

WORLDLY WISDOM

THERE is a character in Mr. Bennett's *These Twain* called Auntie Hamps, whose object is always to deceive, though she has no object in deceiving. Chicane is a habit with her, but she does not know that everyone takes her chicane for granted. We have all met old ladies like her, priding themselves on their worldly wisdom but unwise in all things, trying to manage everyone with a little tactful touch that exasperates more than brutality. We may itch to tell them that they are not clever at all; but we know that it would be vain. It is their pleasure in life to intrigue themselves out of imaginary difficulties, to believe that by their skill they are always escaping from dangers that do not exist. They turn life into a meaningless game and get a kind of morbid fun out of it; they are always playing patience with an imaginary adversary, and it would be cruel, if it were possible, to deceive them.

These old ladies, and all those who, whether young or old, male or female, make a parade of their worldly wisdom, are survivals from a time when worldly wisdom was taken seriously as being a separate art from divine wisdom — not so lofty, but more useful. Books were written to teach it, and of these the most famous in English is *Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son*. But Lord Chesterfield does not take his worldly wisdom so seriously as an earlier professor of it. The classic of worldly wisdom is the *Oraculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia* of Baltasar Gracian, a Spanish Jesuit who was born in 1601 and died in 1658. It has been translated into many languages; there is an English translation of it in

the Golden Treasury Series by Mr. Joseph Jacobs, from which we quote, and a German by Schopenhauer, who praised it highly. His praise makes one suspect that he knew less of the world than he thought; for Gracian, though an accomplished writer, is in his mind very like Auntie Hamps. He loves chicane for its own sake, and, though he professes to know all about the world, he is thoroughly afraid of it. It is for him a place in which you must always be on your guard, and his wisdom is all defensive.

The very headlines to his paragraphs prove this: Create a feeling of dependence — Keep matters for a time in suspense — Avoid victories over superiors — Arouse no exaggerated expectations on entering — Select the lucky and avoid the unlucky — Know how to withdraw — Think with the few and speak with the many — Use but do not abuse cunning — all these come close together, and, though Gracian sometimes takes a higher line, they are the burden of his book. As you read it you feel, first, that worldly wisdom makes life impossible, and, next, that Gracian is not writing about it from experience. Like the German with the camel, he is evolving it out of his inner consciousness; he is as far from any reality that ever existed as a penny novelette that tells us about the wickedness of the nobility: they may be wicked, but we know they are, not wicked in that way. So there may be an art of worldly wisdom; but we know that it is not Gracian's art; for his is the art of Auntie Hamps, well enough expressed, but futile in practice. Like her, he sees life as an elaborate game played according to certain

rules which in real life do not exist. 'Cautious silence,' he says, 'is the holy of holies of worldly wisdom. Mix a little mystery with everything, and the very mystery arouses veneration. You imitate the divine way when you cause men to wonder and watch.' So Auntie Hamps thought; but she was mistaken. She mixed a little mystery with everything, but she did not cause men, or women, to wonder and watch. Everyone saw through her mysteries, and refrained from telling her so only through good nature. Men do not watch and wonder at those who are always trying to deceive them: they are too busy with their own affairs to be interested in a game so futile; they shrug their shoulders and pass on to do business with someone who attends to business. Successful men of the world, even if as unscrupulous as Bismarck, reduce chicane to a minimum — they know that a lie is a last resource; but for Gracian, it is the routine of life. If we followed his advice, we should be like Metternich, according to Talleyrand, who lied always and deceived never; not like Talleyrand, according to himself, who lied never and deceived always. It is the inexperienced and the frightened who believe that cautious silence is the holy of holies of worldly wisdom. The man who is sure of himself knows that other men are clever enough, at least, to suspect caution. Even William the Silent was silent only on a famous occasion: at other times he enjoyed his own eloquence like most great men.

Gracian assumes that all other men are the enemies of the man of the world; but, if that were so, he would not be a man of the world. He assumes that worldly wisdom always takes the line of most resistance.

Man's life [he says] is a warfare against the malice of men. Sagacity fights with strategic changes of intention; it never does

what it threatens, it aims only at escaping notice. It aims in the air with dexterity and strikes home in an unexpected direction, always seeking to conceal its game. It lets a purpose appear in order to attract the opponent's attention, but then turns round and conquers by the unexpected. But a penetrating intelligence anticipates this by watchfulness, and lurks in ambush. It always understands the opposite of what the opponent wishes it to understand, and recognizes every feint of guile. . . . Sagacity now rises to higher flights on seeing its artifice foreseen, and tries to deceive by truth itself, changes its game in order to change its deceit, and cheats by not cheating.

It sounds very clever; given a game with those rules, that is how you would play it. That is how Jesuits do play it in Protestant novels, and perhaps they have got their reputation from Gracian's book. But imagine a life led on those principles. We have only a certain amount of energy, and we should spend it all in deceiving and being deceived. If we aimed always at escaping notice, we should do nothing but escape notice, and everyone would notice us escaping it. This talk of aiming in the air with dexterity reminds one of those Chinese warriors who think more about the carriage of their arms than about killing; while they are practising their arts of war they are killed.

Gracian's error begins with his premise — 'Man's life is a warfare against the malice of man.' No doubt men often are malicious. But malice is not their main business, nor is it any man's main business to defend himself against it. Malice is a risk to be taken in life; only in war is it to be assumed, and life is not war. You can make a war of it if you choose, but, if you do, you certainly are not worldly wise. This is a fact so plain that only a professor of worldly wisdom could ignore it. Let any man consider his chief occupations, and he will see that they do not consist of war against other

men; at least, if they do, he is practising them ill. The artist, the man of science, the priest, the teacher, the physician, the workman, the shop-keeper even — not one of these is at war, except by distraction from his proper business. That is to do or make things, not to prevent others from doing or making them. The tradesman may compete, but his first business, and his best way of competing, is to be a good tradesman. Even the lawyer's proper function is not so much to dispute as to compose disputes justly. Given a dispute, each side to it must be presented as clearly as possible; but a barrister who practised Gracian's arts would soon be driven from the courts by the comments of the judges. War is an attempt to impose your will on someone else, or to prevent someone from imposing his will on you. We do not spend our lives in doing either of these things, and, if we did, we should soon all be starving. Life continues with some happiness and well-being because we are, for the most part, occupied with a positive business of our own, and because we do by nature prefer that to the negative business of war. All this is evident, but not to Gracian or to Auntie Hamps; and, because it is not evident to them, they profess a peculiar art of worldly wisdom which they suppose to be different in kind from other wisdom and to be practised consciously by all men of the world.

No doubt Gracian had his eye on a particular world — the world of the court; but his error was in supposing it to be wise or conducted on any principles of wisdom. All men, wise or unwise, are far more spontaneous than he thinks them; and the incessant chicane of people like Auntie Hamps is the result not of design but of fear; it is the bad habit of a timid mind. No doubt in the court of a despot like

Philip IV of Spain, who does not know how to rule, there is an incessant war of courtiers all afraid of each other and all trying to rule the king; but no man need be a courtier unless he chooses, and it is not worldly wisdom to be a courtier at such a court. But even there Velasquez was secure without intrigue, because he was occupied with his own business and did it well. Under the worst rulers there are men who make themselves indispensable by their ability. They keep their places better by minding their business than by practising all the craft of Gracian. Olivares fell at last because of his arrogance and incompetence: he made war both abroad and at home and was defeated, but both wars were of his own making.

It was from a distant observation of such people that Gracian got his worldly wisdom; but he begins by misunderstanding them. He supposes them to be far more deliberate and conscious than they or any men ever are. The courts of incompetent despots do not breed his kind of superman, the world itself does not breed them, and we are sure, as we read him, that he has not drawn them from life. He has seen from afar little men intriguing for little objects and has supposed them to be great because of their rank. His superman is a monster who attains to perfection by doing what is not worth doing; whereas, all excellence, even of technique, comes from doing what is worth doing.

To Gracian ability is something to be hoarded. There is no need, he says, to show it to everyone. 'If there is too much display to-day, there will be nothing to show to-morrow. Always have some novelty wherewith to dazzle.' He thinks of ability as if it were the prepared wit of a diner-out which he must not repeat too often. He does

not know that even wit grows with the exercise of it, that a witty man does not display but manifests it, and that the best wit is that which happens. Much of his advice is full of the timid malice of inexperience. 'Find out each man's thumbscrew. You must know where to get at anyone'; or, 'Have a store of sarcasms and know how to use them.' But it is not worldly wisdom to get yourself disliked, as you certainly will if you keep a store of sarcasms and try to find out each man's thumbscrew. You will be known for your dirty tricks and everyone will despise you for thinking them clever. There are people who pride themselves on discovering the weak points of others and on their own power of sarcasm, but they are those who have failed in life or never tried to do anything. There are also, some able men who cannot resist the temptation of their own malicious wit. Lord Westbury was one of these; but in that he certainly was not worldly wise, for he made enemies who turned against him when they got the chance. In the House of Commons nothing is hated more than sarcasm for its own sake. It may be said that most members do not know how to retaliate, but there is a better reason. In our modern world we have at least learned to stick to business; and it is assumed that a man who hinders his own business by saying nasty things must be naturally malignant.

Gracian, of course, assumes this natural malignance in everyone. The world to him is a sad, dangerous place, in which men elaborate wickedness for the sake of the elaboration; they are all stage villains, and one can live among them only by learning how to frustrate them. Even the good man must defeat them with their own weapons — he cannot trust in his goodness. 'The discovery of deceit,' he says, 'was always thought the true nourish-

ment of a thoughtful mind, the true delight of a virtuous soul.' In fact, the good man's business is to be a Sherlock Holmes; but what he is to do when he has nourished his mind and delighted his virtuous soul with detecting deceit, Gracian does not tell us. Life for him consists in deceiving and detecting; he does not seem to be aware that the mass of men have to earn their living by some kind of useful work, and have not time to be always deceiving or detecting. He is insane in his attitude toward mankind because he writes of the idle, for the idle; and there again he is like a penny novellette. The art of life is for him an art divorced from use — an art that can be practised only by those who have nothing useful to do. He is romantic in a sordid way; for his people are as impossibly base as the people in the *Idylls of the King* are impossibly noble. Tennyson's sentimentality and Gracian's cynicism are both results of the romantic divorce from business; both come from thinking of mankind as freed from the struggle for life; and Gracian, at least, makes us understand what a blessing that struggle is, how it preserves us from insanity, from insipidity, from futility. There is always some honesty, some positive virtue, and usually some charity, in the man who has learned to do a useful job really well. He does know what life is like. Knowing how difficult his own job is, he makes allowances for other men; he assumes that they also are trying to do their job as well as they can and not wasting their time in trying to deceive each other. Perhaps the greatest virtue of the best modern literature is that it remains conscious of the fact that the mass of men have to earn their living, think, and feel in terms of that fact, and do not judge mankind with the implacable fastidiousness of the idle. The reason why

Auntie Hamps is Auntie Hamps is because she has no function of her own in life; she has to make her own game, and it is not as good a game as that which life imposes on those who have to earn their living. So Gracian assumes a paradise in which man is free from the curse of Adam and makes of it a silly Hell.

A greater man than he was fell into the same state of psychological error, perhaps for the same reason. We suspect that Tacitus was tempted by his own style into his portrait of Tiberius. The detection of the deceits of Tiberius was the nourishment of his thoughtful mind and the delight of his virtuous soul; but we know that Tiberius, being a man of business with a very difficult job, cannot have spent his life in deceiving other people. He may have gone mad toward the end of his life; in which case Tacitus misunderstood his madness. The Tiberius of Tacitus is the great original of Gracian and all romantic pictures of impossible cunning. He has made inexperienced men of letters believe that the great world is conducted on those principles; above all, he has made them believe that cunning is far more deliberate and self-conscious than it really is, and so that it is wisdom. But no man as wise as Gracian's supermen could have got his wisdom Gracian's way. Wisdom comes of wide, passionate, and positive experience; the knowledge of

men comes of loving them and confiding in them: it comes of staking all upon the nobler passions. But Gracian is always warning us against the passions; they are, he says, the humors of the soul; every excess in them weakens prudence. 'Let a man be so great a master of himself that neither in the most fortunate nor in the most adverse circumstances can anything cause his reputation injury by disturbing his self-possession.' No doubt there are men who always preserve their self-possession so that they may suffer no injury to their reputation; but such men have no reputation to be injured. They have emptied themselves of content so that they may make life easy; they have lost their souls in trying to save them. Above all, in their excessive self-consciousness they have cut themselves off from self-knowledge. Those reasons which they find for their actions are not the real reasons. Behind their refusal of all spontaneity there is a hidden spontaneity of fear, which they will never confess to themselves, and so can never master. There is nothing real in them except fear, and this negative reality they could turn into a positive only by confessing it to themselves. They are, in fact, pathological; and from Gracian's book, if we cannot learn worldly wisdom, we may at least learn how to cure ourselves when we think we are worldly wise.

The Times

‘LA LIBRE BELGIQUE’

IN many houses in Brussels there are to be seen, proudly displayed as a souvenir of four years' occupation, a pile of thin, closely-printed sheets. These are the files of *La Libre Belgique*, the newspaper which for four years supplied the only antidote to German war news and was the only source of information of the real state of affairs in the outside world.

The story of how *La Libre Belgique* was edited and published is shortly to be told in full by one of those who played a leading part in its production. In the meantime a pamphlet published in Brussels a few weeks ago gives an account of some of the remarkable adventures of M. Eugène van Doren, who for many months was responsible for printing and publishing the paper.

Soon after their arrival the Germans began to publish a paper, the *Bruxellois*, and it was to counteract the influence of this journal that *La Libre Belgique* came into existence. The first issue consisted of a news sheet written by M. Jourdain, a Belgian journalist, editor of the *Patriote*, which Van Doren printed on a duplicating machine and distributed by means of Boy Scouts. This met with instant success, and the Germans at once forbade the reproduction of written matter by any mechanical process. Then came Cardinal Mercier's famous New Year sermon 'Patriotism and Endurance.' Jourdain and Van Doren at once conceived the plan of printing and selling at cost price 25,000 copies. Most of these copies were confiscated by the Germans, and the same fate befell a second edition of 25,000 copies printed by another press. The Germans were now thoroughly roused.

Thus stimulated, Jourdain and Van Doren determined to continue their activities in the form of a permanent newspaper. The title *La Libre Belgique* was selected; Jourdain undertook the editorship, while Van Doren made himself responsible for the printing and publication.

From the first Van Doren displayed a genius for his dangerous task. He made himself a hollow walking-stick, in which he collected manuscript copy, and also devised an apparatus of string and whalebone for concealing papers in his chimney. At first he and his friends, riding round at night on bicycles, distributed all the copies themselves. Then the Germans prohibited bicycle traffic after dark, and it was necessary to go round on foot. This proved too laborious, so Van Doren organized a service of distributors, to each of whom he delivered several hundred copies, which they distributed in allotted districts. These distributors, he decided, should never be allowed to come to his house, but should be supplied with their copies in some public place, such as a street or shop. A favorite place was the lift in the Grand Bazaar in the Boulevard Anspach. Van Doren and his distributor would meet in front of the lift and travel up together; Van Doren would place his parcel of papers on the seat of the lift, and then get out at the first floor, the distributor got out at the next floor, taking the parcel of papers with him. A similar device was adopted on the tram. Van Doren would ride on the outside platform of the car, placing his parcel on the floor. The distributor would get on to the same car; Van Doren then got off; the dis-