backed by the immemorial belief in a destiny that shapes our ends. As far down as the middle of the nineteenth century, devout doctors of divinity organized lotteries in order to endow religious and educational institutions. According to the more sophisticated standards of to-day, the conductor of a lottery, or a bucket-shop, is a criminal. Public sentiment is so convinced and firm that it influenced the Supreme Court of the United States to strain the law by holding the transportation of lottery tickets by regular commercial agencies to be *commerce*. It thus becomes competent for Congress, as the regulator of inter-State commerce, to enact laws prohibiting the handling of gambling paraphernalia by express companies. The

authority to exclude such matter from the mails was never disputed. Because human nature is the heir of ages of superstition, and on utilitarian grounds, the elaborate legal system for suppression of public facilities for gambling is an important feature of government.

Superstitious heredity has ingrained a tendency making for survival of faith in luck in those who are superior to the vice of gambling as well as to the grosser forms of credulity. In earlier days every event of importance was attributed to some dweller on Olympus or in Valhalla, or to the intervention of Providence. The propensity evolved during countless generations renders it difficult for those most emancipated from superstition to suspend judgment and wait for more light. Inadequate theories that are frankly tentative may prove serviceable in abstract investigation, but unfortunately thorough-going Agnostics are incapable of the agnostic attitude toward practical affairs. We are prone to form hypotheses which from the slender basis of known facts ought never for a moment to be taken as anything but provisional, and then gradually, in default of any better explanation, to cleave in all seriousness and the full strength of pride to our fools' certainty. An illustration is furnished by the sentiment of all communities towards mysterious crimes. The adage that murder will out is not even a half truth; the number of unfathomed murders everywhere exceeds those that are solved. But because human nature abhors a doubt, much as physical nature abhors a vacuum, popular opinion charges the crime to the person of greatest opportunity and most plausible motive and goads the District Attorney, even though not sharing the prevalent belief, into prosecuting him.

If some persons succeed and continue to succeed, if others fail and go from bad to worse, without adequate cause for either phenomenon being perceptible, the inveteracy of fools' certainty disposes persons even of a high degree of intelligence to say that the former are lucky and the latter unlucky. And this language is not used entirely in jest or figuratively. It is rather an utterance of that twilight zone of superstition to which a ghost story that is not too insistent on realistic detail but leaves much to the imagination, appeals with eerie charm. The idea that the lucky man has super-personal resources is not explicitly ac-

cepted, but it is dallied with and, vague as it is, influences opinion and action.

If no intelligent man really did feel more *comfortable* for having seen the new moon over his right shoulder, if everybody knocked on wood merely as a mock ceremony, if all our superstitions, including faith in luck, had no other effect than to add romantic zest to life, it would be ungracious and fanatical to protest. But superstitions are moral forces, often more potent than, for example, patriotism. Railroad men believe that bad luck strikes thrice, that after one accident has occurred the other two must promptly follow, after which last happening one may breathe easily until the first of the next series occurs. This is an article of guild faith having a practical bearing on discipline and morale and it must be reckoned with in somewhat the same spirit as the prevailing religion of a conquered province.

Machiavelli has said that "Fortune is the mistress of one-half our actions, and yet leaves the control of the other half, *or a little less*, to ourselves." While "Fortune" was not used purely in the sense of a good or evil genius, but was intended to comprise the tyranny of circumstances, the context shows that the mystical element of destiny was also in mind. Machiavelli's words testify to the touch of fatalism in the most worldly-wise of us and it is everyone's serious concern how far his superstitions, sentimentally or æsthetically cherished, have become motives of conduct.

Faith in luck is especially insidious as an ally of egoism. There is scarcely any more pathetic, withal more contemptible, figure than that of the middle-aged duffer, who indicts the intelligence of his whole generation for his failure to arrive, with incidental ascription to the shrewd malice of rivals, furtively backbiting those whose work has carried conviction to their age and ever log-rolling and wire-pulling for crumbs of notoriety. Outside the fields of creative thought, indeed, in every sphere of activity, may be found misfits, "inefficients," victims of self-love, or, as they phrase it, of bad luck. Many of them would have gained self-knowledge if their forbears for a hundred generations had not believed that the gods are jealous of the success of mortals.

MADDENING THE MEREDITHIANS

WILLIAM CHISLETT, JR.

MISS FRAZER'S *The Maddening Mr. Meredith* * has a tendency to madden Meredithians. I met one the other day who spoke with heat of Miss Frazer's endeavor to "focus" Meredith. I had had time to cool, myself, having read the essay earlier and clarified my notions later in lectures on my hero before a college class. I tried to show my friend, with academic judiciousness, as of one "lying on a cloud, rapt in sunshine," that Miss Frazer was more than half in the right.

What Miss Frazer has not done, of course, is to see Meredith through his own eyes. Meredith is a tease, so she puts him down in a pet; with full acknowledgment, however, of his genius. He is brilliant, but horrid.

Miss Frazer thinks Meredith's chief defect is his "sheer inability to tell a story." Oscar Wilde said that years ago in his *Decay of Lying*. Meredith as publisher's reader rejected Thomas Hardy's *The Poor Man and the Lady* for Chapman and Hall and gave the great novelist-to-be much good advice, but advice, according to Mr. Hardy, "that he did not follow himself." When Meredith wrote *One of Our Conquerors*, he showed his critics what he thought of them by making the book more exasperatingly difficult than its predecessors. Meantime he read others' novels, in his professional capacity, and continued to preach what he did not always practise—well-constructed plots and clear style.

Meredith was aware of his own genius, and gave it its peculiar expression. He read too many mere novels to write more mere novels. Lack of appreciation, again, added to an innate tendency to artistic capriciousness, made him more and more "original at all costs." "As a writer he has mastered everything except language," said Wilde: "as a novelist he can do everything except tell a story: as an artist he is everything ex-

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