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HOLBROOK JACKSON

# Essays of To-day and Yesterday

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ESSAYS OF  
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

HOLBROOK  
JACKSON



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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

I AM not one of those who write to give people understanding: I write for those who have it." That declaration marks a true essayist, and it is very certain that no reader possessing understanding will fail to appreciate the delicate humour and happy phrasing so characteristic of Mr Holbrook Jackson's essays. Whether he writes of firewood—the variety which he so happily terms "domesticated, . . . the split infinitives of forgotten woodlands"—whether he discourses lightheartedly of the qualities of the Quangle Wangle, or Grilled Sole, tells a story, or instructs the reader in all the mysteries of the epicure's table, he is always a delight to read. His enthusiasm is tempered by a knowledge that is innocent of pedantry, and his work reveals a wise and kindly tolerance based on common sense.

The critical studies which he has written, such as his life of William Morris and his chief work, *The Eighteen Nineties*, show more of the interpreter than of the mere critic. Bernard Shaw and Guy de Maupassant, Richard le Gallienne and Oscar Wilde, all receive just and discriminating treatment at his hands. Himself a finished craftsman, Mr Holbrook Jackson knows how to appreciate the work of his fellow-writers.

Apart from his work as essayist and biographer, Mr Holbrook Jackson is one of the most versatile and widely experienced of living editors. Among the magazines and journals he has edited are *The Idler*,



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*T.P.'s Weekly*, *T.P.'s Magazine*, and *The New Age*. For seven years he owned and edited the charming literary pocket-journal *To-day*, which is now keenly sought after by bibliophiles. As a further evidence of his versatility, and a fact not generally known to the readers of his literary works, he is an authority on many industrial and commercial problems, and as Editorial Director of the National Trade Press, Ltd., he occupies an influential position in the business world.

The essays in this collection have been chosen from the following volumes: "The Pathos of Profanity," "Wood-fires," and "Instead of a Spring Song" from *Occasions* (1922); "Masters of Nonsense" from *All Manner of Folk* (1912). "The Irony of Irony" has not hitherto appeared in this country, but was printed in *The Golden Galleon*, U.S.A., in 1925. "Suprême de Sole" appeared originally in *End Papers* (1923), which was issued pseudonymously by Messrs Chapman and Hall, Ltd., by whose courtesy this essay is reprinted.

F. H. P.

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## THE PATHOS OF PROFANITY

YOUR conversation this evening, Lord Illingworth, has been most immoral, but very interesting all the same." Whenever the remark was made by Mrs Allenby in *A Woman of No Importance* something like a thrill of naughty appreciation passed through the theatre. So is it always with profanity in life and letters. We are shocked: it is proper to be shocked. We are amused: it is necessary to be amused; and if we were not shocked by others, how should we measure our own virtue? But profanity needs no defence, profanity is the homage paid by disillusion to faith. It is more attractive than faith because faith carries no surprises. It is kinder than faith because faith is proud and confident. Above all, profanity bears with it the pathos of eternal rejection. Faith, reverence, the virtues, have hope: verily, they shall have their reward; but, despised and rejected of men, profanity walketh alone without hope or comfort in the future, staking all passionately in the present. Profanity, like virtue, is its own reward.

We should be grateful to the profane, even when we condemn them, for where would some of us be if we had no one or nothing to blame? "Voltaire," said Benjamin Jowett, himself not immune from academic profanities, "Voltaire has done more good than all the Fathers of the Church put together." Was the Master of Balliol referring to Voltaire's provocative piece of irony: "If there were no God it would have been necessary to invent Him," which only the hypersensitive would call profane; or was he referring to the profanely piquant half-truth: "God created man in

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His own image—and man has returned the compliment”? Perhaps Jowett had in mind the former Voltairian phrase, which is more in accord with his own advice to an undergraduate of Balliol who had informed him that he could find no accurate reason for God’s existence—“ I cannot see any signs of Him in Nature, and when I look into my own heart He is not there.” “ You must either find Him by to-morrow morning,” said Jowett, “ or leave the college.” To be ordered to find God overnight by one who had constantly to buttress his own belief by dialectics, and in the end would seem to have hoped for the best rather than to have believed in it, is so ironic as to be a piece of profanity itself, despite orthodox intention.

But profanity is not confined to religious matters. Porson’s favourite profanity was to “ damn the nature of things ”—which does not err on the side of exclusiveness. Secular profanity is presumably any blasphemy against the moral code or convention of time or place. It is not profane, for instance, to sing, as Rudyard Kipling does, that

The wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Khatmandhu,  
And the crimes of Clapham chaste in Martaban,  
because you are merely stating fact; but, if you are, say, a patrician in danger of losing your means of subsistence through revolution, it would be profane of you to say, as that most charming of English lady letter-writers, Miss Emily Eden, asserts Lord Alvanley said during the troubles of the eighteen-thirties, that in such circumstances you would “ keep a disorderly house and make Glengall your head-waiter.”

Profanity is an inevitable and, perhaps, necessary reaction from all accepted views. It usually admits a protest, but is not inherently purposeful, still less propa-

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gandist. Profanity may spring from outraged reverence or allegiance; from suffering or sorrow too hard to bear. It is difficult for us to see the tragedy through the not always unpleasant mists of theology without losing our sense of reality, but when we do so we feel the underlying reverence of the story of the old peasant-woman who, upon hearing for the first time a full account of the Crucifixion, expressed the shattering wish that, "since it all happened so long ago, please God it wasn't true."

But if profanity is sometimes secular, it is generally in opposition to godlike pretensions. *Lèse-majesté* is only remembered when a king peacocks himself with godlike attributes. The last of the 'Divine Right' kings was William Hohenzollern, and *lèse-majesté* was last heard of in Germany. It awoke humour even in the German. Two citizens of Hanover were discussing the Emperor, and a policeman overheard one use the word 'fool' and proceeded to make an arrest. The good citizens protested that they were discussing the Czar of Russia. "Tell that story to the Marines," said the policeman, in effect, "you must have meant the Kaiser!" Napoleon was too great to claim authority of God. He put his success down to hard work, quickness of vision, and action. He was profane. Greatness and profanity are allies behind the scenes. Napoleon's profanity might be called *lèse-humanité*. He denied and defied humanity. *Vox populi vox dei* was only true as it served his object—which was power. His profanity was an empirical use of religion in the systematic control of men.

Napoleon, frankest of men, was frank in this also:

How can a state be well governed without the aid of religion? Society cannot exist save with inequality of fortune, and inequality of fortune cannot be supported

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without religion. When a man dies of hunger by the side of another who is gorged he cannot accept that disparity without some authority that shall say to him: "God has decreed it thus—there must be rich and poor in the world; but in the hereafter, and for all eternity, it will be the other way about." It was by becoming a Catholic that I pacified the Vendée, and a Mussulman that I established myself in Egypt; it was by becoming ultramontane that I won over public opinion in Italy. If I ruled a people of Jews I would rebuild the Temple of Solomon! Paradise is a central spot whither the souls of men proceed along different roads; every sect has a road of its own.

But contempt of man rarely shocks us. We are only amused when a Lord Alvanley announces that he likes to sit in his club window on a Bank Holiday watching it rain on the damn people. Frederick the Great's contempt of man was shown when he rebuked a complaining and demoralized regiment with the words: "Dogs! Would you live for ever?" What the German soldiers thought of this opinion of their will to live is not recorded. Nor in our own time has anything more than amused tolerance been aroused by Rudyard Kipling's poem in which he throws verbal vitriol at the people:

Have no truck with the senseless thing.  
Order the guns and kill!

Insulting mankind apparently involves no greater danger than speaking disrespectfully of the equator. At the same time even a semi-democracy can be aroused to newspaper fury if damned openly. An instance is recorded in America, when William K. Vanderbilt uttered the famous phrase "The public be damned!" over a claim for public rights in connexion with the New York Central Railway. Public conscience was shocked in England, in 1730, when one

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Bond, a Member of Parliament, who had been connected with a fraudulent scheme for advancing money to the poor, said "Damn the poor!" on being informed that his victims would suffer by the failure of the scheme. In our own time a notorious 'unemployed' motto, "Curse your charity—we want work!" gave pain to numerous well-meaning philanthropists. But the honour of committing simultaneously *lèse-majesté* and *lèse-humanité* has been reserved for Bernard Shaw. He achieves the double offence very neatly in the statement, "Vulgarity in a king flatters the majority of the nation."

Profanity is not a faculty, profanity is an attitude of mind. Few men are wholly, but the best men are sometimes, profane. Profanity is revealed at its truest in the flash of an outraged soul. Like lightning, it rarely hits and rarely intends to hit anything; but what it does hit is scarred or destroyed. Even when it misses it illuminates. Weak profanity, such as idle curses and cheap swearing, is, like all weak things, ineffective, futile, and beneath consideration. "Light loves and little errors," as Swinburne said, "do not affect the elect of heaven or hell." The present epidemic of swearing, part of the backwash of war, has no relation to high profanity, in either its tragic or its comic form. It is generally no more than the reflex action of boredom in contact with inefficient expression. Contemporary swearing is verbal incompetence. If every man or woman who used that painfully overworked word 'bloody' applied it blasphemously on the basis of its alleged derivation from "By Our Lady!" then good folk might well believe our generation was well on the way to perdition—or Rome, where profanity and Protestantism are synonymous terms.



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There is a distinction, however, between sectarian profanity and the august gibes and resentments which periodically explode upon the page of history. Let us not confuse this wayward child of passion with mere heresy. The countless sects will "furiously rage together," blaspheming one another for blasphemy, but the profane will pass by in the pride of humility, saving their arrows for higher game. The sectarians are only profane to each other as opposing neighbours are: the profane oppose themselves to the gods. They have jealousy, but no littleness. Profanity is jealous of the belittlement of the gods. "I will only believe in a God who can dance," cried Nietzsche, most tragic of modern men, contemplating the sad gods of Lutheran Germany. "Beware of the man whose God is in the skies," adjures Shaw, in the face of our devastated, church-crowded civilization. "An honest god's the noblest work of man," sneers Robert Ingersoll, humorously contemptuous of the anthropomorphic creations set up for worship by those who would trade us life-in-death for death-in-life. Beerbohm Tree's assertion that "Every man has the God he deserves" deserves to be true. Thus profanity goads the incompetent god-maker.

Profanity, being swift, flashes arrows of wit, but more from necessity than preference. Profanity is kin to humour—allied with laughter and tears. Wit is of the head; it lacks feeling, and has no pity. Humour is of the heart; it rarely gives pain, but is always near pain, for the heart can go on feeling after it is broken. Profanity in the hour of parting laughs the soul abroad and greets death with a quip. A little before his death Rabelais called for his domino: "Put me on my domino, for I am cold: besides, I would die in it, for *Beati qui in Domino moriuntur*," and after this most

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sublime of all puns he murmured, "Let down the curtain, the comedy is ended!" and so passed away. There is more bitterness, but not less pathos in Heine's dying thought, *Dieu me pardonnera; c'est son métier* ("God will forgive me—that's His job"), and there is something valiant and stoical in the deathbed irritation of Thoreau. A well-meaning religious friend persisted in recalling the philosopher's thoughts to another world: "One world at a time, please!" growled Thoreau. The tragi-comedy of this rebuke is comparable with the *mot* which passed with the last breath of a reprobate nobleman who was desired by his chaplain to "call on the Lord." "I will," he replied, "if I go that way, but I don't believe I shall."

Surely there is repentance in such fatalism. But if doubt as to one's heavenly destiny has in it the elements of repentance, honest doubt of any kind cannot be entirely displeasing to any but a God made after man's image. Thus would Arthur Thistlewood, the Radical leader in the Cato Street Conspiracy, have entered into bliss after such a prayer as that uttered by him on the gallows: "O God—if there be a God—save my soul—if I have a soul!" Sometimes the pathos of deathbed profanity becomes holy in its very *naïveté*. Such, for instance, as that recorded of the Spanish patriot Ramon Narvaez, who, exhorted by the priest to forgive his enemies, exclaimed feebly, "My father, I have no enemies; I have killed them all." Nor is there less quality in profanities which mingle impishness with tragedy. A god who could dance, say, would welcome the delicious old French lady, admired of George Meredith, who, when the *curé* came with consolation for her last moments, told him her best improper story, and died.

The Church has not always escaped the slings and

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arrows of profanity, and often the stones have hit and the barbs stuck, for the Church is exposed to attack in all periods and, being human, deserves it in most. There is something peculiarly consoling to those who observe with dismay the tenancy of the House of God by the devotees of Mammon, when they remember the brothers de Goncourt's description of the Abbé Blompoix as the preacher who "brought Jesus Christ within reach of the wealthy." The well-meaning profanities of preaching are innumerable, and were we robbed of them we should lose a fair proportion of our most delicious vintage humour. Two of the best of them are part of the record of that entertaining gossip, the Hon. Lionel Tollemache, who remarks that Macaulay could not have said that "no field preacher ever carried his irreverent familiarity so far as to bid the Supreme Being stop and think on the importance of the interests under his care" if the historian had heard, as Tollemache had, a *locum tenens* at Helmingham exhort his congregation to remind the Deity of the promises by which He had bound Himself. He advised them to "Entangle God in His own words!"

Tollemache gives us a further and more direct refutation of Macaulay's opinion in the story of the opening of a Congregational Church in the West of America, where the Senior Deacon began his dedicatory address, "O Lord, it has been proved to Thee by statistics how grievously inadequate has been the religious accommodation of this city." Such patronization of God is, perhaps, pushing profanity too far, so it is a relief to turn to an amiable story more recently imported from America by Mr E. V. Lucas, about an old trapper who was induced to attend a camp-meeting. Perched on a back seat, he watched the scene,

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when an elderly Evangelical sister placed herself beside the old hunter, laid her hand on his arm, and asked him if he loved Jesus. He pondered for some moments and then replied: "Waal, ma'am, I can't go so far as to say that I love Him. I can't go so far as that. But, by gosh, I'll say this—I ain't got nothin' agin Him." This has the correct *bouquet*.

The teaching of religion has as many humours as it has stupidities and cruelties. And while we laugh or smile, for the humour is quiet and reflective rather than rollicking, we seem to feel our way to the heart of that restlessness which makes saviours or saved of us all. The story of the slightly deaf old lady who, according to Bernard Shaw, sat for years at the feet of Charles Bradlaugh in the Hall of Science, under the impression that the famous atheist was a Methodist, shows that, as Omar believed, only a hair "divides the False and True." And one lingers over the memory of Talleyrand's advice to Lepaux, the inventor of a new religion called Theophilanthropy, with justifiable malice. Lepaux complained that France was not exactly eager to adopt the new gospel. Talleyrand replied sympathetically, "I am not surprised at the difficulty you experience; it is no easy matter to introduce a new religion; but I will tell you what you might at any rate try: I recommend you to be crucified and to rise again on the third day." Profanity, not for the first time, jumps down on the side of religion. Indeed, profanity loses point and piquancy when completely separated from reverence. Profanity is not irreverence, it is outraged reverence. The world may yet be saved by a profane saint.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since writing these words my attention has been drawn to a valuable elucidation of this passage in the essay on Baudelaire

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We can only guess what is in the mind of God, just as we can only guess the purpose of life. But without in the third volume of *La Vie littéraire*, which I cannot deny myself the pleasure of quoting. M. France says :

"I am not wrong, therefore, in saying that he [Baudelaire] is a Christian. But one must add that Baudelaire, like M. Barbey d'Aureilly, is a very bad Christian. He loves sin, and delightedly enjoys the voluptuousness of falling. He knows that he is damning himself, and in that he pays a homage to divine wisdom, which will be accounted to him for righteousness, but he has the vertigo of damnation, and no taste for women, beyond that sufficient surely to lose his soul. He is never a lover, and he would not even be a debauchee if debauchery were not superlatively impious. He is much less attached to the form than to the spirit, which he regards as diabolical. He would leave women completely alone, were it not that he hopes thereby to offend God and make the angels weep.

"Such ideas are doubtless perverse enough, and I see that they distinguished Baudelaire from those old monks who sincerely dreaded the phantoms of the night. Pride was what had thus depraved Baudelaire. In his arrogance he wished that everything he did, even his most trivial impurities, should be important ; he was glad that they were sins, because they would attract the attention of heaven and hell. Fundamentally, he was never more than half a believer. His temperament alone was wholly Christian. His heart and intellect remained empty. It is said that one day a friend, a naval officer, showed him a *ju-ju* which he had brought back from Africa, a monstrous little head carved in wood by a negro.

" 'Well, it's very ugly,' said the sailor, and he threw it contemptuously aside.

" 'Take care,' said Baudelaire uneasily. 'Suppose it were really a god !'

"They were the most profane words he had ever spoken. He believed in the unknown gods, especially for the pleasure of blaspheming. To sum up, I do not think that Baudelaire ever had a perfectly clear idea of the state of soul which I have tried to define. But it seems to me that one finds, amid incredible puerilities and ridiculous affectations, a truly sincere testimony in his work." (*On Life and Letters*, by Anatole France ; translated by D. B. Stewart, pp. 22-23.)

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committing the cheap sin of attempting to make God in our own image we may venture the opinion that if God has preferences in these glimpses of the moon, those preferences would be for human character which displayed spirit as well as spirituality. The timid acceptors of fate might conceivably give place to those valiant ones who, rather than barter their soul for eternal bliss, defied even the Most High if they felt aggrieved, and died with a laugh or, if needs be, a taunt on their lips. An honest God would welcome honest profanities even in those who could not honestly believe in Him, especially, one would like to think, if the rogue of an infidel had the spirit of a Stendhal, who, visualizing the sin and pain of this world, said, "The only excuse for God is that He does not exist!" And even such an honest God might conceivably laugh with us at some profanity revealed in a flash of humour. This is more doubtful, for your gods are grim folk, despite Heine's assertion that God was "the Aristophanes of heaven." But the Elysian Fields must be duller than the least enthusiastic devotee imagines if the gods were not to be moved at least to benign smiles by the record of the assembly of philosophers which was held in heaven when one of them went up to God and whispered confidentially, "Between friends, we do not believe that you exist at all," a profanity equalled only by the enthusiasm of the Hyde Park orator who thanked God he was an atheist!

But mere doubt is a poor form of profanity. It is so obvious and so easy as to be almost innocuous. High profanity springs from tragic wrath or exalted pity, and is revealed oftener in art than in life. Dionysos is the god of profanity: "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

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There is dignity in objection involving disfavour or disgrace, whether of God or man. There is dignity also in unshrinking acquiescence when untoward fate or circumstance conquers. But few can maintain their dignity under stress of beatitude. Tragedy dignifies. Destiny, though still mysterious even to the modern mind, is mysterious only as a familiar disease is mysterious; and, like a disease, it is attacked and exploded, cajoled and circumvented. Oracles foretell its evolution and priests devise illusions to give the doomed courage. But no one has yet answered the profane and bitter realism of ancient Greece. "I was not, I came to be: I was, I am not: that is all; and who shall say more, will lie: I shall not be," sang an unknown poet; and Palladas mourned, "We are all watched and fed for Death as a herd of swine butchered wantonly"; and Glycon, "All is laughter and all is dust, and all is nothing; for out of unreason is all that is."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the tragic attitude of the finite toward the infinite down the ages.

The essence of tragedy is purification by contest with inexplicable forces. Tragedy places a nimbus about the brows of the doomed. Whether it be Greek or Renaissance, Hebrew or Western European, tragedy is always a revelation of the sanctity of the pain-forged, the transcendentalism of sorrow. Thus we are permitted to contemplate the great tragic figures of Œdipus and Dionysos, Jesus and Job, Hamlet and Lear, Tintagiles and Deirdre and Peer Gynt. And in the less real life which we live it is always those who have battled against great odds and failed who are sublime. Success alone is commonplace.

<sup>1</sup> These three translations are from Mackail's *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*.

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Profanity becomes sublime when it is thus allied, when, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, it walks unscathed through the fiery furnace of tragedy. When profanity is plaintive it is weak, but it is saved from contemptible weakness by courage. The craven and the fearful can be neither tragic nor profane. Better set God a good example than beg for mercy:

Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde ;  
Hae mercy o' my soul, Lord God,  
As I wad do were I Lord God,  
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde.

Many have felt so, and the old Scottish epitaph is not unique, for the same thought finds expression elsewhere, notably in Edward FitzGerald's quatrain after Omar Khayyám:

Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,  
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake ;  
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man  
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give—and take !

It is not without significance that most notable examples of exalted profanity are drawn from other days than ours. May we assume that, as ribaldry takes the place of outraged reverence, and cynicism that of faith, profanity will become a lost art?

The profanities of the Great War have yet to be gathered: the harvest should be profuse. Meanwhile, that stupendous event is too near for detailed realization. The impression is massive and confused, a tangled panorama of events with noisy accompaniments rather than the revelation of soul and character in immortal phrases. Little khaki-clad troops with pink faces swinging along highroads and streets to the sound of hymn tunes set to words so obscene that they will never be printed . . . curses and laughter, always laughter and



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always curses . . . and, arising out of the confusion and noise, appeals to God, patronization of God, the conscription of God by all combatants:

God heard the embattled nations sing and shout,  
"Gott strafe England!" and "God save the King!"  
God this, God that, and God the other thing—  
"Good God!" said God, "I've got my work cut out."

The profane bitterness of Mr J. C. Squire's epigram springs from the same source as the ribaldry of our soldiers—and all nations' soldiers—in that great tragedy. The embattled nations mobilized their Gods, men, and goods.

When Montaigne, the honest father of the essay, found his opinions opposed to those of the Church, and himself in danger of pontifical displeasure, he circumvented trouble by informing His Holiness that the essays contained only his private opinions and not his opinions as a Catholic. Profanity is private opinion kicking over the traces. It may happen to the worst of us, and the best. Montaigne was a good man in the best sense of the word, as Mr Gladstone was once described as a good man in the worst sense of the word. Montaigne was orthodox and yet profane. Arthur Hugh Clough was as good as he, or even more conventional, yet he was profane enough to rewrite the Ten Commandments in terms appropriate to the nineteenth century of the true faith. Clough's Decalogue is probably more popular, even though it is denied a thousand times a day, than that which Moses brought down from Sinai. The Sermon on the Mount we know would not withstand the acid test so well, for

John P.

Robinson he

Sez they didn't know everythin' down in Judee.

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No one would seem to be the worse for profanity, or the better, except, perchance, the profane, some of whom may, at least, have enjoyed themselves. We can imagine the indignant pleasure a certain Lord Durham got out of the record of a fire made in his diary to the effect that Almighty God was supposed to have caused the conflagration—"for reasons best known to Himself." To complain without a cause is pleasant, but how much more than pleasant must be the feeling you experience when you hurl your barbed words at the fate which has destroyed your hope or checkmated your desire! Let us leave the profane this little solace, for it is all they will get. Yes, profanity is its own reward. And in the last reckoning, if there be a last reckoning, we may discover that God has paid even less attention to His critics and satirists than men have paid to the sneers of their Alvanleys and Fredericks. The pathos of profanity is its helplessness.

*From "Occasions"*

## WOOD-FIRES

**Y**OU must gather the wood yourself, and saw and split it yourself . . . so let us begin at the beginning. . . .

If you live in a town, which is more than likely, you are obviously at a disadvantage—your fireplace is probably of the wrong shape, and you are forced to the vulgar expedient of buying your wood. Bought wood is foreign to our purpose; there is a long story here which we shall not pursue, for it may lead us on to I know not what economic mysteries and ethnological entanglements; suffice it that bought wood is fallen wood, not wind-fallen, for that is not without advantage, as we shall see; even when it still wears its virginal bark it is wood with the bloom off—and that is insufferable. As for the more domesticated sorts, often enough assembled in democratic bundles, or held together by oleaginous substances to trick the unwilling flame into life, such compromises are beneath us; what proper man would fall so low as to do aught but kindle a fire with the split infinitives of forgotten woodlands?

You should abstain also from unemployed packing-cases or superannuated sleepers, and all such man-handled scions of arboreal splendour; you must hitch your wagon to the stars of wood and dale; aspire to generous associations with lordly oak and elm and other fathers of the forest, whose aristocratic arms have known no master save the seasons, whose heads have bent only to the winds of heaven, whose grace and strength are born of immemorial freedoms, and whose bloom is the *patine* of the open air.

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So let us have no traffic with the poor relations of the forest. Let the genealogy of our fuel be intact; its ancestry unambiguous. The proper fuel for town fires is coal or gas or electricity: compromise is pose.

All of which means that you must live near the wood as it grows, and you must sally forth with axe or saw, or failing that await the autumnal windfalls and frugally and reverently fold the fallen boughs as the shepherd his sheep. Happy he, be he so minded, if he live beside those friendly trees which do not scorn the habitations of man—ancestral elms, for instance, who in wrathful age scatter *largesse* of boughs as though anticipating your fireside needs. There are, I know, those writers on forestry who would have it that the elm is a treacherous fellow, but I prefer to believe that he is doing his best. True, he has a habit of throwing himself at you, but what of that? Once you know his habit you can attend his robustious generosity from a safe distance. From such safe harbourage it is good to hearken to the ancient and upright fellows grinding their teeth against the equinoctial gales and crashing their boughs in the darkness of the night, for all terror is then merged in pleasurable anticipation of the harvest of the storm which you may hope to gather upon the shores of the morning.

A great storm in the second year of the War conquered many of our noblest and sturdiest trees, and in some southern counties sylvan giants lay prone and hapless across roads and meadows, like fallen warriors upon the battlefields. It was sad to contemplate so much shattered loveliness—yet because fuel was scarce that year, and the winter interminable, we found refuge from sorrow at beauty in distress in the contemplation of so much profit for our hearths. We

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forgathered as for festival, like Eskimos about a stranded school of whales. Town-folk and suburbans long since civilized out of primitive activities leapt to attention at the command, so to speak, of the Gods of the Wild. Men, women, and children became woodfolk again as though by magic; and suburban lanes became animated idylls: scenes from *As You Like It*. You may be sure also that philosophic Jaques arose to point the moral and adorn the tale. The spirits that abide in wood-fires renewed their acquaintance that year with those coal-burners long since marked among the lapsed and lost. But you need not wait upon windfalls such as these, nor upon the lesser windfalls of more familiar storms; these be happy accidents of fortune, and true thrift takes them in his stride as he sallies forth a-lumbering.

When your harvest is gathered and cut and stacked you may contemplate the dark days with fortitude. But before burning come the joys of cutting and splitting. If you can add to these the consciousness of having felled your tree, then may you exult as a mighty hunter before the Lord. Such joy is not within the circle of my wood-faring. I begin at the log, rolled on to my small demesne by greater brawn and skill than I possess. The big saw, rather than the adze, is my weapon. You lay him across your log, which has been nicely poised on a couple of smaller logs so that there can be no unequal pressure on him as his work proceeds. I say his work deferentially and deliberately, for your double-toothed saw goes about the business with the minimum of supervision. All you have to do is to place him squarely and swing him to and fro with a free rhythm the while you fall into a dream upon the generous patience of nature which has devoted some

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## WOOD-FIRES

half a century to the up-rearing of so mighty a trunk for your fireside delight; or maybe you sing. . . .

Then comes the process called splitting, and this is the manner of it: you throw your logs, cut some eight or ten inches thick, one at a time atop of a base log, and with a sharp knock of your sledge-hammer drive your first steel wedge into the outer rim. The blow should be so skilfully delivered that the wedge bites at once and forms a crack towards the centre, into which you drive wedge number two with a swinging blow, which, if rightly delivered, severs the log in half. The process is repeated until your log is split into as many triangular sections as you require. It is an ancient game, easily played, and its victories are measured by your own enjoyment and the extent of your growing wood-stack.

And when your logs are ablaze—your very own logs on your very own hearth—they do please you mightily, as Mr Pepys would have said. How merrily they spurt and flare, as though congratulating themselves and you on this reunion, albeit it involves their own sacrifice. But it is a merrie end—a veritable dance of death—and in a good cause! Is not cosiness a good cause? Not, to be sure, as an end in life, but as an incident. We spend a third of our lives in bed; a third in affairs, and a third, in winter at all events, sitting by fires. Did not man become man when he first learnt how to make wood burn? All fires are friendly; but the wood-fire is the greatest friend—because it is the oldest. “Among so many things as are by men possessed or pursued in the course of their lives,” said a King of Aragon, “all the rest are baubles besides old wood to burn, old wine to drink, old friends to converse with, and old books to read.” Truly it is a wood-fire sentiment. If Alphonsus had said “old coal to burn”

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the effect would not have been the same. Woodfires tell you things; they gossip out of their endless memories, bridging the prepossessions and pursuits of man from the caves of the Neolithic Age to the villas of the age of devastation. And with their gossip is mingled the fragrance of the open air, distilled to its companionable essence—a woodland incense for the altar of cosiness! And now, reader, with your permission, I shall do homage before mine own example of that altar, learning thereby perchance a lesson in the greater luxury of warming both hands before the fire of life.

*From "Occasions"*

## MASTERS OF NONSENSE

II DO not think it is good for anyone to be always sensible. Not that anyone is always sensible—on the contrary; but most of us think we are. It is from this illusion that we require a holiday, in fact several holidays, and, were I autocrat, I should make such holidays periodical, like the festivals of the Church; for, as Sir Thomas Browne says, “Many things are true in Divinity, which are neither inducible by reason, nor confirmable by sense.” Doubtless I shall be almost alone in this amiable wish, since we live in a practical and businesslike age, and have little time to cut capers. Material success is our aim, and nonsense has nothing whatever to do with that aim. Nonsense is shy of success, even of its own; and I believe this shyness is due to certain delicate and even fairy-like qualities which are apt to become soiled in the market-place—as what thing does not? One of the inevitable results of a strenuously material era is the brushing away of the more subtle and illusive qualities of life; these suffer at the hands of popular success as butterflies’ wings suffer at the hands of him who is vandal enough to touch them. There is also an arrogance of material success—a swagger of certainty born of pride in accumulated substance—which spoils the taste for finer things. Those afflicted thus, for it is an affliction, surrounded though they are by what the world calls great possessions, possess naught. This is true not only of a man, but of an age, for a man, whatever else he may be, is, finally, the epitome of his age. The possession of a great many things, even the best of things, tends



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to blind one to the real value of anything. And the humour, and the pathos as well, of such an age as ours, which values a man according to the number of more or less troublesome things he possesses, is that it places what is called good sense above what is called nonsense. "Be sensible" is the advice we are all giving one another. And I think we are agreed that to be sensible is to be rational, shrewd, useful, proper, respectable, and even honest—when there is no great risk in our being otherwise. "Honesty," we say, "is the best policy." You see there is no nonsense about honesty being good in itself—it is simply *the best policy*, that is all.

This good sense would be called an English characteristic; it has made us what we are, it has made us rich (at least some of us)—the kind of richness typified so frankly in the popular pictures of John Bull. And we have little doubt that this sense is good sense, since it has given us those fine things, factories and ironclads, locomotives and guns, and banking accounts. But still it would seem, in spite of all these sensible things, that there are some things, in every sense their direct opposites, which bear a more convincing mark of immortality than the ingenious material achievements so much admired to-day. My modern and successful reader will, of course, say "Nonsense!" And I shall not contradict him. It is nonsense, deliberate, unadulterated nonsense, but I am disposed to believe it is all the better for that. And, as if the Fates were on my side, is it not a little strange that this most sensible of all ages, this age of practical rationalism, should have invented, in the pauses of its pursuit of fleeting things, an art of nonsense? Maybe it is a reversion, but reversion of the evolutionary process is only bad when

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it throws back toward what is monstrous and unnecessary. Nonsense verse, primitive though it may be, is something more than that, it is far more entertaining, and perhaps more useful, for it reacts somewhat after the manner of a boomerang. It is our age laughing at itself, pulling wry faces at itself, if you will, realizing perhaps shyly and without courage that this civilization of ours is rather a joke, and perhaps a little top-heavy with self-importance.

There is undoubtedly some deeper relationship between what is called good sense and nonsense, something deeper than the popular conception of these things as the obverse and reverse of the same medal. If, for instance, we took longevity as the test of worthiness, nonsense would be found to rank higher than sense. And I, at least, should be forced to a similar conclusion were I to judge nonsense as a creator of disinterested happiness. But there are so many things in favour of nonsense that I should not be in the least surprised if, one of these days, that much-abused faculty were judged to be the final and consummate expression of sense, a kind of Nirvana of the intelligence. We even get a hint of this in our own sensible civilization; for, just as our national symbol is a rather gross and tubby person John Bull, distinguished only by his uncomfortable if amiable girth, so the most characteristic human product of our age is the millionaire. Surely these Falstaffs of finance are the climax of the sensible line of evolution, and, like all extremes, have met their opposites, though they have not yet admitted it! But to avoid the charge of trifling with modern ideals, I shall not pursue this line of thought any further. Besides, are there not happier phases of my theme?

One of them is the occasional evolution of those

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most exalted and nonsensical of creatures, our poets and dreamers, out of such sensible material as mathematicians or even more laboriously learned people are made on. Take Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, who was a mathematical genius, and something of a conchologist. He might have remained a sensible devotee of science, only his genius was too much for him. It forced him to consider less rational things, and before it was too late he turned from the temple of mathematics and knocked at the door of the Muses, with results that have placed him in the forefront of the world's imaginative writers. There are many such instances in the annals of literary history. And there are other instances of men, like Rabelais and Dean Swift, who, possessing the intuition of artists, have used the language of nonsense to express the idea of sense, who have bedecked rational satire in irrational clothing; but Time, after his manner, stripping away the causes of the irony with the passing of the years, has treated with tender care the nonsensical form in which that irony was enshrined; thus dropping a kindly veil of forgetfulness over the crabbed deeds of ages that are gone. Time has touched to immortality the conceptions of Gargantua, Pantagruel, and Gulliver, leaving us to-day unmoved by anything but their fantastic charm, which was probably accidental.

But stranger still, and here history plays into my hands with something approaching magnanimity, the deliberate creators of nonsense for the sake of nonsense have turned to that noble work from what was acknowledged by their contemporaries to have been sound and sensible work; but, in spite of all temptations, they became masters of nonsense, and their whimsical ideas and images have given delight not only to past genera-

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tions, but to the present, and there is every sign that they will continue to give delight to many, perhaps to all, generations to come; for nonsense rarely dies. Let me take but three examples of this type of genius: Lewis Carroll, Hans Andersen, and Edward Lear. The first of these was the creator of that classic of nonsense *Alice in Wonderland*; yet how strange it is to think that *Alice* was but an incident—an accident really—in a life which might easily have lost itself in a morass of theology and mathematics. Doubtless he took himself more seriously as the Rev. C. L. Dodgson, mathematician and theologian, than as Lewis Carroll, creator of *Alice*; but who shall say that he did not touch infinity in the latter capacity? His mathematics, upon which he prided himself, will be forgotten (even Euclid is becoming *passé*); his theology, which, doubtless, was much to him, will be dead; but the Jabberwock, the Mad Hatter, the Duchess, the Mock Turtle, and the Gryphon, and all their jolly fellows will prance merrily down the ages, cutting happy capers for happy children and happier adults until the crack o' doom.

Just as Lewis Carroll took himself seriously as a mathematician so Hans Andersen took himself seriously as a novelist. But the spirit of Eternity judges neither one nor the other by such standards; Eternity has touched neither their mathematics nor their novels with his magic wand. That wand has waved and descended gently upon *Alice*; and it has waved with like immortal results over *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Tinder Box*, and *The Wild Swans*.

But the most remarkable of all nonsense-artists is Edward Lear; if the rest are Masters of Nonsense he is surely our Prince of Nonsense. He has raised

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nonsense, nonsense pure and simple, nonsense free of all sense, morals, and prettiness, to the heights of art. His work is the very apotheosis of nonsense; he is "the prophet of the utterly absurd, of the patently impossible and vain."

His world is peopled with men and animals that never were on sea or land; strange lights flare in his dreams, showing us a realm of prank here in the very heart of our rational day. He has given us the keys of the heaven of nonsense, and as we turn them in the doors and enter therein we breathe lightly and without care of the morrow, as though we were one with a rout of children dancing and shouting:

Sally go round the sun !  
Sally go round the moon !  
Sally go round the chimney-pot  
On a Sunday afternoon.

And, characteristically, again, he raised himself to that eminence in the spare moments of a busy career devoted to the most obviously sensible things.

He permitted many years of a life, which might have been entirely devoted to nonsense, to be dissipated in ornithological studies and in the drawing and painting of birds and landscapes. Perchance, like Lewis Carroll, he was prouder of his learned work on *The Family of the Psittacidæ* than of *The Pobble who has No Toes*. But, as it was with Lewis Carroll and Hans Andersen, the judgment of Time is against him. The *Psittacidæ* will become extinct, the *Pobble* is immortal.

Still, in spite of other endeavour, Edward Lear is the first to have made a fine art of nonsense. His work in the mode of nonsense is irresponsibly defiant of all the scaffolding by which the intellect is supported, and though one is carried away on the wings of a chuckling

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fascination as one reads through his verses or looks at their illustrations, one is filled with a disturbing, mystical, yet exhilarating feeling that something unusual is happening, that a new sort of wisdom is being enunciated, a new order of life being revealed in this scamper of the wits. It is as though a dignified ritual, long become exanimate by repetition, had suddenly been reversed by an unseen but jocular power, creating, instead of shallow laughter, fathomless joy.

Take his autobiographical verses, for example, and, sheer nonsense as they are, how much clearer a conception of the personality of Lear do they give us than any more sensible account of him could have done!

How pleasant to know Mr Lear !  
Who has written such volumes of stuff !  
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,  
But a few think him pleasant enough.

His mind is concrete and fastidious,  
His nose is remarkably big ;  
His visage is more or less hideous,  
His beard it resembles a wig.

He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers,  
Leastways if you reckon two thumbs ;  
Long ago he was one of the singers,  
But now he is one of the dumbs.

He sits in a beautiful parlour,  
With hundreds of books on the wall ;  
He drinks a great deal of Marsala,  
But never gets tipsy at all.

He has many friends, laymen and clerical ;  
Old Foss is the name of his cat ;  
His body is perfectly spherical,  
He weareth a runcible hat.

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He reads but he cannot speak Spanish,  
He cannot abide ginger-beer ;  
Ere the days of his pilgrimage vanish,  
How pleasant to know Mr Lear !

Much of Edward Lear's work in the realm of nonsense is in the *Limerick* verse form which has become the established medium of nonsensical utterance :

There was an old man who supposed  
The street door was partially closed,  
But some very large rats  
Ate his coat and his hats  
While the futile old gentleman dozed.

But Edward Lear's most masterly work does not lie in the classical nonsense verse, nor yet in those delightfully futile sketches by means of which he illustrated his books of nonsense. Rather is it to be found in that series of ballads which, for whimsical fancy and deliberate abandonment of all reasonableness, stands matchless and supreme, the very negation of the rationale of things.

The finest of these ballads is certainly *The Pelican Chorus*, although its excellence does not lie so entirely in the domain of nonsense as in the setting of the quality of nonsense in picturesque surroundings. The chorus itself, whimsical though it is, translates what ought to be pelicanese into a kind of pidgin-English, which one can easily imagine to be the nearest approximation in human language of the thoughts and emotions of the pelican. There is, in fact, as the reader will readily comprehend, a strong resemblance between the personal appearance of the pelican and the quaint words of the chorus, and if it is the expression of the unseen self, then the natural historical truth of the chorus is obvious:

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Pliffskin, Ploffskin, Pelican jee !  
We think no birds so happy as we !  
Plumpskin, Ploshkin, Pelican jill,  
We think so then, and we thought so still !

Yes, when Lear tells me of the assembling of these impossible birds on their "long bare islands of yellow sand," I am convinced that, whether they sing this pleasant verse or not, it is quite obvious that they ought to do so; and it is an oversight on the part of nature if they do not. But I am somewhat at a disadvantage in the matter. I cannot speak with authority, because my experience of pelicans is confined to those at the Zoo. They certainly did not quote Lear. But what would you expect of creatures that live in a paddock? And now I come to think of it, I noticed that each of those curious guests of the Royal Zoological Society did wear the absorbed expression peculiar to people who want to catch some thought which has just slipped the memory. Captivity had evidently afflicted them with aphasia, just as it afflicts many other creatures of our civilization. The pelicans at the Zoo are sad birds, and now I know why—they are trying to recollect *The Pelican Chorus*, which dangles in their memories just beyond grasping-point.

For the most exalted nonsense, however, we must turn to the immortal *Pobble who has No Toes*:

The Pobble who has no toes  
Had once as many as we ;  
When they said, " Some day you may lose them all,"  
He replied, " Fish fiddle-de-dee ! "  
And his Aunt Jobiska made him drink  
Lavender water tinged with pink,  
For she said, " The World in general knows  
There's nothing so good for a Pobble's toes ! "



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and to the equally great *Mr and Mrs Discobolos* :

Mr and Mrs Discobolos  
Climbed to the top of a wall,  
And they sat to watch the sunset sky,  
And to hear the Nupiter Piffkin cry,  
And the Biscuit Buffalo call.  
They took up a roll and some camomile tea,  
And both were as happy as happy could be—  
Till Mrs Discobolos said,  
“ Oh ! W ! X ! Y ! Z !  
It has just come into my head—  
Suppose we should happen to fall ! ! !  
Darling Mr Discobolos ! ”

and to *The Quangle Wangle's Hat* :

On the top of the Crumpetty Tree  
The Quangle Wangle sat,  
But his face you could not see,  
On account of his Bever Hat !  
For his hat was a hundred and two feet wide,  
With ribbons and bibbons on every side,  
And bells, and buttons, and loops, and lace,  
So that nobody ever could see the face  
Of the Quangle Wangle Quee.

In these three poems Edward Lear is seen at his best. In these poems one meets all those strange creations of his which meet their peers only in the Jabberwock and the Mock Turtle of Lewis Carroll. You are introduced to them all at once, for all of them meet at a grand reunion on the amazing hat of the still more amazing and mysterious Quangle Wangle. The Fimble Fowl, with the corkscrew leg,

And the Golden Grouse came there,  
And the Pobble who has no toes—  
And the small Olympian Bear—  
And the Dong, with the Luminous Nose :

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And the Blue Baboon, who played the flute,  
And the Orient Calf from the Land of Tute,  
And the Attery Squash and the Bisky Bat,  
All came and built on the lovely hat  
Of the Quangle Wangle Quee.

There is an ineffable futility about these poems suggestive of things as final and as certain as any imaginable. One cannot explain them, they baffle and elude and convince like

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe ;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Who are all these strange creatures, and why do they enter into our consciousness against all reason? Why do we sympathize as deeply with the absurd whimsies of Mr and Mrs Discobbolos as we do with the adventures of Mr Pickwick or the love of Lucy Desborough for Richard Feverel? Why should the incomprehensible Pobble creep into our lives on such a wave of sympathy? Or why, to take another expression of nonsense, should we have a deeper if more furtive regard for Jabberwocky than we have for the language of Shakespeare? Such questions are as difficult as Pilate's "What is truth?"

These things are nonsense, unquestionably, but, as the lady in *Patience* says, "Oh, what precious nonsense!" But nonsense does not always find expression in the same way. We even see hints of it in certain of the phenomena of wild life. Nature was certainly working in the same vein, though expressing it through a different medium, when she created the gecko, the duckbill platypus, and the tortoise; but it is a moot point whether even she improves upon the Quangle Wangle Quee.

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But, in spite of it all, nonsense is one of the few things modern learning does not attempt to explain. Nonsense exists; it is delightful; that is all. Furthermore, it is not sense, and perhaps therefore we should rejoice in the fact that it has escaped learned analysis; not even nonsense could withstand that.

In the hands of Edward Lear and his followers it is becoming not only proud of its isolation, but self-assertive, articulate, and, like the mind of Mr Lear, "concrete and fastidious."

We are all, in fact, beginning to find, as Alice did, that what sounds like nonsense is no ground for objection. You will remember how she was making up her mind to run to meet the Red Queen in the reasonable way of going forward, for the Red Queen was ahead of her. "You can't possibly do that," said the Rose. "I should advise you to walk the other way." Alice refused to follow this advice, and speedily lost herself, and it was not until she acted upon the non-sensical that she eventually met the Red Queen.

This adventure in Looking-glass Land might well serve as a parable, a hint of that higher thing than sense lying hidden in the heart of the absurd. We know the legend of Punch is a laughing tragedy truer than our truth, and on the same lines there may be long vistas of intelligence, whole realms of consciousness, whose nature mere sense cannot penetrate. Nonsense may be the striving of consciousness toward newer ways of expressing life; it may indicate the final breakdown of intellect and reason, and the beginning of a fresh idea, the childhood of a new world; the proof, in fact, of man's unwritten belief that what can be proved is not worth proving.

Man is an irrational creature, and the essence of the

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human comedy is concerned with his attempts to be otherwise. Doubtless the comedy will continue—there will be no last act. So I do not look to nonsense as one looks to some reforming or revolutionary power. It is not that. Indeed, I am not so sure that I would alter the human comedy; I might wish it more varied—but on the whole it is good enough until we are more conscious of its purpose. Nonsense has nothing to do with progress; it is as unchanging as it is uncertain, as young as it is old. Its value lies in its futility. But by showing us the absurdity of things nonsense may help to keep us usefully sane; by checking ultimate consistency it may help to keep us alive.

*From "All Manner of Folk"*

## INSTEAD OF A SPRING SONG

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone ; the flowers appear on the earth ; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land. . . .

SOMETIMES the happiest of us feel that life is of little value in this workaday world. The sun shines, and we go on working; winds shout, birds sing; memories of coloured cities in brighter climates invite us, and the rolling, bare-backed downs beckon—but all for nothing; we go on working. We go on working, most of us merely for daily bread, and the remainder from habit, from ineptitude, or—to encourage the others. But we have to nudge each other to remind ourselves that we like it, for all that; and when the spring fret comes we know we don't! I should like to write about the spring fret, but no one would thank me if I did; few have understanding of such things, and I am not one of those who write to give people understanding: I write for those who have it. I do not think you can give people anything worth having; we, all of us, have the real things within us, if we only knew it, and the spring fret is one of them.

It comes on one day of the year, in the morning, generally on the first morning of spring. I do not mean on March 21. That need not necessarily be the first day of spring. The first day of spring is the first day after the winter on which the sun lights up; the day on which you are brought face to face again with the facts of light—when a white door becomes opalescent, when the dull buds of the hawthorn twinkle into stars of green fire, when the leafless plane-trees waken into

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shadowy green and grey traceries. Then beware, or, if you are fearless, be glad, for the spring fret may be on you at any moment, and during its continuance you are not worth your salt in places where men buy and sell.

But, in spite of that, the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. It is the invitation of the sun, it is the whisper of the wild, bidding you lay down your tools and your nets and follow, follow, you know not whither, for man knows not what is good or bad for him. You only know that when the white door becomes opalescent, and the hawthorn buds green fire, you suffer a kind of nausea in the face of all humdrum things and long to have done with them, to break free, to run wild for a time. And why should you not? For you do not; you simply fight it down, like the good sensible fellow you are. You fight it down and plunge into the brown air of commerce again, until next year. It is always next year, "jam to-morrow," as the White Queen said, "but never jam to-day," and when the same old spur to rebellion comes at you again—once more you force it from you, for next year, like to-morrow, never comes. But the day will come when the light will shine full on common things, giving them distinction, and you will see it not. In that hour the spring fret will pass you by. "The grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail. . . ." You may look through your office window at the blue sky interlaced with telephone-cables, and yearn for Saskatchewan, or shake your fist at the engine on Ludgate Bridge, protesting your determination to fly to the South Seas. You will be too old.

That is life's tragedy—to find suddenly that you are too old; to find that you no longer desire to play truant,

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that you are become a mere Mantalini doomed to know only that "life is one demd horrid grind," even when the spring comes in, and the sun wakes up, and the Strand and Cheapside become temples of light; to find that you are good for nothing but to stay at home and be good. I suppose that is the fate of most of us, and, perhaps, we deserve it. Well, well, let me be generous, and say we do; for if we did otherwise deserve, and answered not the promptings of the spring fret, then I should have to say a worse thing.

It is not good at all times to ride our souls on the curb. We should give them their heads when they seem to need it—that is, when the need becomes sufficiently dominant. Needs are made to be gratified, even if they are only whims. Let us not be supercilious about whims like the spring fret, for it is Nature's summons to growth. It is the old primeval frenzy of life working within us, urging us to slough our habits as the snake his skin. Let us answer in the same spirit.

"That," I fancy I hear you say, "is all very well, but what shall we do; how can we answer in the same spirit?" And there, if I may say it, you have me. I did not set out to tell you how to answer the spring fret, because I don't know. I know, to be sure, how I shall answer it, or rather, how I have answered it after I have done so; and I know also how my friend will answer it, the friend who babbled o' sunny climes and eternal afternoons of loafing, the while he fed himself with chump chop and *pommes sautées*; but as for you, tender reader, to tell you the truth, you have the advantage of me. I sympathize with you, but I know you not. Were it otherwise, I doubt if I could be of much use, because each of us answers the spring fret

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in his own way. Should you be young and at school you play truant, and take the ultimate thwackings at the appointed hour (for there is always an appointed hour) without regret. Are you a little older (or much older, as the case may be), you fall in love—you know the overworn but ever-new poetics of it: "In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love"—and there are worse things; but let us not waste time and space on what is obvious. Then, if you are of no particular age, but just on the right side of being alive, you—well, there it is, no one can say of a certainty what you will do, but you will of a certainty do it. You will, in short, let the spring fret have its way with you, even if you lose money in the transaction.

All this may sound nonsense, and I am not one of those who would for a moment suggest another name for it. Nonsense it may be, and nonsense we shall let it be; but is it any the worse for that? The sensible things to do are associated with keeping yourself in hand, well in hand for the matter of that; and, when the spring urges, not to throw down your tools has been the method and habit of all sensible folk from time immemorial. But the foolish ones have done otherwise. They have yielded to the spring fret, and at the end of the day's march they have laughed quietly to themselves, quietly and gladly, at the thought of the rebel days, and they have gone hence murmuring to their consciences that, in spite of all and after all, it has been somehow good; life has been spent. As for the others at the same lone hour, they also say things to themselves, but the things they say are far different. They say, "Alas, how good it might have been!" But I must not end on so sad a note, for, after all, we are not dead yet.



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Not dead yet, did I say? I must be careful, for one never knows about such things. Life and death are debatable. It is not only the dead who are dead; the living are often in the same sad plight. Indeed, there are evidences to prove that the dead are not so dead as those who imagine they know would have us believe. And when I look about me, and take stock, as it were, of my fellow-men, I am often moved by the reflection that all is not well with them (or me, for the matter of that), that, in short, they are not quite so much alive as they think they are. The attitude toward the spring fret is the real test; it tells us who's who more vividly than any stout year-book of celebrities. You just want to watch people under the thrall of the thing, and, watching carefully, you may note differences. You may realize, in fact, that the laughter and the light of things are tangled with the peculiar restlessness which comes upon men and animals at the spring-time of the year. And now, I fancy, I must close as rapidly as may be, or there is danger of these words lapsing into moral reflections, which would be absurd. Moral concepts and the spring fret have nothing in common. At the same time the spring fret and morals have no particular enmity—their quarrel is too ancient for that. They have long since grown to ignore each other, and will continue so to do until one or the other passes hence.

*From "Occasions"*

## THE IRONY OF IRONY

THE word itself, it will be remembered, is derived from a Greek word which means 'dissembling.' But irony is far more than mere dissembling. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as the "Expression of one's meaning by language of opposite or different tendency, especially . . . for purpose of ridicule," and further, as the "use of language that has an inner meaning for a privileged audience and an outer meaning for the persons addressed or concerned." The latter was the method of simulated ignorance adopted by Socrates toward his disciples and critics. Thus, when Phædrus concludes his reading of the speech of Lysias he asks Socrates whether he did not like the speech, and Socrates replies:

"Nay, divinely, my good friend; it quite threw me into an ecstasy. And this sensation I owe to you, Phædrus; for all the time you were reading I kept my eye on your face, and saw it glow with rapture under the influence of the speech. And esteeming you a better judge in such matters than myself, I thought I could not do better than follow your example, and so I have shared with you in all your transports, my god-inspired friend." He then proceeds to tear the speech to shreds.

But irony is not merely a use of language. Irony is an attitude toward life. It is a recognition that things are not what they seem and that even the truth may not be true. The ironist is ever on his guard against fate and circumstance, not to circumvent, still less to frustrate their operations, but to mark them and

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appraise their tragedy or comedy, for irony can be both comic and tragic, as a connoisseur appraises a rare wine or a precious stone. But your ironist, although conscious of wrong, is not always a reformer, still less a moralist. His irony is urbanity. He reveals a fable and unmasks a crime to invoke pity; and it may be that the pity he arouses is first and last in his own heart. Irony and pity are intimate friends, the one the complement of the other, even though there are times when you might not believe it.

"The more I think over human life," said Anatole France, gentlest and wisest of modern followers of Voltaire and Swift, "the more I am persuaded we ought to choose Irony and Pity for its assessors and judges, as the Egyptians called upon the goddess Isis and the goddess Nephtys on behalf of their dead. Irony and Pity are both of good counsel; the first with her smiles makes life agreeable; the other sanctifies it to us with her tears. The Irony I invoke is no cruel deity. She mocks neither love nor beauty. She is gentle and kindly disposed. Her mirth disarms anger, and it is she who teaches us to laugh at rogues and fools, whom but for her we might be so weak as to hate." But all irony is not like that, as we know. Much depends upon those who use the ironic art, and whether they use it as a weapon or a tool, with compassion or cupidity.

Irony is the late-born attitude of a civilization. It is a sign of mortal ripening, an indication that the golden age of illusion is passing. It is a last effort to justify God's ways to man, to justify them not without a smile, to sanctify them not without tears. The most highly civilized and most urbane of peoples have been its greatest masters. The art of irony is found at its best in the literature of civilizations which have grown

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up. Tragic irony reaches its highest expression in the *Œdipus Rex* and in the *Antigone*, in the Book of Job and in *King Lear*; comic and satiric irony, in Rabelais and Voltaire, Defoe and Swift, Heine and Anatole France; and in our own time and among our own people, in Bernard Shaw, Cunninghame Graham, and Max Beerbohm, and more recently still in the work of C. E. Montague and Lytton Strachey. But wherever tolerant smile or kindly pity are possible there will you find irony casting her beneficent ray over man's infinite capacity for increasing his turnover of trouble. "Alas, the irony of heaven weighs heavily upon me!" said the exiled Heine on his "mattress grave" in Paris. "The great author of the universe, the Aristophanes of heaven, wished to show me, the little earthly so-called German Aristophanes, how my wittiest sarcasms are only pitiful attempts in comparison with His, and how miserably I am beneath Him in humour, in colossal irony."

Tragic irony is inevitable to all but those innumerable people whose practical philosophy is to make the best of a bad job by making a hobby of optimism. Tragedy is always ironic because it is reality breaking into those illusions which make life acceptable to both the wise and the witless—the only difference being that the one knows it will happen but hopes it won't and the other believes it will never happen if he persists in deluding himself that it won't. The irony of Greek tragedy is the inevitable anticlimax to great joy—it is the irony of disillusionment. In the last resort we are all more or less in the position of the people in Rupert Brooke's curious ironic lines on the death of Smet-Smet, the Hippopotamus-Goddess of the Egyptians:

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She was hungry and ate our children ;—how should we stay  
Her ?

She took our young men and our maidens ;—ours to obey  
Her.

We were loathed and mocked and reviled of all nations ; that  
was our pride.

She fed us, protected us, loved us, and killed us ; now She  
has died.

The greatest ironist is life—in the midst of which we are in death. The game of contradictions which we call living is the raw material of all irony. We all mean the same thing, yet none of us speak the same language, so that none of us can tell each other exactly what we do mean. We agree most when we disagree. We start for the same goal, but finish in different places. Wars fought to end war provoke war. Ten million men may die for freedom and achieve tyranny. Armageddon may be fought to make the world safe for democracy, only to make it necessary to make the world safe from democracy. Self-determination ends in self-extinction. Big greedy states are brought low and broken up into spitfire little states coveting each others' possessions.

The same confusion exists in every sphere of human affairs. Harley Street lives on differences of medical opinion. Theology is a Great War for spiritual supremacy, but none of the militants are allies, and there is no hope even of a Peace of Versailles bringing not even peace but a change of front. Christianity is the Balkan States of the Religious Continent. The statue of Liberty guards the gateway to the land of Prohibition and the home of the Ku-Klux-Klan. Critics cancel out as consistently as the "four and twenty jarring sects" of Persia. Philosophies end in confusion—or metaphysics:

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Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument  
About it and about, but evermore  
Came out by the same Door as in I went.

And yet, as we know, life is not without interest—even for the ironist who fiddles in his own charming way while Rome is burning—knowing well enough that if he stopped fiddling things would be no better—perhaps they would be a little worse—lacking his music.

The irony of irony is that it generally misses its point. George Meredith, an ironist *malgré lui*, objected to the ironic leer. He was far from wrong; but unless you wear the mask of a satyr your irony is likely to be taken literally. Irony without the satiric label is in danger of becoming a family joke: caviare to the herd. A most difficult art this art of irony, and a dangerous one, if used as a weapon, because it has a habit of slashing back upon its wielder, with surprising results. So inexact is the application of irony that even its masters have been startled by its mulish habits.

For examples it is not necessary to go farther back than to Daniel Defoe, whose famous *Shortest Way with the Dissenters* exposed the High Church Party to ridicule by the ironic art of dissembling. The shortest way with the troublesome sectarians was, ostensibly, banishment from the country and the hanging of their preachers. There were many who took the father of journalism literally, and a Fellow of Cambridge wrote a grateful letter to his bookseller for sending him the pamphlet, regretting that so obvious a remedy had not been perceived by all the town. Defoe had to write a further pamphlet explaining that he was attacking and not defending the Tories.

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So admirable an ironist as the great Dean himself suffered also from the irony of his craft. The fact that his *Modest Proposal to the Public for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from being a Burden to their Country, and for making them Beneficial to the Public* was looked upon as a cynical advocacy of cannibalism, proves that the witty and perspicuous age of reason was neither so witty nor so reasonable as its admirers would have us believe. Much misunderstanding followed also the publication of his famous *Argument for Abolishing Christianity in England*, and, as we all know, that illustrious piece of irony, *Gulliver's Travels*, ironically translated Swift from the realms of satire to that of fairy-tale. His friend Arbuthnot was even less fortunate with his *Art of Political Lying*, for, far from curing the world of the evil which he denounced, he would seem to have given it a new lease of life by offering the naughty politicians tips which otherwise might not have occurred to them.

I do not know whether Thomas de Quincey's pleasant lecture *On Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts*, was ever taken literally, but it is certain that Oscar Wilde's humorous lamentation on the *Decay of Lying* caused alarm among many pious folk, and Max Beerbohm was forced to issue a disclaimer after the first appearance of his delightful *Defence of Cosmetics* in the pages of the *Yellow Book*. But his effort was vain, for the "pervasion of rouge" is now universal.

One of the most surprising examples of ironic dilemma is recorded by the late Austin Dobson as evidence that irony can be at times "an awkward edged-tool." Lord Justice Bowen was trying the case of a burglar, who, having entered a house by the top story, was afterward captured in a room below in the

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act of sampling the silver. The defence was that the accused was an eccentric addicted to perambulating the roofs of houses, and, apparently out of mere curiosity, dropping through any conveniently open skylight. As that master of irony, the Cockney, would say, this was simply "asking for it." The judge could not resist the chance, and he concluded his address to the jury with these words: "If, gentlemen, you think it likely that the prisoner was merely indulging an amiable fancy for midnight exercise on his neighbour's roof; if you think it was kindly consideration for that neighbour that led him to take off his boots and leave them behind him before descending into the house; and if you believe that it was the innocent curiosity of the connoisseur which brought him to the silver pantry and caused him to borrow the tea-pot, then, gentlemen, you will acquit the prisoner!" To Lord Bowen's dismay the jury instantly acquitted the prisoner.

It is regrettable that so dainty an art should be so uncertain; but let this spur none of my readers to condemn it. Irony, like virtue, is its own reward. There is no attitude toward life which has quite the same flavour. It has the subtlety of a rare perfume, the elusiveness of happiness, the delicacy of a soap-bubble, and, for the initiated, the point of a stiletto. And in addition to all these niceties it is balm of Gilead to our conceit, uplifting and consoling us in the face of universal folly and invincible ignorance. The very fact that irony so often misses fire is not a little consoling, for it sets the ironist apart as one who knows and it gives his art an esoteric flavour which further enhances his content. The ironist himself may be an example of irony, for he sometimes begins by trying to save the world, but he invariably ends by trying to save himself.



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Each of the adventures is food for irony, the latter perhaps more than the former. The irony of ironies is that man will abandon everything but his illusions, and the last illusion of the ironist is that he is disillusioned.

## SUPRÊME DE SOLE—CAPRICE PRÉCIEUX

WHEN Eugenius and I dine, as we do, alas! all too infrequently, it is not so much to satisfy appetite as to appreciate each other *à propos* of good food. To eat, to talk, to drink, knowingly, regardful of the amenities: the flavour of food, the *bouquet* of wine or words, or wine and words, for the two are married thus and have most agreeable issue. Such occasions have but a traditional relation with hunger; they are not for satisfaction so much as for gratification. Hunger is not to be despised. It has its place, but that place is not among the urbanities. You may satisfy your hunger alone; hunger is better satisfied alone—it is primitive; it is war. There is, indeed, something unseemly in the sight of people satisfying their hunger—it has all the pathos of nudity; not the nudity of art, for that is made decent by reason of its veil of idea or expression—the artist drapes the figure with himself. But you cannot stop these reversions to the primitive; all you can do is to avoid them. One of the ways of avoiding hunger is to dine. Dining is an art. Those who dine are artists, they place themselves between feeding and eating, and by doing so take part in a ceremony rather than yield to a function.

“God,” paraphrased Eugenius one night at Savarin’s, “God might have created a better fish than the sole—but doubtless God never did.” I made no immediate reply, not that there was none, nor yet that I lacked it; but our palates responded so readily to this just

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sentiment that indulgence in the elusively delicate flavour of the most spiritual of fishes was more appropriate than words. Then I said: "In himself brother sole is an ungainly fellow and uncomely, too, obviously and consciously incomplete as he wobbles in a sort of green-grey boredom beneath the Straits of Dover awaiting the trawl-net which shall give him immortality." "Surely it is not the trawl-net which gives him immortality?" "No, Eugenius, you are right. Not the trawl-net. When God created soles He left His work unfinished. It was not completed until He had created Colbert." Eugenius raised his glass of Goutte d'Or—"à Colbert," he said; I raised mine—"à Colbert!" "God," added Eugenius, with feeling, "could not have made Antonio's violins without the hand of Stradivarius." "That," said I, "is George Eliot; she is never mentioned at dinner—never later than tea." Eugenius conceded my veto with a deprecating smile, for George Eliot is one of his many and varied strange tastes: "*Revenons à nos soles*," he said.

I suggested as an axiom that as all souls of one kind were equal in the sight of God, all *les autres* were equal in the sight of the epicure. Eugenius concurred, with a footnote to the effect that *cuisine* should be postulated. "And yet," I conjectured, "there are preferences, for have we not preferred *sole Colbert*?" We agreed that the sole and the moment might be mated on different occasions as admirably as on this one. We pondered this nice point. "At a banquet of many covers, for instance——" "I object to banquets of many covers," murmured Eugenius. "I stand by Brillat-Savarin's twelve-cover limit." "So do I—but, in the words of Bernard Shaw, who possesses *esprit* at

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the cost of *goût*, what are we two against so many?"<sup>1</sup> He peered through the liquid gold in his glass, inhaled its fragrance, and sipped and said deliberately as though pronouncing an edict—"Soles should not be served to crowds." "Not even *sole Royale*?" "Not even *sole Royale*—soles are not for the crowd."

It was no easy task to apportion the varied masterpieces of sole dishes to their appropriate moments. It was a task demanding scholarship of the table as well as experience of life. *Sole Colbert*, our initial masterpiece, was indicated for little occasions made big by long-standing friendships—the covers limited to four, *sex au choix*, on the grounds that this immaculate dish inspired sedate moods. For a *dîner intime*, *sole Véronique*, or for one of those adventures where indiscretion is the quintessence of valour, *filet de sole meunier aux muscats*. In these circumstances a little music enhances the bouquet of intimacy and the delicacy of the dish—but the music should be distant and from a small orchestra—not a jazz-band. Eugenius interpolated approval here. "Sole," he said, "is not eaten to jazz." You may take *filet de sole frit* at lunch or at home, but the sin of *pommes frites* should be left to the proletariat, who rightly call them "chips." They are *de rigueur* with fish and feeding at Sam Isaacs'. It is better, however, not to fry your fillets. *Filet* is but a stage in the art of cooking—it requires the attentions of a Robert or a Carême to complete it. *Sole frite* should be served complete. This noble fish was given vertebræ to sustain him in the frying-pan or on the grill and to imbue him with succulence.

<sup>1</sup> John Wilkes was also a few-cover man. A dinner-party, he remarked neatly, "should never consist of more than the number of the Muses, nor of less than that of the Graces."

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Abstain then from rending him before incarceration, and, oh, fall not so low as to permit your waiter to maul him so that he may appear boneless, even after he has been suitably fried! *Filet de sole à la Horly* is one of those marinaded masterpieces whose piquancy suggests lighthearted ceremonies, and may be eaten accordingly—on an inheritance, a birthday (“If you are under forty-five,” commented Eugenius), at a reunion, and at, Eugenius added, “a remarriage.” I left it at that.

And so we annotated the course, concluding with a grand recital of sole dishes as a sort of homage—a garland of *chef-d'œuvre* laid at the feet of the great *chefs*. Eugenius called it *une Anthologie de Soles*. Let us repeat a few of the principals for very joy of the act—*carrelets et petites soles frites*; *souchet de soles*; *mayonnaise de filets de soles*; *délices de sole Bréval*; *filets de soles à la Montreuil*; *filets de soles à la Rouennaise*; *suprême de sole Caustière*; *suprême de soles* . . . “Shall we end there,” asked Eugenius, “on the assumption that all soles are supreme?” We did. Then it was that we discovered our omission, our sin of omission, for we had left out that treatment of our brother from Dover without which no true justice had been done to him or to us. We had forgotten—grilled sole. “Whenever I eat grilled sole,” remarked Eugenius, “I feel as though I were spending a week-end with Marius and Flavian at White Nights with *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius as the novel of the season.” And when you come to think of that delicate elusive flavour—an embodied fragrance—you recall white things. “Like eating purity,” said Eugenius. “All the primary colours of taste transfused into their essential clarity, distilled, filtered, refined, until the palate must

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have genius to taste it; the sole is the fish of genius—it required genius to imagine him, genius to cook him, and genius to eat him.” “Yes,” Eugenius agreed, “and now I think the *relevé* should be ready. What is it? Ah, *canard pressé aux petits pois*.” “And,” I recalled, “a half-bottle of Clos-Vougeot.”

*From “End Papers”*



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