Jerome K. Jerome

The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow

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"Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow" is a collection of humorous and entertaining essays written by popular English humorist Jerome K. Jerome. It was the author's second published book and it helped establish him as a leading English humorist.

Содержание

The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow by Jerome K. Jerome

Dedication

To
The very dear and well-beloved
Friend
Of my prosperous and evil days—
To the friend
Who, though in the early stages of our acquaintanceship
Did ofttimes disagree with me, has since
Become to be my very warmest comrade—
To the friend
Who, however often i may put him out, never (now)
Upsets me in revenge—
To the friend
Who, treated with marked coolness by all the female
Members of my household, and regarded with suspicion
By my very dog, nevertheless seems day by
Day to be more drawn by me, and in return
To more and more impregnate me with
The odor of his friendship—
To the friend
Who never tells me of my faults, never wants to
Borrow money, and never talks about himself—
To the companion
Of my idle hours, the soother of my sorrows,
The confidant of my joys and hopes—
My oldest and strongest
Pipe,
This little volume
Is
Gratefully and affectionately
Dedicated.

Preface

One or two friends to whom I showed these papers in MS. having observed that they were not half bad, and some of my relations having promised to buy the book if it ever came out, I feel I have no right to longer delay its issue. But for this, as one may say, public demand, I perhaps should not have ventured to offer these mere “idle thoughts” of mine as mental food for the English-speaking peoples of the earth. What readers ask nowadays in a book is that it should improve, instruct, and elevate. This book wouldn't elevate a cow. I cannot conscientiously recommend it for any useful purposes whatever. All I can suggest is that when you get tired of reading “the best hundred books,” you may take this up for half an hour. It will be a change.

On being idle

Now, this is a subject on which I flatter myself I really am *au fait*. The gentleman who, when I was young, bathed me at wisdom's font for nine guineas a term– no extras– used to say he never knew a boy who could do less work in more time; and I remember my poor grandmother once incidentally observing, in the course of an instruction upon the use of the Prayer-book, that it was highly improbable that I should ever do much that I ought not to do, but that she felt convinced beyond a doubt that I should leave undone pretty well everything that I ought to do.

I am afraid I have somewhat belied half the dear old lady's prophecy. Heaven help me! I have done a good many things that I ought not to have done, in spite of my laziness. But I have fully confirmed the accuracy of her judgment so far as neglecting much that I ought not to have neglected is concerned. Idling always has been my strong point. I take no credit to myself in the matter– it is a gift. Few possess it. There are plenty of lazy people and plenty of slow-coaches, but a genuine idler is a rarity. He is not a man who slouches about with his hands in his pockets. On the contrary, his most startling characteristic is that he is always intensely busy.

It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do. There is no fun in doing nothing when you have nothing to do. Wasting time is merely an occupation then, and a most exhausting one. Idleness, like kisses, to be sweet must be stolen.

Many years ago, when I was a young man, I was taken very ill– I never could see myself that much was the matter with me, except that I had a beastly cold. But I suppose it was something very serious, for the doctor said that I ought to have come to him a month before, and that if it (whatever it was) had gone on for another week he would not have answered for the consequences. It is an extraordinary thing, but I never knew a doctor called into any case yet but what it transpired that another day's delay would have rendered cure hopeless. Our medical guide, philosopher, and friend is like the hero in a melodrama– he always comes upon the scene just, and only just, in the nick of time. It is Providence, that is what it is.

Well, as I was saying, I was very ill and was ordered to Buxton for a month, with strict injunctions to do nothing whatever all the while that I was there. “Rest is what you require,” said the doctor, “perfect rest. ”

It seemed a delightful prospect. “This man evidently understands my complaint,” said I, and I pictured to myself a glorious time– a four weeks' *dolce far niente* with a dash of illness in it. Not too much illness, but just illness enough– just sufficient to give it the flavor of suffering and make it poetical. I should get up late, sip chocolate, and have my breakfast in slippers and a dressing-gown. I should lie out in the garden in a hammock and read sentimental novels with a melancholy ending, until the books should fall from my listless hand, and I should recline there, dreamily gazing into the deep blue of the firmament, watching the fleecy clouds floating like white-sailed ships across its depths, and listening to the joyous song of the birds and the low rustling of the trees. Or, on becoming too weak to go out of doors, I should sit propped up with pillows at the open window of the ground-floor front, and look wasted and interesting, so that all the pretty girls would sigh as they passed by.

And twice a day I should go down in a Bath chair to the Colonnade to drink the waters. Oh, those waters! I knew nothing about them then, and was rather taken with the idea. “Drinking the waters” sounded fashionable and Queen Anneified, and I thought I should like them. But, ugh! after the first three or four mornings! Sam Weller's description of them as “having a taste of warm flat-irons” conveys only a faint idea of their hideous nauseousness. If anything could make a sick man get well quickly, it would be the knowledge that he must drink a glassful of them every day until he was recovered. I drank them neat for six consecutive days, and they nearly killed me; but after then I adopted the plan of taking a stiff glass of brandy-and-water immediately on the top of them, and found much relief thereby. I have been informed since, by various eminent medical gentlemen, that

the alcohol must have entirely counteracted the effects of the chalybeate properties contained in the water. I am glad I was lucky enough to hit upon the right thing.

But “drinking the waters” was only a small portion of the torture I experienced during that memorable month– a month which was, without exception, the most miserable I have ever spent. During the best part of it I religiously followed the doctor's mandate and did nothing whatever, except moon about the house and garden and go out for two hours a day in a Bath chair. That did break the monotony to a certain extent. There is more excitement about Bath-chairing– especially if you are not used to the exhilarating exercise– than might appear to the casual observer. A sense of danger, such as a mere outsider might not understand, is ever present to the mind of the occupant. He feels convinced every minute that the whole concern is going over, a conviction which becomes especially lively whenever a ditch or a stretch of newly macadamized road comes in sight. Every vehicle that passes he expects is going to run into him; and he never finds himself ascending or descending a hill without immediately beginning to speculate upon his chances, supposing– as seems extremely probable– that the weak-kneed controller of his destiny should let go.

But even this diversion failed to enliven after awhile, and the *ennui* became perfectly unbearable. I felt my mind giving way under it. It is not a strong mind, and I thought it would be unwise to tax it too far. So somewhere about the twentieth morning I got up early, had a good breakfast, and walked straight off to Hayfield, at the foot of the Kinder Scout– a pleasant, busy little town, reached through a lovely valley, and with two sweetly pretty women in it. At least they were sweetly pretty then; one passed me on the bridge and, I think, smiled; and the other was standing at an open door, making an unremunerative investment of kisses upon a red-faced baby. But it is years ago, and I dare say they have both grown stout and snappish since that time. Coming back, I saw an old man breaking stones, and it roused such strong longing in me to use my arms that I offered him a drink to let me take his place. He was a kindly old man and he humored me. I went for those stones with the accumulated energy of three weeks, and did more work in half an hour than he had done all day. But it did not make him jealous.

Having taken the plunge, I went further and further into dissipation, going out for a long walk every morning and listening to the band in the pavilion every evening. But the days still passed slowly notwithstanding, and I was heartily glad when the last one came and I was being whirled away from gouty, consumptive Buxton to London with its stern work and life. I looked out of the carriage as we rushed through Hendon in the evening. The lurid glare overhanging the mighty city seemed to warm my heart, and when, later on, my cab rattled out of St. Pancras' station, the old familiar roar that came swelling up around me sounded the sweetest music I had heard for many a long day.

I certainly did not enjoy that month's idling. I like idling when I ought not to be idling; not when it is the only thing I have to do. That is my pig-headed nature. The time when I like best to stand with my back to the fire, calculating how much I owe, is when my desk is heaped highest with letters that must be answered by the next post. When I like to dawdle longest over my dinner is when I have a heavy evening's work before me. And if, for some urgent reason, I ought to be up particularly early in the morning, it is then, more than at any other time, that I love to lie an extra half-hour in bed.

Ah! how delicious it is to turn over and go to sleep again: “just for five minutes. ” Is there any human being, I wonder, besides the hero of a Sunday-school “tale for boys,” who ever gets up willingly? There are some men to whom getting up at the proper time is an utter impossibility. If eight o'clock happens to be the time that they should turn out, then they lie till half-past. If circumstances change and half-past eight becomes early enough for them, then it is nine before they can rise. They are like the statesman of whom it was said that he was always punctually half an hour late. They try all manner of schemes. They buy alarm-clocks (artful contrivances that go off at the wrong time and alarm the wrong people). They tell Sarah Jane to knock at the door and call them, and Sarah Jane does knock at the door and does call them, and they grunt back “awri” and then go comfortably to

sleep again. I knew one man who would actually get out and have a cold bath; and even that was of no use, for afterward he would jump into bed again to warm himself.

I think myself that I could keep out of bed all right if I once got out. It is the wrenching away of the head from the pillow that I find so hard, and no amount of over-night determination makes it easier. I say to myself, after having wasted the whole evening, “Well, I won't do any more work to-night; I'll get up early to-morrow morning; ” and I am thoroughly resolved to do so– then. In the morning, however, I feel less enthusiastic about the idea, and reflect that it would have been much better if I had stopped up last night. And then there is the trouble of dressing, and the more one thinks about that the more one wants to put it off.

It is a strange thing this bed, this mimic grave, where we stretch our tired limbs and sink away so quietly into the silence and rest. “O bed, O bed, delicious bed, that heaven on earth to the weary head,” as sang poor Hood, you are a kind old nurse to us fretful boys and girls. Clever and foolish, naughty and good, you take us all in your motherly lap and hush our wayward crying. The strong man full of care– the sick man full of pain– the little maiden sobbing for her faithless lover– like children we lay our aching heads on your white bosom, and you gently soothe us off to by-by.

Our trouble is sore indeed when you turn away and will not comfort us. How long the dawn seems coming when we cannot sleep! Oh! those hideous nights when we toss and turn in fever and pain, when we lie, like living men among the dead, staring out into the dark hours that drift so slowly between us and the light. And oh! those still more hideous nights when we sit by another in pain, when the low fire startles us every now and then with a falling cinder, and the tick of the clock seems a hammer beating out the life that we are watching.

But enough of beds and bedrooms. I have kept to them too long, even for an idle fellow. Let us come out and have a smoke. That wastes time just as well and does not look so bad. Tobacco has been a blessing to us idlers. What the civil-service clerk before Sir Walter's time found to occupy their minds with it is hard to imagine. I attribute the quarrelsome nature of the Middle Ages young men entirely to the want of the soothing weed. They had no work to do and could not smoke, and the consequence was they were forever fighting and rowing. If, by any extraordinary chance, there was no war going, then they got up a deadly family feud with the next-door neighbor, and if, in spite of this, they still had a few spare moments on their hands, they occupied them with discussions as to whose sweetheart was the best looking, the arguments employed on both sides being battle-axes, clubs, etc. Questions of taste were soon decided in those days. When a twelfth-century youth fell in love he did not take three paces backward, gaze into her eyes, and tell her she was too beautiful to live. He said he would step outside and see about it. And if, when he got out, he met a man and broke his head– the other man's head, I mean– then that proved that his– the first fellow's– girl was a pretty girl. But if the other fellow broke *his* head– not his own, you know, but the other fellow's– the other fellow to the second fellow, that is, because of course the other fellow would only be the other fellow to him, not the first fellow who– well, if he broke his head, then *his* girl– not the other fellow's, but the fellow who *was* the– Look here, if A broke B's head, then A's girl was a pretty girl; but if B broke A's head, then A's girl wasn't a pretty girl, but B's girl was. That was their method of conducting art criticism.

Nowadays we light a pipe and let the girls fight it out among themselves.

They do it very well. They are getting to do all our work. They are doctors, and barristers, and artists. They manage theaters, and promote swindles, and edit newspapers. I am looking forward to the time when we men shall have nothing to do but lie in bed till twelve, read two novels a day, have nice little five-o'clock teas all to ourselves, and tax our brains with nothing more trying than discussions upon the latest patterns in trousers and arguments as to what Mr. Jones' coat was made of and whether it fitted him. It is a glorious prospect– for idle fellows.

On being in love

You've been in love, of course! If not you've got it to come. Love is like the measles; we all have to go through it. Also like the measles, we take it only once. One never need be afraid of catching it a second time. The man who has had it can go into the most dangerous places and play the most foolhardy tricks with perfect safety. He can picnic in shady woods, ramble through leafy aisles, and linger on mossy seats to watch the sunset. He fears a quiet country-house no more than he would his own club. He can join a family party to go down the Rhine. He can, to see the last of a friend, venture into the very jaws of the marriage ceremony itself. He can keep his head through the whirl of a ravishing waltz, and rest afterward in a dark conservatory, catching nothing more lasting than a cold. He can brave a moonlight walk adown sweet-scented lanes or a twilight pull among the somber rushes. He can get over a stile without danger, scramble through a tangled hedge without being caught, come down a slippery path without falling. He can look into sunny eyes and not be dazzled. He listens to the siren voices, yet sails on with unveered helm. He clasps white hands in his, but no electric “Lulu”-like force holds him bound in their dainty pressure.

No, we never sicken with love twice. Cupid spends no second arrow on the same heart. Love's handmaids are our life-long friends. Respect, and admiration, and affection, our doors may always be left open for, but their great celestial master, in his royal progress, pays but one visit and departs. We like, we cherish, we are very, very fond of– but we never love again. A man's heart is a firework that once in its time flashes heavenward. Meteor-like, it blazes for a moment and lights with its glory the whole world beneath. Then the night of our sordid commonplace life closes in around it, and the burned-out case, falling back to earth, lies useless and uncared for, slowly smoldering into ashes. Once, breaking loose from our prison bonds, we dare, as mighty old Prometheus dared, to scale the Olympian mount and snatch from Phoebus' chariot the fire of the gods. Happy those who, hastening down again ere it dies out, can kindle their earthly altars at its flame. Love is too pure a light to burn long among the noisome gases that we breathe, but before it is choked out we may use it as a torch to ignite the cozy fire of affection.

And, after all, that warming glow is more suited to our cold little back parlor of a world than is the burning spirit love. Love should be the vestal fire of some mighty temple– some vast dim fane whose organ music is the rolling of the spheres. Affection will burn cheerily when the white flame of love is flickered out. Affection is a fire that can be fed from day to day and be piled up ever higher as the wintry years draw nigh. Old men and women can sit by it with their thin hands clasped, the little children can nestle down in front, the friend and neighbor has his welcome corner by its side, and even shaggy Fido and sleek Titty can toast their noses at the bars.

Let us heap the coals of kindness upon that fire. Throw on your pleasant words, your gentle pressures of the hand, your thoughtful and unselfish deeds. Fan it with good-humor, patience, and forbearance. You can let the wind blow and the rain fall unheeded then, for your hearth will be warm and bright, and the faces round it will make sunshine in spite of the clouds without.

I am afraid, dear Edwin and Angelina, you expect too much from love. You think there is enough of your little hearts to feed this fierce, devouring passion for all your long lives. Ah, young folk! don't rely too much upon that unsteady flicker. It will dwindle and dwindle as the months roll on, and there is no replenishing the fuel. You will watch it die out in anger and disappointment. To each it will seem that it is the other who is growing colder. Edwin sees with bitterness that Angelina no longer runs to the gate to meet him, all smiles and blushes; and when he has a cough now she doesn't begin to cry and, putting her arms round his neck, say that she cannot live without him. The most she will probably do is to suggest a lozenge, and even that in a tone implying that it is the noise more than anything else she is anxious to get rid of.

Poor little Angelina, too, sheds silent tears, for Edwin has given up carrying her old handkerchief in the inside pocket of his waistcoat.

Both are astonished at the falling off in the other one, but neither sees their own change. If they did they would not suffer as they do. They would look for the cause in the right quarter– in the littleness of poor human nature– join hands over their common failing, and start building their house anew on a more earthly and enduring foundation. But we are so blind to our own shortcomings, so wide awake to those of others. Everything that happens to us is always the other person's fault. Angelina would have gone on loving Edwin forever and ever and ever if only Edwin had not grown so strange and different. Edwin would have adored Angelina through eternity if Angelina had only remained the same as when he first adored her.

It is a cheerless hour for you both when the lamp of love has gone out and the fire of affection is not yet lit, and you have to grope about in the cold, raw dawn of life to kindle it. God grant it catches light before the day is too far spent. Many sit shivering by the dead coals till night come.

But, there, of what use is it to preach? Who that feels the rush of young love through his veins can think it will ever flow feeble and slow! To the boy of twenty it seems impossible that he will not love as wildly at sixty as he does then. He cannot call to mind any middle-aged or elderly gentleman of his acquaintance who is known to exhibit symptoms of frantic attachment, but that does not interfere in his belief in himself. His love will never fall, whoever else's may. Nobody ever loved as he loves, and so, of course, the rest of the world's experience can be no guide in his case. Alas! alas! ere thirty he has joined the ranks of the sneerers. It is not his fault. Our passions, both the good and bad, cease with our blushes. We do not hate, nor grieve, nor joy, nor despair in our thirties like we did in our teens. Disappointment does not suggest suicide, and we quaff success without intoxication.

We take all things in a minor key as we grow older. There are few majestic passages in the later acts of life's opera. Ambition takes a less ambitious aim. Honor becomes more reasonable and conveniently adapts itself to circumstances. And love– love dies. “Irreverence for the dreams of youth” soon creeps like a killing frost upon our hearts. The tender shoots and the expanding flowers are nipped and withered, and of a vine that yearned to stretch its tendrils round the world there is left but a sapless stump.

My fair friends will deem all this rank heresy, I know. So far from a man's not loving after he has passed boyhood, it is not till there is a good deal of gray in his hair that they think his protestations at all worthy of attention. Young ladies take their notions of our sex from the novels written by their own, and compared with the monstrosities that masquerade for men in the pages of that nightmare literature, Pythagoras' plucked bird and Frankenstein's demon were fair average specimens of humanity.

In these so-called books, the chief lover, or Greek god, as he is admiringly referred to– by the way, they do not say which “Greek god” it is that the gentleman bears such a striking likeness to; it might be hump-backed Vulcan, or double-faced Janus, or even driveling Silenus, the god of abstruse mysteries. He resembles the whole family of them, however, in being a blackguard, and perhaps this is what is meant. To even the little manliness his classical prototypes possessed, though, he can lay no claim whatever, being a listless effeminate noodle, on the shady side of forty. But oh! the depth and strength of this elderly party's emotion for some bread-and-butter school-girl! Hide your heads, ye young Romeos and Leanders! this *blase* old beau loves with an hysterical fervor that requires four adjectives to every noun to properly describe.

It is well, dear ladies, for us old sinners that you study only books. Did you read mankind, you would know that the lad's shy stammering tells a truer tale than our bold eloquence. A boy's love comes from a full heart; a man's is more often the result of a full stomach. Indeed, a man's sluggish current may not be called love, compared with the rushing fountain that wells up when a boy's heart is struck with the heavenly rod. If you would taste love, drink of the pure stream that youth pours out at your feet. Do not wait till it has become a muddy river before you stoop to catch its waves.

Or is it that you like its bitter flavor– that the clear, limpid water is insipid to your palate and that the pollution of its after-course gives it a relish to your lips? Must we believe those who tell us that a hand foul with the filth of a shameful life is the only one a young girl cares to be caressed by?

That is the teaching that is bawled out day by day from between those yellow covers. Do they ever pause to think, I wonder, those devil's Lady-Helps, what mischief they are doing crawling about God's garden, and telling childish Eves and silly Adams that sin is sweet and that decency is ridiculous and vulgar? How many an innocent girl do they not degrade into an evil-minded woman? To how many a weak lad do they not point out the dirty by-path as the shortest cut to a maiden's heart? It is not as if they wrote of life as it really is. Speak truth, and right will take care of itself. But their pictures are coarse daubs painted from the sickly fancies of their own diseased imagination.

We want to think of women not– as their own sex would show them– as Lorleis luring us to destruction, but as good angels beckoning us upward. They have more power for good or evil than they dream of. It is just at the very age when a man's character is forming that he tumbles into love, and then the lass he loves has the making or marring of him. Unconsciously he molds himself to what she would have him, good or bad. I am sorry to have to be ungallant enough to say that I do not think they always use their influence for the best. Too often the female world is bounded hard and fast within the limits of the commonplace. Their ideal hero is a prince of littleness, and to become that many a powerful mind, enchanted by love, is “lost to life and use and name and fame. ”

And yet, women, you could make us so much better if you only would. It rests with you, more than with all the preachers, to roll this world a little nearer heaven. Chivalry is not dead: it only sleeps for want of work to do. It is you who must wake it to noble deeds. You must be worthy of knightly worship.

You must be higher than ourselves. It was for Una that the Red Cross Knight did war. For no painted, mincing court dame could the dragon have been slain. Oh, ladies fair, be fair in mind and soul as well as face, so that brave knights may win glory in your service! Oh, woman, throw off your disguising cloaks of selfishness, effrontery, and affectation! Stand forth once more a queen in your royal robe of simple purity. A thousand swords, now rusting in ignoble sloth, shall leap from their scabbards to do battle for your honor against wrong. A thousand Sir Rolands shall lay lance in rest, and Fear, Avarice, Pleasure, and Ambition shall go down in the dust before your colors.

What noble deeds were we not ripe for in the days when we loved? What noble lives could we not have lived for her sake? Our love was a religion we could have died for. It was no mere human creature like ourselves that we adored. It was a queen that we paid homage to, a goddess that we worshiped.

And how madly we did worship! And how sweet it was to worship! Ah, lad, cherish love's young dream while it lasts! You will know too soon how truly little Tom Moore sang when he said that there was nothing half so sweet in life. Even when it brings misery it is a wild, romantic misery, all unlike the dull, worldly pain of after-sorrows. When you have lost her– when the light is gone out from your life and the world stretches before you a long, dark horror, even then a half-enchantment mingles with your despair.

And who would not risk its terrors to gain its raptures? Ah, what raptures they were! The mere recollection thrills you. How delicious it was to tell her that you loved her, that you lived for her, that you would die for her! How you did rave, to be sure, what floods of extravagant nonsense you poured forth, and oh, how cruel it was of her to pretend not to believe you! In what awe you stood of her! How miserable you were when you had offended her! And yet, how pleasant to be bullied by her and to sue for pardon without having the slightest notion of what your fault was! How dark the world was when she snubbed you, as she often did, the little rogue, just to see you look wretched; how sunny when she smiled! How jealous you were of every one about her! How you hated every man she shook hands with, every woman she kissed– the maid that did her hair, the boy that cleaned her shoes, the dog she nursed– though you had to be respectful to the last-named! How you looked forward to

seeing her, how stupid you were when you did see her, staring at her without saying a word! How impossible it was for you to go out at any time of the day or night without finding yourself eventually opposite her windows! You hadn't pluck enough to go in, but you hung about the corner and gazed at the outside. Oh, if the house had only caught fire– it was insured, so it wouldn't have mattered– and you could have rushed in and saved her at the risk of your life, and have been terribly burned and injured! Anything to serve her. Even in little things that was so sweet. How you would watch her, spaniel-like, to anticipate her slightest wish! How proud you were to do her bidding! How delightful it was to be ordered about by her! To devote your whole life to her and to never think of yourself seemed such a simple thing. You would go without a holiday to lay a humble offering at her shrine, and felt more than repaid if she only deigned to accept it. How precious to you was everything that she had hallowed by her touch– her little glove, the ribbon she had worn, the rose that had nestled in her hair and whose withered leaves still mark the poems you never care to look at now.

And oh, how beautiful she was, how wondrous beautiful! It was as some angel entering the room, and all else became plain and earthly. She was too sacred to be touched. It seemed almost presumption to gaze at her. You would as soon have thought of kissing her as of singing comic songs in a cathedral. It was desecration enough to kneel and timidly raise the gracious little hand to your lips.

Ah, those foolish days, those foolish days when we were unselfish and pure-minded; those foolish days when our simple hearts were full of truth, and faith, and reverence! Ah, those foolish days of noble longings and of noble strivings! And oh, these wise, clever days when we know that money is the only prize worth striving for, when we believe in nothing else but meanness and lies, when we care for no living creature but ourselves!

On being in the blues

I can enjoy feeling melancholy, and there is a good deal of satisfaction about being thoroughly miserable; but nobody likes a fit of the blues. Nevertheless, everybody has them; notwithstanding which, nobody can tell why. There is no accounting for them. You are just as likely to have one on the day after you have come into a large fortune as on the day after you have left your new silk umbrella in the train. Its effect upon you is somewhat similar to what would probably be produced by a combined attack of toothache, indigestion, and cold in the head. You become stupid, restless, and irritable; rude to strangers and dangerous toward your friends; clumsy, maudlin, and quarrelsome; a nuisance to yourself and everybody about you.

While it is on you can do nothing and think of nothing, though feeling at the time bound to do something. You can't sit still so put on your hat and go for a walk; but before you get to the corner of the street you wish you hadn't come out and you turn back. You open a book and try to read, but you find Shakespeare trite and commonplace, Dickens is dull and prosy, Thackeray a bore, and Carlyle too sentimental. You throw the book aside and call the author names. Then you “shoo” the cat out of the room and kick the door to after her. You think you will write your letters, but after sticking at “Dearest Auntie: I find I have five minutes to spare, and so hasten to write to you,” for a quarter of an hour, without being able to think of another sentence, you tumble the paper into the desk, fling the wet pen down upon the table-cloth, and start up with the resolution of going to see the Thompsons. While pulling on your gloves, however, it occurs to you that the Thompsons are idiots; that they never have supper; and that you will be expected to jump the baby. You curse the Thompsons and decide not to go.

By this time you feel completely crushed. You bury your face in your hands and think you would like to die and go to heaven. You picture to yourself your own sick-bed, with all your friends and relations standing round you weeping. You bless them all, especially the young and pretty ones. They will value you when you are gone, so you say to yourself, and learn too late what they have lost; and you bitterly contrast their presumed regard for you then with their decided want of veneration now.

These reflections make you feel a little more cheerful, but only for a brief period; for the next moment you think what a fool you must be to imagine for an instant that anybody would be sorry at anything that might happen to you. Who would care two straws (whatever precise amount of care two straws may represent) whether you are blown up, or hung up, or married, or drowned? Nobody cares for you. You never have been properly appreciated, never met with your due deserts in any one particular. You review the whole of your past life, and it is painfully apparent that you have been ill-used from your cradle.

Half an hour's indulgence in these considerations works you up into a state of savage fury against everybody and everything, especially yourself, whom anatomical reasons alone prevent your kicking. Bed-time at last comes, to save you from doing something rash, and you spring upstairs, throw off your clothes, leaving them strewn all over the room, blow out the candle, and jump into bed as if you had backed yourself for a heavy wager to do the whole thing against time. There you toss and tumble about for a couple of hours or so, varying the monotony by occasionally jerking the clothes off and getting out and putting them on again. At length you drop into an uneasy and fitful slumber, have bad dreams, and wake up late the next morning.

At least, this is all we poor single men can do under the circumstances. Married men bully their wives, grumble at the dinner, and insist on the children's going to bed. All of which, creating, as it does, a good deal of disturbance in the house, must be a great relief to the feelings of a man in the blues, rows being the only form of amusement in which he can take any interest.

The symptoms of the infirmity are much the same in every case, but the affliction itself is variously termed. The poet says that “a feeling of sadness comes o'er him. ” 'Arry refers to the

heavings of his wayward heart by confiding to Jimee that he has “got the blooming hump. ” Your sister doesn't know what is the matter with her to-night. She feels out of sorts altogether and hopes nothing is going to happen. The every-day young man is “so awful glad to meet you, old fellow,” for he does “feel so jolly miserable this evening. ” As for myself, I generally say that “I have a strange, unsettled feeling to-night” and “think I'll go out. ”

By the way, it never does come except in the evening. In the sun-time, when the world is bounding forward full of life, we cannot stay to sigh and sulk. The roar of the working day drowns the voices of the elfin sprites that are ever singing their low-toned *miserere* in our ears. In the day we are angry, disappointed, or indignant, but never “in the blues” and never melancholy. When things go wrong at ten o'clock in the morning we– or rather you– swear and knock the furniture about; but if the misfortune comes at ten P. M., we read poetry or sit in the dark and think what a hollow world this is.

But, as a rule, it is not trouble that makes us melancholy. The actuality is too stern a thing for sentiment. We linger to weep over a picture, but from the original we should quickly turn our eyes away. There is no pathos in real misery: no luxury in real grief. We do not toy with sharp swords nor hug a gnawing fox to our breast for choice. When a man or woman loves to brood over a sorrow and takes care to keep it green in their memory, you may be sure it is no longer a pain to them. However they may have suffered from it at first, the recollection has become by then a pleasure. Many dear old ladies who daily look at tiny shoes lying in lavender-scented drawers, and weep as they think of the tiny feet whose toddling march is done, and sweet-faced young ones who place each night beneath their pillow some lock that once curled on a boyish head that the salt waves have kissed to death, will call me a nasty cynical brute and say I'm talking nonsense; but I believe, nevertheless, that if they will ask themselves truthfully whether they find it unpleasant to dwell thus on their sorrow, they will be compelled to answer “No. ” Tears are as sweet as laughter to some natures. The proverbial Englishman, we know from old chronicler Froissart, takes his pleasures sadly, and the Englishwoman goes a step further and takes her pleasures in sadness itself.

I am not sneering. I would not for a moment sneer at anything that helps to keep hearts tender in this hard old world. We men are cold and common-sensed enough for all; we would not have women the same. No, no, ladies dear, be always sentimental and soft-hearted, as you are– be the soothing butter to our coarse dry bread. Besides, sentiment is to women what fun is to us. They do not care for our humor, surely it would be unfair to deny them their grief. And who shall say that their mode of enjoyment is not as sensible as ours? Why assume that a doubled-up body, a contorted, purple face, and a gaping mouth emitting a series of ear-splitting shrieks point to a state of more intelligent happiness than a pensive face reposing upon a little white hand, and a pair of gentle tear-dimmed eyes looking back through Time's dark avenue upon a fading past?

I am glad when I see Regret walked with as a friend– glad because I know the saltness has been washed from out the tears, and that the sting must have been plucked from the beautiful face of Sorrow ere we dare press her pale lips to ours. Time has laid his healing hand upon the wound when we can look back upon the pain we once fainted under and no bitterness or despair rises in our hearts. The burden is no longer heavy when we have for our past troubles only the same sweet mingling of pleasure and pity that we feel when old knight-hearted Colonel Newcome answers “*adsum*” to the great roll-call, or when Tom and Maggie Tulliver, clasping hands through the mists that have divided them, go down, locked in each other's arms, beneath the swollen waters of the Floss.

Talking of poor Tom and Maggie Tulliver brings to my mind a saying of George Eliot's in connection with this subject of melancholy. She speaks somewhere of the “sadness of a summer's evening. ” How wonderfully true– like everything that came from that wonderful pen– the observation is! Who has not felt the sorrowful enchantment of those lingering sunsets? The world belongs to Melancholy then, a thoughtful deep-eyed maiden who loves not the glare of day. It is not till “light thickens and the crow wings to the rocky wood” that she steals forth from her groves. Her palace is

in twilight land. It is there she meets us. At her shadowy gate she takes our hand in hers and walks beside us through her mystic realm. We see no form, but seem to hear the rustling of her wings.

Even in the toiling hum-drum city her spirit comes to us. There is a somber presence in each long, dull street; and the dark river creeps ghostlike under the black arches, as if bearing some hidden secret beneath its muddy waves.

In the silent country, when the trees and hedges loom dim and blurred against the rising night, and the bat's wing flutters in our face, and the land-rail's cry sounds drearily across the fields, the spell sinks deeper still into our hearts. We seem in that hour to be standing by some unseen death-bed, and in the swaying of the elms we hear the sigh of the dying day.

A solemn sadness reigns. A great peace is around us. In its light our cares of the working day grow small and trivial, and bread and cheese– ay, and even kisses– do not seem the only things worth striving for. Thoughts we cannot speak but only listen to flood in upon us, and standing in the stillness under earth's darkening dome, we feel that we are greater than our petty lives. Hung round with those dusky curtains, the world is no longer a mere dingy workshop, but a stately temple wherein man may worship, and where at times in the dimness his groping hands touch God's.

On being hard up

It is a most remarkable thing. I sat down with the full intention of writing something clever and original; but for the life of me I can't think of anything clever and original– at least, not at this moment. The only thing I can think about now is being hard up. I suppose having my hands in my pockets has made me think about this. I always do sit with my hands in my pockets except when I am in the company of my sisters, my cousins, or my aunts; and they kick up such a shindy– I should say expostulate so eloquently upon the subject– that I have to give in and take them out– my hands I mean. The chorus to their objections is that it is not gentlemanly. I am hanged if I can see why. I could understand its not being considered gentlemanly to put your hands in other people's pockets (especially by the other people), but how, O ye sticklers for what looks this and what looks that, can putting his hands in his own pockets make a man less gentle? Perhaps you are right, though. Now I come to think of it, I have heard some people grumble most savagely when doing it. But they were mostly old gentlemen. We young fellows, as a rule, are never quite at ease unless we have our hands in our pockets. We are awkward and shifty. We are like what a music-hall Lion Comique would be without his opera-hat, if such a thing can be imagined. But let us put our hands in our trousers pockets, and let there be some small change in the right-hand one and a bunch of keys in the left, and we will face a female post-office clerk.

It is a little difficult to know what to do with your bands, even in your pockets, when there is nothing else there. Years ago, when my whole capital would occasionally come down to “what in town the people call a bob,” I would recklessly spend a penny of it, merely for the sake of having the change, all in coppers, to jingle. You don't feel nearly so hard up with eleven pence in your pocket as you do with a shilling. Had I been “La-di-da,” that impecunious youth about whom we superior folk are so sarcastic, I would have changed my penny for two ha'pennies.

I can speak with authority on the subject of being hard up. I have been a provincial actor. If further evidence be required, which I do not think likely, I can add that I have been a “gentleman connected with the press. ” I have lived on 15 shilling a week. I have lived a week on 10, owing the other 5; and I have lived for a fortnight on a great-coat.

It is wonderful what an insight into domestic economy being really hard up gives one. If you want to find out the value of money, live on 15 shillings a week and see how much you can put by for clothes and recreation. You will find out that it is worth while to wait for the farthing change, that it is worth while to walk a mile to save a penny, that a glass of beer is a luxury to be indulged in only at rare intervals, and that a collar can be worn for four days.

Try it just before you get married. It will be excellent practice. Let your son and heir try it before sending him to college. He won't grumble at a hundred a year pocket-money then. There are some people to whom it would do a world of good. There is that delicate blossom who can't drink any claret under ninety-four, and who would as soon think of dining off cat's meat as off plain roast mutton. You do come across these poor wretches now and then, though, to the credit of humanity, they are principally confined to that fearful and wonderful society known only to lady novelists. I never hear of one of these creatures discussing a *menu* card but I feel a mad desire to drag him off to the bar of some common east-end public-house and cram a sixpenny dinner down his throat– beefsteak pudding, fourpence; potatoes, a penny; half a pint of porter, a penny. The recollection of it (and the mingled fragrance of beer, tobacco, and roast pork generally leaves a vivid impression) might induce him to turn up his nose a little less frequently in the future at everything that is put before him. Then there is that generous party, the cadger's delight, who is so free with his small change, but who never thinks of paying his debts. It might teach even him a little common sense. “I always give the waiter a shilling. One can't give the fellow less, you know,” explained a young government clerk with whom I was lunching the other day in Regent Street. I agreed with him as to the utter impossibility of

making it elevenpence ha'penny; but at the same time I resolved to one day decoy him to an eating-house I remembered near Covent Garden, where the waiter, for the better discharge of his duties, goes about in his shirt-sleeves– and very dirty sleeves they are, too, when it gets near the end of the month. I know that waiter. If my friend gives him anything beyond a penny, the man will insist on shaking hands with him then and there as a mark of his esteem; of that I feel sure.

There have been a good many funny things said and written about hardupishness, but the reality is not funny, for all that. It is not funny to have to haggle over pennies. It isn't funny to be thought mean and stingy. It isn't funny to be shabby and to be ashamed of your address. No, there is nothing at all funny in poverty– to the poor. It is hell upon earth to a sensitive man; and many a brave gentleman who would have faced the labors of Hercules has had his heart broken by its petty miseries.

It is not the actual discomforts themselves that are hard to bear. Who would mind roughing it a bit if that were all it meant? What cared Robinson Crusoe for a patch on his trousers? Did he wear trousers? I forget; or did he go about as he does in the pantomimes? What did it matter to him if his toes did stick out of his boots? and what if his umbrella was a cotton one, so long as it kept the rain off? His shabbiness did not trouble him; there was none of his friends round about to sneer him.

Being poor is a mere trifle. It is being known to be poor that is the sting. It is not cold that makes a man without a great-coat hurry along so quickly. It is not all shame at telling lies– which he knows will not be believed– that makes him turn so red when he informs you that he considers great-coats unhealthy and never carries an umbrella on principle. It is easy enough to say that poverty is no crime. No; if it were men wouldn't be ashamed of it. It's a blunder, though, and is punished as such. A poor man is despised the whole world over; despised as much by a Christian as by a lord, as much by a demagogue as by a footman, and not all the copy-book maxims ever set for ink stained youth will make him respected. Appearances are everything, so far as human opinion goes, and the man who will walk down Piccadilly arm in arm with the most notorious scamp in London, provided he is a well-dressed one, will slink up a back street to say a couple of words to a seedy-looking gentleman. And the seedy-looking gentleman knows this– no one better– and will go a mile round to avoid meeting an acquaintance. Those that knew him in his prosperity need never trouble themselves to look the other way. He is a thousand times more anxious that they should not see him than they can be; and as to their assistance, there is nothing he dreads more than the offer of it. All he wants is to be forgotten; and in this respect he is generally fortunate enough to get what he wants.

One becomes used to being hard up, as one becomes used to everything else, by the help of that wonderful old homeopathic doctor, Time. You can tell at a glance the difference between the old hand and the novice; between the case-hardened man who has been used to shift and struggle for years and the poor devil of a beginner striving to hide his misery, and in a constant agony of fear lest he should be found out. Nothing shows this difference more clearly than the way in which each will pawn his watch. As the poet says somewhere: “True ease in pawning comes from art, not chance. ” The one goes into his “uncle's” with as much composure as he would into his tailor's– very likely with more. The assistant is even civil and attends to him at once, to the great indignation of the lady in the next box, who, however, sarcastically observes that she don't mind being kept waiting “if it is a regular customer. ” Why, from the pleasant and businesslike manner in which the transaction is carried out, it might be a large purchase in the three per cents. Yet what a piece of work a man makes of his first “pop. ” A boy popping his first question is confidence itself compared with him. He hangs about outside the shop until he has succeeded in attracting the attention of all the loafers in the neighborhood and has aroused strong suspicions in the mind of the policeman on the beat. At last, after a careful examination of the contents of the windows, made for the purpose of impressing the bystanders with the notion that he is going in to purchase a diamond bracelet or some such trifle, he enters, trying to do so with a careless swagger, and giving himself really the air of a member of the swell mob. When inside he speaks in so low a voice as to be perfectly inaudible, and has to say it all over again. When, in the course of his rambling conversation about a “friend” of his, the word

“lend” is reached, he is promptly told to go up the court on the right and take the first door round the corner. He comes out of the shop with a face that you could easily light a cigarette at, and firmly under the impression that the whole population of the district is watching him. When he does get to the right place he has forgotten his name and address and is in a general condition of hopeless imbecility. Asked in a severe tone how he came by “this,” he stammers and contradicts himself, and it is only a miracle if he does not confess to having stolen it that very day. He is thereupon informed that they don't want anything to do with his sort, and that he had better get out of this as quickly as possible, which he does, recollecting nothing more until he finds himself three miles off, without the slightest knowledge how he got there.

By the way, how awkward it is, though, having to depend on public-houses and churches for the time. The former are generally too fast and the latter too slow. Besides which, your efforts to get a glimpse of the public house clock from the outside are attended with great difficulties. If you gently push the swing-door ajar and peer in you draw upon yourself the contemptuous looks of the barmaid, who at once puts you down in the same category with area sneaks and cadgers. You also create a certain amount of agitation among the married portion of the customers. You don't see the clock because it is behind the door; and in trying to withdraw quietly you jam your head. The only other method is to jump up and down outside the window. After this latter proceeding, however, if you do not bring out a banjo and commence to sing, the youthful inhabitants of the neighborhood, who have gathered round in expectation, become disappointed.

I should like to know, too, by what mysterious law of nature it is that before you have left your watch “to be repaired” half an hour, some one is sure to stop you in the street and conspicuously ask you the time. Nobody even feels the slightest curiosity on the subject when you've got it on.

Dear old ladies and gentlemen who know nothing about being hard up– and may they never, bless their gray old heads– look upon the pawn-shop as the last stage of degradation; but those who know it better (and my readers have no doubt, noticed this themselves) are often surprised, like the little boy who dreamed he went to heaven, at meeting so many people there that they never expected to see. For my part, I think it a much more independent course than borrowing from friends, and I always try to impress this upon those of my acquaintance who incline toward “wanting a couple of pounds till the day after to-morrow. ” But they won't all see it. One of them once remarked that he objected to the principle of the thing. I fancy if he had said it was the interest that he objected to he would have been nearer the truth: twenty-five per cent certainly does come heavy.

There are degrees in being hard up. We are all hard up, more or less– most of us more. Some are hard up for a thousand pounds; some for a shilling. Just at this moment I am hard up myself for a fiver. I only want it for a day or two. I should be certain of paying it back within a week at the outside, and if any lady or gentleman among my readers would kindly lend it me, I should be very much obliged indeed. They could send it to me under cover to Messrs. Field & Tuer, only, in such case, please let the envelope be carefully sealed. I would give you my I. O. U. as security.

On vanity and vanities

All is vanity and everybody's vain. Women are terribly vain. So are men– more so, if possible. So are children, particularly children. One of them at this very moment is hammering upon my legs. She wants to know what I think of her new shoes. Candidly I don't think much of them. They lack symmetry and curve and possess an indescribable appearance of lumpiness (I believe, too, they've put them on the wrong feet). But I don't say this. It is not criticism, but flattery that she wants; and I gush over them with what I feel to myself to be degrading effusiveness. Nothing else would satisfy this self-opinionated cherub. I tried the conscientious-friend dodge with her on one occasion, but it was not a success. She had requested my judgment upon her general conduct and behavior, the exact case submitted being, “Wot oo tink of me? Oo peased wi' me? ” and I had thought it a good opportunity to make a few salutary remarks upon her late moral career, and said: “No, I am not pleased with you. ” I recalled to her mind the events of that very morning, and I put it to her how she, as a Christian child, could expect a wise and good uncle to be satisfied with the carryings on of an infant who that very day had roused the whole house at five AM.; had upset a water-jug and tumbled downstairs after it at seven; had endeavored to put the cat in the bath at eight; and sat on her own father's hat at nine thirty-five.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.