

## CONTENTMENT IN POVERTY

BY WILLIAM CHASE GREENE

THE expectant attitude of most of the people that I know gives me daily amusement and surprise. They are always waiting for their ship to come in. When it has arrived, they say, they are going to begin to be happy. Till then, of course, they must do the best they can with makeshifts; but then they are going really to live. Then they will travel, and build a new house, and go to the theatre twice as often, and have really good clothes; till then, they will have to get along with illustrated magazines and bargain counters. Now, what surprises me is not that they should feel a vague curiosity about their ship, but that they should ever expect to see it, and that they should so definitely postpone happiness till its problematic arrival. Perhaps we are so hopeful because we live in a new and growing country. Yet no one imagines that any fairy godmother is going to double our incomes all round, this week or next year. If wealth is to be increased on a large scale, it will be either only in the conspicuous case of a Midas here and a Croesus there, or in our discovery of forgotten assets that can readily be cashed in. Croesus and Midas somehow appeal to our imaginations less than they used to do; and we know that as a matter of sober fact it is not likely to be our roofs that the golden lightning will strike. In all probability, most of us will remain all our lives in our present comparative poverty. Nevertheless, I suspect that we can force Croesus, Midas, and Co. to honor rather largely our drafts on our very poverty.

In speaking of poverty it is well to be somewhat definite and concrete. There is a sort of poverty that is of the Devil; it means squalor, famine, and disease. I hold no brief for such poverty, or for its forbears, or for its offspring. There is, too, an elegant sort of "straitened circumstances" that means giving up one of the automobiles and the better brands of cigars; it deserves few tears. But between these limits exists the province of true pov-

erty, in which more than half of us always live—and usually wish we did not, and see no reason why in a free America we should not emerge from it. This is the province of skilled laborers and of most professional men; it includes the men who run their own furnaces and the women who “do their own work” but not other people’s. From it comes the bulk of the support of the movies, the public schools, the Ford car, professional base-ball, and the church. Some of its members climb into the more affluent minority, and some fall among the tragic fraction of the submerged; but their places are always being taken by recruits from the other classes. On the whole, the wealth and the comfort of those whom I describe as truly “poor” is slowly increasing; but unless new sources of wealth are tapped for a population that remains stagnant, there can be no very sudden increase of wealth or comfort for the “poor” as a class. Yet most of the increase in happiness of the nation, if each individual is to count for one and only one, must come within this class, for the obvious reason that it includes most of the population. I am not at all sure that the bulk of the population is conspicuously more happy to-day than it was one hundred years ago, or three hundred years ago. But I am confident that the “poor” have in their possession or within their reach enough assets for happiness to make Crœsus look foolish.

If these seem to be homiletic abstractions, they can be tested in daily experience. The *pater familias* who has actually taken his share in the bringing up of children, perhaps primarily because there was no one else at hand to help the mother, may feel that the details of feeding, amusement, and discipline take time that he can ill afford; but he finds that he knows the little beggars in an intimate way that is denied to the father who is wealthy enough to suppose that he can depute all such matters to others. Nor is he my only witness. Ask the sun-burned amateur gardener, whose peas are always “better than you could buy”; the confirmed walker, who can hardly be prevailed upon to accept a lift from well-meaning motorists; the music-lover whose concerts are perforce few, but who prefers his own efforts on the fiddle to the allurements of “canned music”. In the homely matter of meals, the only testimony worth having

is that of the person whose experience includes both Persian plenty and domestic frugality; yet ask the maid-attended family what meal in all the week they anticipate with most pleasure, and notice how often the immediate answer tells of Sunday night, when the maid is out, and supper is only a picnic before the open fire or on the veranda, when Edith brews the tea and Roderick does the toast to a burn. Most *soi-disant* "brain-workers" are constantly on the verge of premature senility, a disease which shows itself much less in the products of their minds than in their personal habits—in caste assumption, in lack of adaptability and practical sense. For them, the economies and the manual labor enforced by the war have often proved rejuvenating. The abstract thinker while sifting ashes and painting the stairs has learned something of physics and sociology; it is the laboratory method that he most needs. Even when the intellectual expert chafes at being compelled by stress of economy to spend his valuable leisure in chores that "any laborer" could do, the question remains whether the whole man does not gain, even though the expert suffers.

Nor is the champion of poverty hypocritical if he occasionally accepts with delight the rare pleasures that only a more ample margin of wealth can afford. The very rarity of the occurrence is a sufficient guarantee both that he is in no danger of being debauched by it and that his enjoyment may be the more intense. The appetite for music, like the appetite for food, is most keen when not jaded by over-indulgence. Few of those who hear the Franck Symphony gain more pleasure from it than those whose half-starved ears are familiar with every note of it not from much concert-going but from much experimentation with it on the piano at home. "Fools are they," wrote the old Greek poet, "who know not how much more is the half than the whole, nor what blessedness there is in mallow and asphodel."

If we must admit that many luxuries and comforts are beyond the reach of the average "poor" man, he takes for granted many conveniences that our grandfathers would have considered the perquisites of only the lucky few. There is no harm in these conveniences in themselves, if we do not get the notion that it is necessary to have them all in order to be happy, and that the more

we have of them the happier we shall be. I admit, for example, that I like electric light; but I had no cause to complain when, for what I considered good reasons, I chose to move from the delights of electricity to a house that could boast only gas. Is it not curious that in our materially progressive age we are so completely happy when we "cut loose from civilization," whether momentarily in the guise of a picnic or in the more lasting form of "camping out" or "roughing it"? It is then that we feel most fully that we are on our own resources, as the humble servants and assistants of Mother Nature. If we can bring ourselves to see that frugality is only a prolonged picnic, a sort of self-imposed athletic training, we shall not greatly envy the lot of those who have to live in stupidly correct houses and wear uncomfortably stylish clothes. And frugality has indeed the essential character of a game: the attempt to do one's best within the limitations imposed by the rules. If our grandfathers contrived to get along, moderately well, without a good many of the things that can be acquired only by feverish efforts, it seems reasonable to suppose that, other things being equal, we should be as happy as they if we were no more liberally supplied than they. What is not equal, of course, is the glittering superfluity of our neighbors: but it is not at all clear why that should trouble our peace of mind. If moderate industry will provide us with moderate means, as under normal conditions it generally does, we have our choice: we may fret ourselves in the hope of greatly increasing our means, a hope not often realized by many under normal conditions, and a hope that offers no certain prospect of any increase in happiness under any circumstances; or we may frankly accept our moderate means, our comparative poverty, and employ our leisure according to our own tastes. Acceptance is the choice of the really happy.

Most failures in happiness arise from an almost incredible faith in the potency of inert things and a naïve distrust of ourselves. But, after all, satisfaction, or contentment, or whatever the phrase may be, is a state of mind; and chattels have not an absolute value. To the golfer who already has half-a-dozen clubs, every new addition to his outfit represents a diminishing return. Happiness, to be sure, can no more easily exist *in vacuo* than golf can be played in a void. But its essence is neither acquisitive-

ness nor passive possession, but the active use of a limited number of things; like golf, it is stance, and swing, and head-work, and control of nerves. At no distant day, we are told by those who should know, there will be an end of the fuel on which rests the machinery of our precarious civilization, and we shall have to depend more than ever on our human selves. If we are wise, we shall begin betimes to reckon up our human assets, and see what remains that can be converted into happiness. Unless I am mistaken, we shall find that we have of late been educating ourselves and our children into a rather blind confidence in the blessedness that inevitably follows an increase of wealth. I am inclined to think that our schools are in many ways better than they used to be: but, to apply a crucial test, do they succeed in showing the boys and girls that it is possible to have a good time with simple means,—with home-made and makeshift toys, for example,—or do they encourage the notion that the larger the material equipment at hand the more the fun? The school buildings are certainly better; is the teaching of human experience better? And, not to throw undeserved blame on the schools, does it do any good to preach the simple life to youngsters who are carried home in limousines to indigestible dinners?

All this will not go unchallenged: I can hear the rebellious voices of many a scoffer. There is the supercilious young man who considers the domestic scenes that I have mentioned too bourgeois, and who chafes at the very thought of poverty, and thinks it should never be accepted in any spirit save that of fierce protest. I shall not be at pains to convert him to any special brand of happiness, for happiness cannot be forced on anyone; but I am afraid that he may discover that he is temperamentally unfitted to be happy. Then there is the angry friend of the people who thinks I must be a tool of the capitalists, hired to deter the down-trodden poor from rising against the rich. I suppose I shall protest in vain that I am all on the side of the poor in many of the abstract questions of justice; but in the very practical matter of happiness I find by observation that happiness is not often reducible to a calculus of things lacking or things possessed. The capitalist, too, will have his angry word for me, because he fears that I advocate slackened effort and diminished production.

But can he not see that I am concerned only with the very practical and immediate effect of a man's view of the things that he personally needs? I am more terrified by the critic who may accuse me of retailing a Pollyanna philosophy, of a cheap optimism, of a denial of evil. But there is evil enough in the world and to spare, without magnifying the evils of moderate poverty. Nine-tenths of the world have always had as little material well-being as nine-tenths of us have to-day, or rather less, and have yet contrived to produce games, dances, music, and poetry—fairly good signs of superabundant energy. There are devoted men of genius, to be sure, scholars and scientists and artists, who could do great things if they were not obliged to spend so much of their time in keeping the wolf from the door. Yet much as this is to be deplored, I am the less disturbed by it when I think of the men of undoubted genius who have ceased to produce works worthy of themselves as soon as they have achieved more than modest competence: possibly even the poet sings best on an empty stomach.

Yet there are more weighty objections to a doctrine of contented poverty. Happiness may be bought at the expense of others. *Pater familias* may be quite content to jog along on nothing a year, immersed in his vocation and his avocations, forgetting that others of his family may be reduced to something little short of suffering—unfashionable clothes, for example. The man who has wedded himself to Lady Poverty and to a terrestrial spouse is guilty of some sort of bigamy, and it is hard for him to be true to both wives. There is no easy way out of this dilemma; but the question is fortunately a relative one. And it is because the whole question is a relative one that it is of such eternal interest. We cannot live at all without a minimum of material resources; up to an uncertain and variable point our happiness seems to increase with increasing wealth. Some kinds of work depend on the use of large amounts of funded capital or an ample margin of leisure. But beyond a comparatively low point there is no evidence to show that for men as individuals happiness will accrue as rapidly as wealth is increased; there is even some evidence to the contrary. Where the point of diminishing returns may be, I do not presume to say; probably it varies with individuals, and is sometimes rec-

ognized, alas, only after it has been irretrievably passed. And there is no rule of thumb to help us; for happiness is not a science but an art.

So I shall not be greatly worried if I hear that my neighbor is getting a new car. I shall not even feel defrauded if I find it impossible to "buy a book a week." As I look about the room in which I write, I see a good many books that have rested on my shelves for some years, for lack of time unread. Probably they will keep if I read them as slowly as they deserve to be read.

WILLIAM CHASE GREENE.



## A NEAPOLITAN SONNETEER

BY RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS

THE tourist in a European city where he has no acquaintance, and whither he has gone, after the manner of most such visitors, unprovided with letters to establish him in social relations there, peoples it for himself with literary associations. Every beautiful woman who rides towards him down the Champs Elysées in a luxurious victoria is Mme. de Beauséant, every young elegant is Maxime de Trailles; any frowning Venetian *palazzo* may be hiding the swift decline of Milly Theale, any fair estate is Matcham.

And so, as he is being swept along in a steamer bound for Naples, past the strung-out necklace of sapphire islands, past Posilipo and Cape Misenum to where the city rises white and shell-shaped to the Castello, he will see that splendid panorama perhaps as the setting for the leisures and love-affairs of elegant foreigners like the English father and daughter and their French visitor in Gautier's *Jettatura*, or for the pretty but less richly appointed American romance of Aldrich's *Two Bites at a Cherry*, or for the pathetic idyl of *Graziella*.

But unless he knows the native literature well enough to have read at least Matilde Serao's *Paese di Cuccagna*, he will perhaps not be thinking at all of the true Neapolitan life, that swarming, seething, passionate life of Via di Toledo, of the *popolani* who breed and stifle in the insanitary *Funneco verde*, get themselves condemned to the prison of San Francisco, claim sanctuary in Sta. Maria del Rifugio, or amuse themselves in the theatre of *Fondo*.

Yet this is the Naples of Signor Salvatore di Giacomo, and it has sufficed him as subject for the successive volumes of a lifetime. From his first essays at short stories, recently assembled with an introduction by Benedetto Croce in a volume called *Novelle Napolitane*, to the collection of verse, *Canzoni e ariette*