

THRILLS, COMMON AND UNCOMMON

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN;

IDEALS change, like everything else. Time was when we aspired to wealth, to glory, to undying fame. Every man thought himself entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Now we devote ourselves to the pursuit of thrills. The critic coldly turns from book or picture, dismissing the unworthy effort with — "It gives me no thrill," or warmly admires another production because it does. Children have the advantage of us in this sensation, as the fresh field of inexperience makes each new impression thrilling. The younger they are, the more easily thrilled — "pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw."

The child, of course, enjoys what thrills him and repeats the indulgence until to his dull disappointment it no longer produces the desired effect. He is no philosopher. He does not in the least understand the mechanism of the nervous system carrying the sensation he seeks. Being a child, he has no background of previous experience to learn from, much less the historic background wherein he might observe his innumerable ancestors making fools of themselves all along the ages in endless repetition of the same childish behavior.

Perhaps our present renewed eagerness for thrills is due to the marvelous peculiarity of to-day — youth. Never before, apparently, have we been blessed with that great gift. Says this newcomer to those before him, or her, "I am the most important person in the world." The previous incumbent, studying the claim, replies: "Ah, I see. You have discovered youth and invented sex; you are indeed important." In later years, when we have got over this attack of youth, perhaps poets will be writing historic verse, humorous verse, about the early twentieth century, "When We Were Very Young."

When dealers in candy employ new assistants, the custom is to urge them to eat all they wish. They do. Quite a thrill at first to have a whole shopful of sweetmeats to choose from. So they help themselves, they eat, they stuff, and alas! the thrill turns to indifference and then to aversion. Perhaps there may have been some sugar philosopher who had sense enough to limit his indulgence and keep his enjoyment; but we do not hear of him.

In a sense the thrill-seekers are entirely right. The process of

living consists in receiving and transmitting force through our vitally sensitive machine. If the force pours smoothly, it is a keen pleasure to feel it. We may see this in the whole-souled rapture of the devoted dog when taken to walk; he has no "inhibitions," he is a bounding stream of delight. So again with children. When it is Christmas time, or a circus to visit, or any lively game, they "let themselves go" in full enjoyment.

With older people one finds infrequently this capacity for submitting to the current, whether it is intake or output. Yet in some lines they retain it, and are notably anxious to find new ones. The child's gusto in eating is soon modified by time, remains a satisfaction indeed, but does not yield the same "thrill." The man, wishing to repeat it, tries variety, tries expense, tries the overeating of the gourmand and the delicate tastes of the gourmet. Yet it is to be doubted if either Epicurus or Heliogabalus had the pleasure in food of any healthy schoolboy. A normal appetite and limited experience seem the requisites for a continuing thrill.

We have to eat as long as we live; it remains a necessity as well as a pleasure in extreme age. Would it not appear a simple use of the reasoning faculties to take measures to preserve the pleasure as well as submit to the necessity? But when we have the means for indulgence, we behave exactly like the young "salespersons" in the candy shop, and squander a lifetime's enjoyment in a few years at most.

Food furnishes the commonest thrill of all, shared by us and the other animals. Then, also common, comes the thrill of sex. This is certainly no novelty. It goes back, back, to the conjugating paramercia (which, by the way, do not conjugate when given more to eat); back to "the small starving male cell seeking the large rich female cell" in the initial union.

The interest and delight with which this process has been rediscovered by our young people, and harped on by certain philosophies entirely preoccupied with the subject, is one of the salient features of our age. When one says "our age" nowadays, one means a decade or so. Youth naturally has not a long memory, and, if not studious, has no race-memory at all. A little girl of my acquaintance gazed long and eagerly at a horse-drawn lawn mower at work, and remarked sadly to her aunt, "I wish I had lived in the age of horses." A horse to her was like a pterodactyl, apparently — a prehistoric monster of intriguing possibilities.

But assuredly for the last decade or two the search for thrills has opened up as an undiscovered country this extremely ancient field of sex. There is no doubt that it is thrilling. Among certain insects the instinct is so powerful that the unhappy male fulfills its demand though he is eaten alive in the process. Again, in one stage of insect life, it is not only the chief but the only occupation of one sex — he has no mouth, poor dear; he can but “love” and die.

The whole subject is open to the student, in all its forms, low and high, from botany up. It is certainly no secret. What, then, is all this new excitement about it in “our age”? As a philosophic base we have the theory that sex is, so to speak, the whole show. If we do accomplish a few things in manufacture, architecture, discovery, invention, and so on, these are but deviations from our main business, attained by “sublimating sex.” I have quoted before now what I once heard stated by a very conspicuous clergyman of New York: “Sex, and the stomach — these are the bases of all our activities.”

On this theory we may imagine Columbus as actuated by a desire for sweet potatoès, or for a Caribbean bride. We may wonder which appetite made Bruno dare the stake, or Herschel subordinate music for astronomy. Doubtless these consistent protagonists of the one motive would suggest that Lindbergh had “a date” in Paris.

They are consistent. No Calvinist ever carried his theology to more relentless conclusions than they carry their sexology. Not satisfied with attributing to this one desire all the acts of living men — who sometimes rudely contradict them — they dig up dead men who cannot answer, and reëmbalm them in their books in this sticky gum of all-enclosing sex.

These modern theories are nothing if not retroactive. Not only history and biography, but fiction must be reinterpreted in the light of this lurid lantern. But they let biology alone. Biology is too much for them. It shows, to be sure, some creatures who seem to have no business beyond reproduction, some so far gone in this particular thrill that — like two amorous scorpions — they bask in the mere preliminaries, in mutual contemplation, for hours and hours. But then these poor specimens of arrested development have no other thrills. We have.

After all, getting fed and getting reproduced do not fill a lifetime — a human lifetime. And even if, as with the ancient

Romans, food is regurgitated in order to repeat the pleasure of eating; or if, with later methods, we carefully detach any possibility of reproduction from the pleasure of mating so that it may be repeated indefinitely, still one does weary in time. If youth weren't so young, it would know this. All old people know it, if they have had that experience at all. The exhausted Don Juan looks back longingly upon the thrill of his youth, as the sated glutton looks back at the eager joy in eating of his boyhood, with its "normal appetite," and "limited experience."

Wherefore it follows that those who pursue only this particular thrill have to add seasoning to the dish, as one does with warmed-over food. That works for awhile. But alas! Even pepper — even red pepper — palls in time. People long before us might remark, "Yes, we found that out." Mere excess tires soon; variety one becomes accustomed to; and then follows morbidity, step after step of the abnormal, and after a lifetime of such a "Rake's Progress," only the same satiety.

In such pictures as we have of genuine enduring thrills — thrills that will wash as it were — it seems to take just two people to keep it up, the same two. Therefore it is sad to see our resourceful and daring young people messing up what might be a supreme experience by the multiplicity of their "experiences." Such old experiences at that! Like the "bundling" of our much decried ancestors, the "hand-fasting" of the earlier Scotch, the customs of ancient Babylon where girls earned their dowries by a sort of sacred prostitution in the temple, proving a double popularity by the amount gained; or, back of all history, by tribal customs where chastity was only expected after marriage, cheerful promiscuity before.

Dismissing for the moment these two very early pleasures of eating and mating, and freely admitting the natural desire for thrills, has the human race no others at command? Balboa certainly had one when the Pacific "swam into his ken." Archimedes, magnificent thinker that he was, leaped from his bath and ran naked into the street, shouting "Eureka!" That was a supreme thrill. It has come down the ages to us, that explosion of unbridled rapture, not because dinner was ready, not because of a new lady friend, but because he perceived a new truth. He "had an idea" as we say, and it was such a big one that it fairly set him on fire.

Then there was Copernicus, daring discoverer in astronomy,

who sat back from his telescope and murmured devoutly, "O God, I think thy thoughts after Thee!" There was a thrill. To all who study the huge glittering sky, with its inconceivable distances and sizes, as also to the examiner of atoms, each a little universe, the exquisite excitement of new sensation opens, new brain areas being touched and roused.

The ancient thrill of the hunter, which some of us seek to repeat by long expensive travels after "big game," may be had by the searcher of scientific truth, "world without end." There is in history — and all its predecessors of anthropology, biology, geology — a darkening hinterland where huge discoveries rise dimly before the student, each with its tremendous thrill; and there is in the progressive applied sciences of to-day and to-morrow an undiscovered country stretching before us, where any one, any day, may chance upon new knowledge of colossal importance, with its colossal thrill.

Luther Burbank, as a creator, must have had many. To hold in your hand, to look at and admire, a totally new flower or fruit and feel "I made it!" — that must be a sensation.

We all know the sensation in fierce games, and when we cannot play, we pay, sharing our excitement in a thousandfold shouting. We know it, have known it for all historic time, in the mass-thrill of fighting together for a common cause. Women have only now learned the thrill of mere marching together, the rhythmic tread of many feet, the music, the applause. Glory — there is a thrill quite difficult to associate with the stomach, or with even sublimated sex.

Sex and the stomach are, after all, merely individual incentives. We are human, and humanity is a collective thing; it has sensations far larger than those of a single animal. It seems a pity to emulate the thrills of a guinea pig — forever eating and mating — when we have so much bigger ones of our own.

To return to youth, and there is no getting away from it while it is so new an appearance — youth is of course intensely individual. This is not a reproach, it is a condition. The first business of youth is to grow, and that requires eating. The second business of youth is to keep the race going, and that requires mating. Both are individual activities. But now that education opens old knowledge to young minds and spreads the experience of the world before us ere we are twenty, there is small excuse for endless repetition of a childishness we should have long since out-grown.

These keen, intelligent, young minds are just as capable of appreciating the facts and laws of sociology as old ones are — more so, because not yet so heavily walled in with prejudices. They are vigorously throwing off the traditions of the past; that is a splendid step forward. But they still show a guileless readiness to accept new theories, as if because a thing is new it must be true.

By no means is this so. Some of the solidest truths of nature were discovered very early — by the Egyptians, for instance — and some of the most unmitigated foolishness is being put forward to-day. It is probably a fact that primitive savages were more credulous than we are, but it is certainly a fact that we are still pathetically, absurdly credulous. No ancient religion was more baseless and silly than some of the most recent; yet old and new find believers without difficulty.

Our long upward path is strewn with theories, with solemn philosophies, put forward in all seriousness and accepted by many, only to be shown up in later years as no more scientific than hopscotch. The present revival of the very ancient phallic worship as a philosophy instead of a religion ought not to confuse a really modern mind.

The simple facts of normal sex, the range of its abnormalities and pursuant miseries — all this is “old stuff”; it is “dated,” most emphatically. Here to-day we have a world shaken with new discoveries, lit and powered with new inventions, dragging at us constantly to step outside of personal limitations and feel the swelling waves of larger emotions — race emotions, immense, uplifting. This is no old story, to be learned from A to Z in the broken races behind us. It is a new one, not only vividly interesting in this installment, but “continued in our next.”

Here is a game to play, a war to win, a growing thing to help, a creation going on beneath our hands. As we enter into it there is a steady enlargement of our range of consciousness, a capacity for feeling utterly beyond the sweetest personal experiences. If we were frankly hedonists, caring only for sensation, for pleasure, there is none commensurable with this. To feel, with millions. To be conscious backward through all history, and forward into a constructive future. Then to act, with this wide power, for this endless end; to be Humanity, instead of just a little human animal with sex and a stomach — *that* brings a thrill worth feeling.

CASTE IN AMERICA

COUNT HERMANN KEYSERLING:



TWO of the most important characteristics of the Age of Democracy are, as it seems to me, its belief in differences of ability and its total disbelief in differences of State of Being. The latter disbelief is natural enough.



The old order which Democracy overthrew was based entirely on the idea that there are differences, due to the original status of man, which no talent nor merit could annul. These differences were thought to provide the only possible frame for a social system true to fact; and they were supposed to be entirely a matter of natural heredity, except in those instances where the law of Divine Grace — superior to the law of nature — chose to assert itself, as it was supposed to do in matters of religious calling, and very rarely also with regard to exceptional men of the world. Here we find the root of the idea that Kings rule by Divine Grace; the founders of dynasties really were self-made men, but the creed of the age would not have it so.

The idea underlying mediæval society was obviously wrong in many respects. Heredity does not work as accurately as it supposed. Nor is it safe to rely on Divine Grace always manifesting itself inevitably at the right moment. Above all, a social structure exclusively based on differences of State of Being disregards the rational side of life — that is, the one part of it which can be directed by the intelligent will of man. Accordingly, a society like the mediæval cannot be progressive. It cannot breed efficiency as a ruling principle, since no individual can develop outside of and beyond his inherited position in life. It is untrue to the reality of life for every individual whose inherited social position does not correspond to his true State of Being. And it appears fundamentally unjust wherever the men belonging to the supposed-to-be superior castes are not actually superior. The democratic ideal could conquer the Western World chiefly because, at the