Saltus Edgar

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE GENESIS OF DISENCHANTMENT

The trite and commonplace question of contentment and dissatisfaction is a topic which is not only of every-day interest, but one which in recent years has so claimed the attention of thinkers, that they have broadly divided mankind into those who accept life off-hand, as a more or less pleasing possession, and those who resolutely look the gift in the mouth and say it is not worth the having.

Viewed simply as systems of thought, the first of these two divisions is evidently contemporaneous with humanity, while the second will be found to be of purely modern origin; for from the earliest times man, admittedly and with but few exceptions, has been ever accustomed to regard this world as the best one possible, and through nearly every creed and sect he has considered happiness somewhat in the light of an inviolable

birthright.

Within the last half century, however, there has come into being a new school, which, in denying the possibility of any happiness, holds as first principle that the world is a theatre of misery in which, were the choice accorded, it would be preferable not to be born at all.

In stating that this view of life is of distinctly modern origin, it should be understood that it is so only in the systematic form which it has recently assumed, for individual expressions of discontent have been handed down from remote ages, and any one who cared to rummage through the dust-bins of literature would find material enough to compile a dictionary of pessimistic quotation.

For these pages but little rummaging will be attempted, but as the proper presentation of the subject demands a brief account of the ideas and opinions in which it was cradled, a momentary examination of general literature will not, it is believed, cause any after-reproach of time misspent.

To begin, then, with Greece, whose literature has precedence over all others, it will be remembered that in former days, when the citizen expended the greater part of his activity for the common good, the poets in like manner sang of national topics, the gods, the heroes, and the charms of love. There was, therefore, little opportunity for the expression of purely personal ideas, and the whole background of the poetry of antiquity is in consequence brilliant with optimistic effect. Nevertheless, here

and there, a few complaints crop out from time to time. Homer, for instance, says that man is the unhappiest wight that ever breathed or strutted, and describes his ephemeral existence in a wail of gloomy hexameters.

Then, too, there is the touching Orphean distich, which runs: —

"From thy smile, O Jove, sprang the gods,

But man was born of thy sorrow."

Pindar in one of his graceful odes compared men to the shadows of a dream, while the familiar quotation, "Whom the gods love die young," comes to us straight from Menander.

With the peculiar melancholy of genius, that in those favored days seems more a presentiment than the expression of a general conception, Sophocles, in his last tragedy, says that not to be born at all is the greatest of all possible benefits, but inasmuch as man has appeared on earth, the very best thing he can do is to hurry back where he came from.

In spite, too, of the general tendency of thought, sentiments not dissimilar are to be found in Æschylus and Euripides, while something of this instinctive pessimism was expanded into a quaint and national custom by the Thracians, who, according to Herodotus, met birth with lamentations, but greeted death with salvos and welcoming festivals.

With but few exceptions the early philosophers considered

death not as a misfortune, but as an advantage. Empedocles taught that the sojourn on earth was one of vexatious torment, an opinion in which he was firmly supported by Heraclitus, and even Plato, whose general drift of thought was grandly optimistic, said in the "Apology," "If death is the withdrawal of every sensation, if it is like a sleep which no dream disturbs, what an incomparable blessing it must be! for let any one select a night passed in undisturbed and entire rest, and compare it with the other nights and days that have filled his existence, and then from his conscience let him answer how many nights and days he has known which have been sweeter and more agreeable than that. For my part I am sure that not the ordinary individual alone, but even the great King of Persia would find such days and nights most easy to enumerate."

The doctrine of Epicurus held, in substance, that the moment it was no longer possible to delight the senses death became a benefit, and suicide a crowning act of wisdom. The teaching of the Socratic school and its offshoots amounted, in brief, to the idea that the only admissible aim of life was the pursuit and attainment of absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge, however, being found unattainable, the logical culmination of their doctrine was delivered by Hegesias, in Alexandria, in the third century before the Christian era. This disciple of Socrates argued that as there was a limit to the knowable, and happiness was a pure illusion, a further prolongation of existence was useless. "Life seems pleasing only to the fool," he stated; "the

wise regard it with indifference, and consider death just as acceptable." "Death," he added, "is as good as life; it is but a supreme renunciation in which man is freed from idle complaints and long deceptions. Life is full of pain, and the pangs of the flesh gnaw at the mind and rout its calm. In countless ways fate intercepts and thwarts our hopes. Contentment is not to be relied on, and even wisdom cannot preserve us from the treachery and insecurity of the perceptions. Since happiness, then, is intangible we should cease to pursue it, and take for our goal the absence of pain; this condition," he explained, "is best obtained in making ourselves indifferent to every object of desire and every cause of dislike, and above all to life itself. In any event," he concluded, "death is advantageous in this, it takes us not from blessings but from evil."[1]

This curious mixture of pessimism and theology was, it is said, delivered with such charm of persuasive grace and eloquence that several of his listeners put his ideas into instant practice, and that the city might be preserved from the contagion of suicide, King Ptolemy felt himself obliged to prevent this seductive misanthrope from delivering any further harangues.

Literature has the same tendency to repeat itself as history, and as the Romans took much of their culture and many of their ideas from Greece, the tone of their principal writers is only dissimilar to those already quoted in that with the fall of their religion, the decline of the empire and the universal

[1] Zeller, *Philosophie der Griechen*.

intoxication of the senses, the pessimist element became somewhat accentuated. It would be an idle task, however, to attempt to cite even a fraction of the cheerless distress which pervades the Roman classics, and it will perhaps suffice for the moment to note but a passage or two, which bear directly upon the subject.

Seneca, for instance, whose insight was as clear and whose understanding was as unclouded as any writer with whom the world is acquainted, sent his letters down the centuries freighted with such ideas as these: "Death is nature's most admirable invention." "There is no need to complain of particular grievances, for life in its entirety is lamentable." "No one would accept life were it not received in ignorance of what it is."

Pliny, also, is very quotable. "Nature's most pleasing invention," he says, "is brevity of life." And he adds, "No mortal is happy, for even if there is no other cause for discontent there is at least the fear of possible misfortune."

Then, too, Petronius, the poet of the Roman orgy, opening and closing his veins, toying with death, as with a last and supreme delight, is of familiar, if repulsive, memory.

English literature is naturally as well stocked with individual expressions of distaste for existence as that of Rome. The poets, nearly one and all, from Chaucer to Rossetti, have told their sorrow in a variety of more or less polished metre, and even Macpherson was careful, in dowering his century with another bard, to put thoughts into Ossian's verse which would not have

been unfitting in a Greek chorus.

In speaking of the world, Chaucer had already said, —

"Here is no home, here is but a wilderness,"

when Sir Thomas Wyatt, enlarging on the theme, repeated, —

"Wherefore come death and let me dye."

The delicate muse of Samuel Fletcher found —

"Nothing's so dainty sweet, as lovely melancholy,"

and Shakespeare's depressing lines on the value of life are familiar to every schoolboy.

Dryden wrote, —

"When I consider life, 't is all a cheat;
Yet, fooled with hope, men favour the deceit,
Trust on and think to-morrow will repay;
To-morrow's falser than the former day."

All of which was afterwards summed up in the well-known line, —

"Man never *is* but always *to be* blessed,"

while Thomson noted —

… "all the thousand, nameless ills
That one incessant struggle render life."

Keats, and especially Byron, wrote stanza after stanza of enervating sadness. Moore's dear gazelle is nowadays a familiar comparison. Shelley's tremulous sensibility forbade his finding any charm in life, and we none of us need to be reminded that Poe's soul was sorrow-laden.

But the poets are not alone in their tale of the deceptions of life; the moralists and essayists, too, have added their quota to the general budget, and it is not simply the value of life that has been questioned by many of the best writers; there has been also a certain surprise expressed that man should care to live at all. Indeed, the "I see no necessity" of the wit, to the beggar imploring aid that he might live, is the epigram of the thoughts of a hundred scholars.

In France, pessimism cannot be said to have been ever regarded otherwise than as an intellectual curiosity. The Frenchman, it is true, not infrequently lapses into a cynical indifference; yet the value of life is as a rule so evident to him, that he seldom vouchsafes more than a passing shrug to any theory of disparagement. In the first place, death, to which the hat is gravely raised, has never been in France a polite or welcome topic; moreover, French literature, while lawless enough in other respects, has left its readers generally unprepared to view the

world as a fiasco, in which misery is the one immense success. The trouvères and troubadours sang to the mediæval châtelaine little else than the praise of love, with here and there the account of some combat, to show what they might do were they put to the test. Later, Villon told gently of the *neiges d'antan*, Ronsard aimed a dart or two at fate, and Rabelais's laugh was sometimes very near to tears; but, broadly speaking, the French asked of their writers little else than wit, – if they could not give them that, then should they hold their peace.

The delicate irony of Candide had, therefore, when appreciated, something almost novel in its savor; and, indeed, it may fairly be said that it was not until the blight of Byron had been cheerfully translated, that the French were in any measure prepared to understand Rolla and the pathetic beauties of De Musset's verse. Pascal, Helvetius, and other writers of desultory depression had of course already appeared. Maupertuis had found no difficulty in showing that life held more pain than pleasure, while Chamfort's conclusions on the same subject were as luminous as they were gloomy; and yet it is difficult to say that the gall with which these authors dashed their pages served otherwise than as a condiment to fresher and less flavored works. Baudelaire, the poet of boredom, praying for a new vice that should wrest life into some semblance of reality, was in consequence almost a novelty, and not a perfectly satisfactory one at that. It is therefore only within the last ten years or so that pessimism has in any wise attracted the notice of French

thinkers, and the attention which has recently been paid to it is due partly to Leconte de Lisle, and partly to a surge of German thought.

During the eighteenth century the majority of the scholars who represented the culture of Germany were faithfully following the optimist theories of Leibnitz and Wolf. The doctrine that the world was the best one possible, supported as it was by official theology and strictly in accord with the deism of Pope and Paley, was very generally and unhesitatingly accepted. Indeed, there is no apparent reason why it should not have been. The Minnesingers doubtless had formulated some few complaints, but then these literary vagrants had already begun to form part of mythology, and besides, poets are all more or less prone to discontent and voluble of sorrow. Beyond the classics of Greece and Rome there was, therefore, no precedent for pessimistic thought. German literature, strictly speaking, did not begin until Lessing's advent, and before that the theatre, with its Hans Wurst and its Pickleherring, had offered only a succession of the broadest farce.

The calm and quiet which the Germans then enjoyed was ruffled, if at all, only by some confused echoes of the *obiter dicta* which Voltaire's royal disciple was pleased to disseminate, but it is probable that the better part of this ferocious gayety was drowned in crossing the Rhine, and, in any event, it was too delicately pungent to do more than disturb the placid current of their thought.

Later, when Kant appeared, the effect of his philosophy was very much like a successful treatment of cataract on the eyes of the whole nation. "Happiness," he insisted in the "Kritik der Urtheilskraft," "has never been attained by man, for he is unable to find contentment in any possession or enjoyment, … and were he called upon to fashion a system of happiness for his fellows he would be unable to do so, for happiness is in its essence intangible." "No one," he added elsewhere, "has a right conception of life who would care to prolong it beyond its natural duration, for it would then be only the continuation of an already tiresome struggle."

After this the teaching of Leibnitz slowly disappeared, and though a certain amount of optimism necessarily subsisted, the tendency of thought veered to the opposite direction. Fichte, Kant's immediate successor, declared, in direct contradiction to Leibnitz, that this world was the worst one possible, and was only consoled by thinking he could raise himself by the aid of pure thought into the felicity of the "supersensible." "Men," he says, "in the vehement pursuit of happiness grasp at the first object which offers to them any prospect of satisfaction, but immediately they turn an introspective eye and ask, 'Am I happy?' and at once from their innermost being a voice answers distinctly, 'No, you are as poor and as miserable as before.' Then they think it was the object that deceived them, and turn precipitately to another. But the second holds as little satisfaction as the first… Wandering then through life,

restless and tormented, at each successive station they think that happiness dwells at the next, but when they reach it happiness is no longer there. In whatever position they may find themselves there is always another one which they discern from afar, and which but to touch, they think, is to find the wished delight, but when the goal is reached discontent has followed on the way and stands in haunting constancy before them."[2]

Schelling expressed himself more guardedly. As professional pantheist, he seemed to think that anything not rigidly vague and inaccessible was inconsistent with his philosophy. Still there was probably a secret revolt, some propelling impulse to deny his own syllogisms, and to bathe for once in some clear stream of common sense. In the "Nachtwachen," which he published under the pseudonym of Bonaventura, this incentive is evidently, though unsuccessfully, at work. It may be that the force of habit was too strong, but at any rate this rhapsody, which was intended to be a confession of the combat that he had waged with his belief, and a recognition of the immedicable misery of life, brings with it something of that impression of delirium which Poe and Doré not infrequently suggest.

Nor was Hegel hostile to pessimism; he regarded it as an inevitable phase of universal evolution, and indeed its dawn as a science had then already broken.

Meanwhile the poets had not been idle. Herder and Schiller had already attested the bitterness of life to unreluctant ears,

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[2] *Werke*, *v.* p. 408, *et seq.*

and the number of suicides that were directly traceable to the appearance of Werther and his sorrows was instructively large. This phase of sentimentalism, which immediately preceded the riotous rebirth of the Romantic school, was not without its influence on Heine's verse, and in some measure affected the literary tone of the day.

It would, however, be erroneous to suppose that the poets of this epoch were more agitated by the impression of universal worthlessness of life than were their classic predecessors. The distress of Werther, as that of Lara and of Rolla, was not the pain of suffering humanity; it was in each case merely the poet's complacent analysis of his own exceptional nature and personal grievances; it was the expression of the inevitable surprise of youth, which notes for the first time reality's unsuspected yet yawning indifference to the ideal, and the stubborn disaccord between aspiration and fact. It was indeed very beautiful and elegiac, and yet so fluent in its polished melancholy that somehow it did not at all times seem to have been really felt. In any case, it was not a theory of common woe, and lacked that clear conception of the universality of suffering, which the less exalted minds of the philosophers had already signaled, but for which no one as yet had been able to suggest a remedy.

It was about this time that an action was being instituted against humanity by a young Italian, the Count Giacomo Leopardi, and the muffled discontent which for centuries had been throbbing through land and literature was raised by his verse

into one clear note of eloquent arraignment.

Now, in most countries there is a provision which inhibits a judge from hearing a cause which is pleaded by one of his connections, for it is considered that the scales of justice are so delicately balanced, that their holder should be preserved from any biasing influence, however indirect; for much the same reason, there are few communities that permit a man to sit in judgment on his own case. Some knowledge of Leopardi himself, therefore, will be of service in deciding whether the verdict which he brought against the world should be accepted without appeal, or returned as vitiated by extraneous circumstances.

Leopardi passed a joyless boyhood at Recanti, one of those maddeningly monotonous Italian towns whose unspeakable dreariness is only attractive when viewed through the pages of Stendhal. The unrelaxing severity of an austere and pedant father curbed, as with a bit, every symptom of that haphazard gayety which is incident to youth. At once precocious and restive, deformed yet inflammable, he was necessarily enervated by the exasperating dullness of his life, and chafed, too, by the rigid poverty to which his father condemned him. As he grew up, his mind, richly stored with the wealth of antiquity, rioted in a turbulency of imagination which, unable to find sympathetic welcome without, consumed itself in morbid distrust within, and led him at last from fervid Catholicism down the precipitate steps of negation.

He was not much over twenty before excessive study had well-nigh ruined such health as he once possessed. The slightest application was wearisome both to eye and brain. He wandered silently about the neighboring forests, seeking solitude not only for the sake of solitude, but also perhaps for the suggestions, at once soothing and rebellious, which solitude always whispers to him who courts her truly. At other times he sat hour by hour in a state as motionless as that of catalepsy. "I am so much overcome," he wrote to a friend, "by the nothingness that surrounds me, that I do not know how I have the strength to answer your letter. If at this moment I lost my reason, I think that my insanity would consist in sitting always with eyes fixed, open-mouthed, without laughing or weeping, or changing place. I have no longer the strength to form a desire, be it even for death."

The Muse, however, would have none of this; she flaunted her peplum so seductively before him that, a little later, when he had been visited by some semblance of returning health, he resisted no longer, and delivered himself up to her, heart and soul.

The present century, especially during its earlier decades, has been racked with a great glut of despondent verse; but no batch of poets, however distressed, has been able, at any time, to catch and cling to such a persistent monotone of complaint as that which runs through every line of Leopardi's verse. To quote De Musset: —

"Les plus désespérés sont les chants les plus beaux,

Et j'en sais d'immortels qui sont de purs sanglots."

His odes, his adjurations to Italy, and his elegies are, one and all, stamped with such unvarying and changeless despair, that their dominant motive seems not unlike that tower which René, finding alone in the desert, compared to a great thought in a mind ravaged by years and by grief. His theory of life never altered; he resumed it in a distich, —

… "Arcano é tutto
Fuor che il nostro dolor."

It may be said, and with justice perhaps, that it was the invalid body, aggravating and coexisting with a mind naturally morbid, that afterwards wrote of the *gentilezza del morir*, but it was the thinker, conquering the ills of the flesh, who later whispered to the suffering world the panacea of patience and resignation.

In Leopardi there is none of the vapid elegance and gaudy vocabulary of French verse; technically, he wrote in what the Italians call *rime sciolte*, and he charms the reader as well through a palpitant sincerity as evident and continuous inspiration. Now, the educated Italian turns naturally to rhyme; any incident holds to him the germ of a sonnet, and there is perhaps no other country in the world so richly dowered with patriotic canzoni as this joyously unhappy land. But of all who have sounded this eloquent chord, not one has done so with the masculine originality and fervor of expression that Leopardi reached in his ode to Italy, in

which, in a resounding call to arms, he exclaims: —

"Let my blood, O gods! be a flame to Italian hearts."

Italian hearts, however, had other matters to attend to, and Leopardi's magnificent invocation was barely honored with a passing notice. For that matter, his poetry, in spite of its resonant merit, has, through some inexplicable cause, been generally ignored; and while it resembles no other, it has never, so to speak, been in vogue.

As has been seen, he was a lover of solitude; indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he was glued to it; and in the isolation which he partly made himself, and which was partly forced upon him, he watched the incubation of thought very much as another might have noted the progress of a disease. A life of this description, even at best, is hardly calculated to awaken much enthusiasm for every-day matters, and it was not long before Leopardi became not only heartily sick of the commonplace aspects of life, but contemptuous, too, of those who lived in broader and more active spheres.

Poetically untrammeled, and of advanced views on all subjects, he regarded erudition as the simple novitiate of the man of letters, or in other words, as a preparation which renders the intelligence supple and pliant; and in one of those rare moments, when the timid approach of ambition was seemingly unnoticed, he caressed the pleasing plan of attacking Italian torpor with

reason, passion with laughter, and of becoming, in fact, the Plato, the Shakespeare, and the Lucian of his epoch. To Giordani, his mentor, he wrote: "I study night and day, so long as my health permits; when it prevents me from working, I wait a month or so, and then begin again. As I am now totally different from that which I was, my plan of study has altered with me. Everything which savors of the pathetic or the eloquent wearies me beyond expression. I seek now only the true, the real, which before was so repulsive. I take pleasure in analyzing the misery of men and things, and in shivering as I note the sinister and terrible mystery of life. I see very clearly that when passion is once extinguished, there subsists in study no other source of pleasure save that of vain curiosity, whose satisfaction, however, is not without a certain charm."

But Leopardi was so essentially the poet that, in spite of his growing disdain of the pathetic and the eloquent, he became not infrequently the dupe of his own imagination. That which he took for the fruit of deduction was probably little more than ordinary hypochondria, and in turning as he did to other work, he was never able to free himself entirely from the jealous influence of the muse.

He was, from a variety of causes, very miserable himself, and his belief in universal misery amounted very nearly to a mania. His logic reduced itself to the paraphrase of an axiom, "I am, therefore I suffer," and the suffering which he experienced was not, he was very sure, limited solely to himself. It was, he

considered, the garment and appanage of every sentient being. In this he was perfectly correct, but his error consisted in holding all cases to be equally intense, and in imagining that means might be devised which would at once do away with or, at least, lessen the evil. Patience and resignation he had already suggested, but naturally without appreciable success; indeed, the regeneration of man, he clearly saw, was not to be brought about through verse, and he turned therefore to philosophy with a fixity of purpose, which was strengthened by the idea that he could work therein another revolution. This was in 1825. Leopardi at that time was in his twenty-seventh year, and the task to which he then devoted himself was, he said, to be the sad ending of a miserable life. His intention was to run the bitter truth to earth, to learn the obscure destinies of the mortal and the eternal, to discover the wherefore of creation, and the reason of man's burden of misery. "I wish," he said, "to dig to the root of nature and seek the aim of the mysterious universe, whose praises the sages sing, and before which I stand aghast."

Forthwith, then, in the "Operette Morale," Leopardi began a resolute, if poetic, siege against every form of illusion. His philosophy, however, provoked no revolution, nor can it be even said that he discovered any truth more bitter than the old new ones, which antiquity had unearthed before him. His work, nevertheless, sent the old facts spinning into fresh and novel positions, and is to be particularly admired for the artistic manner in which it handles the most stubborn topics. The starting point

of each of his arguments is that life is evil; to any objection, and the objections that have been made are countless, Leopardi has one invariable reply, "All that is advanced to the contrary is the result of illusion." "But supposing life to be painless," some one presumably may interject, whereupon Leopardi, with the air of an oracle, too busy with weighty matters to descend to chit-chat on the weather, will answer tersely, "Evil still."

It is useless for the practical man of the day, who knows the price of wheat the whole world over before he has tasted his coffee, and who digests a history of the world's doings and misdoings each morning with his breakfast, – it is useless for him to say, as he invariably does: – Why, this is rubbish, look at modern institutions, look at progress, look at science; for if he listens to Leopardi he will learn that all these palpable advantages have, in expanding activity, only aggravated the misery of man. In other words, that the sorrows of men and of nations develop in proportion to their intelligence, and the most civilized are in consequence the most unhappy.

Indeed, Leopardi's philosophy is nothing if not destructive; he does not aim so much to edify as to undermine. According to his theory the universe is the resultant of an unconscious force, and this force, he teaches, is shrouded in a vexatious mystery, behind which it is not given to man to look. In one of his dialogues, certain mummies resurrect for a quarter of an hour and tell in what manner they died. "And what follows death?" their auditor asks, eagerly. But the quarter of an hour has expired and the

mummies relapse into silence.

In another fantastic scene, an Icelander, convinced that happiness is unattainable, and solely occupied in avoiding pain, has, in shunning society, found himself in the heart of the Sahara, face to face with Nature. This Icelander, who, by the way, singularly resembles Leopardi, had found but one protection against the ills of life, and that was solitude; but wherever he wandered he had been pursued by a certain malevolence. In spite of all he could do, he had roasted in summer and shivered in winter. In vain he had sought a temperate climate: one land was an ice-field, another an oven, and everywhere tempests or earthquakes, vicious brutes or distracting insects. In short, unalloyed misery. Finding himself, at last, face to face with Nature he took her to task, demanding what right she had to create him without his permission, and then, having done so, to leave him to his own devices? Nature answers that she has but one duty, and that is to turn the wheel of the universe, in which death supports life, and life death. "Well, then," the obstinate Icelander asks, "tell me at least for whose pleasure and for what purpose this miserable universe subsists?" But before Nature can enlighten her embarrassing questioner, he is surprised by two famished lions and conveniently devoured.

The moral of all this is not difficult to find. Life, such as it is, is all this is accorded. Beyond it there is only an impenetrable silence. The blue of the heavens is pervasive, but void. The hope of ultramundane felicity is, therefore, an illusion, and man is to

seek such happiness as is possible only in this life. But if it be asked what the possibilities of earthly happiness are, Leopardi is quick to tell his reader that there are none at all.

As has been seen, he regarded life as an evil; and he insisted in so regarding it, not only as a whole, but in each of its fractional divisions. This idea is quaintly expressed in a dialogue between a sorcerer and a demon, the latter having been presumably summoned with an incantatory blue flame. The demon is somewhat sulky at first, and asks why he has been disturbed. Is it wealth that the sorcerer wishes? Is it glory or grandeur? But the sorcerer has neither greed nor ambition.

"Do you wish me to procure for you a woman as captiously capricious as Penelope?"

The sorcerer probably smiles, for he answers wittily: —

"Do you think I need the aid of a devil for that?"

Thus outfaced, the demon begs to know in what manner he may be of service.

"I simply want one moment of happiness," the sorcerer answers.

But Mephisto declares, on his word as a gentleman, that such a thing is impossible, because the desire for happiness is insatiable, and no one can be happy so long as it is unsatisfied.

"Well, then?" the sorcerer asks, moodily querulous.

"Well, then," answers the demon, "if you think it worth while to give me your soul before the time, behold me ready to oblige you."

Since happiness, then, is intangible, the wisest thing to do is to try to be as little unhappy as possible. One of the chief opponents to such a state of being is evidently discontent, and this, Leopardi hints, should be routed at any cost, and the yawning spectre of ennui flung with it into fettered exile. In the warmth of these instructions it is curious to note how Leopardi turns on himself, so to speak, and recommends as cure-all the very activity which he had before proscribed. In his dialogue between Columbus and Gutierrez, the navigator admits to his discouraged companion that the success of the undertaking is far from certain; "but," he adds, "even if no other benefit accrue from our voyage, it will be an advantage at least in this; it has for a certain time delivered us from boredom; it has made us love life, and appreciate, moreover, many things of which otherwise we would have thought nothing."

It should not, however, be supposed that Leopardi had no higher rule of life than that which is circumscribed in the narrow avoidance of discontent. That man has certain duties to perform, he frequently admitted, but he denied that he owed any to the unconscious and tyrannical force which had given him life. "I will never kiss," he said, "the hand that strikes." Any obligation to society was equally out of the question. "Society," he noted in the *Pensieri*, "is a league of blackguards against honest men." Man's duties are to himself alone; and the essence of Leopardi's ethics (as, indeed, of all other ethics) is held simply in the recommendation that virtue and self-esteem be preserved. "To

thine own self be true," Polonius had said long before, and to this Leopardi had nothing to add.

The illusions which hamper life have been so clearly and thoroughly analyzed by other thinkers, whose conclusions will be found to constitute the groundwork of the subsequent part of this monograph, that it will be unnecessary at this stage to examine any of Leopardi's theories on this subject, save such, perhaps, as may seem to contain original views. He had, as has been intimated, a thorough contempt for life: "It is," he said, "fit but to be despised." *Nostra vita a che val, sola a spregiarla.* He was, in consequence, well equipped to combat the illusion which leads so many to imagine that were their circumstances different, they would then be thoroughly content. This idea is presented with vivacious ingenuity in a dialogue between a man peddling calendars and a passer-by.

It runs somewhat as follows: —

"Calendars! New calendars!"

"For the coming year?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think the year will be a good one?"

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"As good as last year?"

"Better, sir, – better."

"As year before last?"

"Much better, sir."

"But wouldn't you care to have the next year like any of the

past years?"

"No, sir, I would not."

"For how long have you been selling calendars?"

"Nearly twenty years, sir."

"Well, which of these twenty years would you wish to have like the coming one?"

"I? I really don't know, sir."

"Can't you remember any one year that seemed particularly attractive?"

"I cannot, indeed, I cannot."

"And yet life is very pleasant, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, sir, we all know that."

"Would you not be glad to live these twenty years over again?"

"God forbid, sir."

"But supposing you had to live your life over again?"

"I would not do it."

"But what life would you care to live? mine, for instance, or that of a prince, or of some other person?"

"Ah, sir, what a question!"

"And yet, do you not see that I, or the prince, or any one else, would answer precisely as you do, and that no one would consent to live his life over again?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose so."

"Am I to understand, then, that you would not live your life over again?"

"No, sir, truly, I would not."

"What life would you care for, then?"

"I would like, without any other condition, such a life as God might be pleased to give me."

"In other words, one which would be happy-go-lucky, and of which you would know no more than you do of the coming year."

"Exactly."

"Well, then, that is what I would like too; it is what every one would like, and for the simple reason that up to this time there is no one whom chance has not badly treated. Every one agrees that the misery of life outbalances its pleasure, and I have yet to meet the man who would care to live his old life over. The life which is so pleasant is not the life with which we are personally acquainted; it is another life, not the life that we have lived, but the life which is to come. Next year will treat us all better; it will be the beginning of a happy existence. Do you not think it will?"

"Indeed, I hope so, sir."

"Show me your best calendar."

"This one, sir; it is thirty soldi."

"Here they are."

"Thank you, sir, long life to you, sir. Calendars! new calendars!"

There are few scenes as clever as this, and fewer still in which irony and humor are so delicately blended; and yet, notwithstanding its studied bitterness, there is little doubt that its author clearly perceived that life does hold one or two incontestable charms.

In speaking of glory, Pascal noted in his "Pensées" that even philosophers seek it, and those who wrote it down wished the reputation of having written it down well. To this rule Leopardi was no exception; he admitted as much on several occasions; and even if he had not done so, the fact would have been none the less evident from the burnish of his verse and the purity of his prose, which was not that of a writer to whom the opinion of others was indifferent. In the essay, therefore, in which he attacks the illusion of literary renown, he reminds one forcibly of Byron hurrying about in search of the visible isolation which that simple-minded poet so seriously pursued; and yet while no other writer, perhaps, has been more thoroughly given to *pose* than the author of "Childe Harold," there are few who have been so entirely devoid of affectation as Leopardi. The comparative non-success of his writings, however, was hardly calculated to make him view with any great enthusiasm the subject of literary fame; and as, moreover, he considered it his mission to besiege all illusions, he held up this one in particular as a seductive chimera and attacked it accordingly.

In the "Ovvero della Gloria," he says reflectively: "Before an author can reach the public with any chance of being judged without prejudice, think of the amount of labor which he expends in learning how to write, the difficulties which he has to overcome, and the envious voices which he must silence. And even then, what does the public amount to? The majority of readers yawn over a book, or admire it because some one else

has admired it before them. It is the style that makes a book immortal; and as it requires a certain education to be a judge of style, the number of connoisseurs is necessarily restricted. But beyond mere form there must also be depth, and as each class of work presupposes a special competence on the part of the critic, it is easy to see how narrow the tribunal is which decides an author's reputation. And even then, is it one which is thoroughly just? In the first place, the critic, even when competent, judges – and in that he is but human – according to the impression of the moment, and according to the tastes which age or circumstances have created. If he is young, he likes brilliance; old, he is unimpressionable. Great reputations are made in great cities, and it is there that heart and mind are more or less fatigued. A first impression, warped in this way, may often become final; for if it be true that valuable works should be re-read, and are only appreciated with time, it is also true that at the present time very few books are read at all. Supposing, however, the most favorable case: supposing that a writer, through the suffrage of a few of his contemporaries, is certain of descending to posterity as a great man, – what is a great man? Simply a name, which in a short time will represent nothing. The opinion of the beautiful changes with the days, and literary reputations are at the mercy of their variations; as to scientific works, they are invariably surpassed or forgotten. Nowadays, any second-rate mathematician knows more than Galileo or Newton." Genius, then, is a sinister gift, and its attendant glory but a vain and empty shadow.

The life of Leopardi, as told by his biographers, is poetically suggestive of the story of the pale Armide, who burned the palace that enchanted her; and the similarity becomes still more noticeable when he is found hacking and hewing at the illusion of love. Personally considered, Leopardi was not attractive; he was undersized, slightly deformed, near-sighted, prematurely bald, nervous, and weak; and though physical disadvantages are often disregarded by women, and not infrequently inspire a compassion which, properly tended, may warm into love, yet when the body, weak and infirm as was his, incases the strength and lurid vitality of genius, the unlovable monstrosity is complete. Indeed, in this respect, it may be noted that while the love of a delicate-minded woman for a coarse and stupid ruffian is an anomaly of daily repetition, there are yet few instances in which genius, even when strong of limb, has succeeded in inspiring a great and enduring affection.

Against Leopardi, then, the house of love was doubly barred. When he was about nineteen, he watched the usual young girl who lives over the way, and with a *naïveté* which seems exquisitely pathetic he made no sign, but simply watched and loved. The young lady does not appear to have been in any way conscious of the mutely shy adoration which her beauty had fanned into flame, and at any rate paid no attention to the sickly dwarf across the street. She sat very placidly at her window, or else fluttered about the room humming some old-fashioned air. This went on for a year or more, until finally she was carried away

in a rumbling coach, to become the willing bride of another.

This, of course, was very terrible to Leopardi. Through some inductive process, which ought to have been brought about by the electric currents which he was establishing from behind the curtain, he had in his lawless fancy made quite sure that his love would sooner or later be felt and reciprocated. When, therefore, from his hiding place he saw the bride depart in maiden ignorance of her conquest, and entirely unconscious of the sonnets which had been written in her praise, the poet's one sweet hope faded slowly with her.

This pure and sedate affection remained vibrant in his memory for many years, and formed the theme of so many reveries and songs that love finally appeared to him as but another form of suffering. In after life, when much of the lustre of youthful candor had become dull and tarnished, he besieged the heart of another lady, but this time in a bolder and more enterprising fashion. His suit, however, was unsuccessful. It may be that he was too eloquent; for eloquence is rarely captivating save to the inexperienced, and the man who makes love in rounded phrases seems to the practised eye to be more artistic than sincere. At all events, his affection was not returned. The phantom had passed very close, but all he had clutched was the air. He was soon conscious, however, that he had made that mistake which is common to all imaginative people: it was not the woman he loved, it was beauty; not woman herself, but the ideal. It was a conception that he had fallen in love with; a conception

which the woman, like so many others, had the power to inspire, and yet lacked the ability to understand. This time Leopardi was done with love, and forthwith attacked it as the last, yet most tenacious, of all illusions. "It is," he said, "an error like the others, but one which is more deeply rooted, because, when all else is gone, men think they clutch therein the last shadow of departing happiness. Error beato," he adds, and so it may be, yet is he not well answered by that sage saying of Voltaire, "L'erreur aussi a son mérite"?

It was in this way that Leopardi devastated the palace from whose feasts he had been excluded. At every step he had taken he had left some hope behind; he had been dying piecemeal all his life; he was confessedly miserable, and this not alone on account of his poverty and wretched health, but chiefly because of his lack of harmony with the realities of existence. The world was to him the worst one possible, and he would have been glad to adorn the gate of life with the simplicity of Dante's insistent line, —

"Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate."

"There was a time," he said, "when I envied the ignorant and those who thought well of themselves. To-day, I envy neither the ignorant nor the wise, neither the great nor the weak; I envy the dead, and I would only change with them."

This, of course, was purely personal. Toward the close of his life he recognized that his judgment had been in a measure

warped by the peculiar misfortunes of his own position, but in so doing he seemed almost to be depriving himself of a last, if sad, consolation. Nor did he ever wholly recant, and it is in the conception of the universality of misery which stamped all his writings, and which, even had he wished, he was then powerless to alter, that his relation to the theoretic pessimism of to-day chiefly rests.

As a creed, the birthplace of pessimism is to be sought on the banks of the Ganges, or far back in the flower-lands of Nepaul, where the initiate, with every desire lulled, awaits Nirvâna, and murmurs only, "Life is evil."

Now, as is well known, in every religion there is a certain metaphysical basis which is designed to supply an answer to man's first question; for while the animal lives in undismayed repose, man of all created things alone marvels at his own existence and at the destruction of his fellows. To his first question, then, What is life and death? each system attempts to offer a perfect reply; indeed, the temples, cathedrals, and pagodas clearly attest that man at all times and in all lands has continually demanded that some reply should be given, and it is perhaps for this very reason that where other beliefs have found fervent adherents, neither materialism nor skepticism have been ever able to acquire a durable influence. It is, however, curious to note that in attempting the answer, nearly every creed has given an unfavorable interpretation to life. Aside from the glorious lessons of Christianity, its teaching, in brief, is that the world is a

vale of tears, that nothing here can yield any real satisfaction, and that happiness, which is not for mortals, is solely the recompense of the ransomed soul. To the Brahmin, while there is always the hope of absorption in the Universal Spirit, life meanwhile is a regrettable accident. But in Buddhism, which is perhaps the most naïve and yet the most sublime of all religions, and which through its very combination of simplicity and grandeur appeals to a larger number of adherents than any other, pessimism is the beginning, as it is the end.

To the Buddhist there is reality neither in the future nor in the past. To him true knowledge consists in the perception of the nothingness of all things, in the consciousness of —

> "The vastness of the agony of earth,
> The vainness of its joys, the mockery
> Of all its best, the anguish of its worst;"

and in the desire to escape from the evil of existence into the entire affranchisement of the intelligence. To the Buddhist, —

> … "Sorrow is
> Shadow to life, moving where life doth move."

The Buddhist believes that the soul migrates until Nirvâna is attained, and that in the preparation for this state, which is the death of Death, the nothingness of a flame extinguished, there are four degrees. In the first, the novitiate learns to be implacable

to himself, yet charitable and compassionate to others. He then acquires an understanding into the nature of all things, until he has suppressed every desire save that of attaining Nirvâna, when he passes initiate into the second degree, in which judgment ceases. In the next stage, the vague sentiment of satisfaction, which had been derived from intellectual perfection, is lost, and in the last, the confused consciousness of identity disappears. It is at this point that Nirvâna begins, but only begins and stretches to vertiginous heights through four higher degrees of ecstasy, of which the first is the region of infinity in space, the next, the realm of infinity in intelligence, then the sphere in which nothing is, and, finally, the loss of even the perception of nothing. When Death is dead, when all have attained Nirvâna, then, according to the Buddhist, the universe will rock forevermore in unconscious rest.

In brief, then, life to the Christian is a probation, to the Brahmin a burden, to the Buddhist a dream, and to the pessimist a nightmare.

CHAPTER II
THE HIGH PRIEST OF PESSIMISM

Arthur Schopenhauer, the founder of the present school, was born toward the close of the last century, in the now mildewed city of Dantzic. His people came of good Dutch stock, and were both well-to-do and peculiar. His grandmother lost her reason at the death of her husband, a circumstance as unusual then as in more recent years; his two uncles passed their melancholy lives on the frontiers of insanity, and his father enjoyed a reputation for eccentricity which his end fully justified.

This latter gentleman was a rich and energetic merchant, of educated tastes and excitable disposition, who, when well advanced in middle life, married the young and gifted daughter of one of the chief magnates of the town. Their union was not more unhappy than is usually the case under similar circumstances, his time being generally passed with his ledger, and hers with the poets.

With increasing years, however, his untamable petulance grew to such an extent that he was not at all times considered perfectly sane, and it is related that on being visited one day by a lifelong acquaintance, who announced himself as an old friend, he exclaimed, with abrupt indignation, "Friend, indeed! there is no such thing; besides, people come here every day and say they

are this, that, and the other. I don't know them, and I don't want to." A day or two later, he met the same individual, greeted him with cheerful cordiality, and led him amiably home to dinner. Shortly after, he threw himself from his warehouse to the canal below.

He had always intended that his son, who was then in his sixteenth year, should continue the business; and to prepare him properly for his duties he had christened him Arthur, because he found that name was pretty much the same in all European languages, and furthermore had sent the lad at an early age first to France, and then to England, that he might gain some acquaintance and familiarity with other tongues.

The boy liked his name, and took naturally to languages, but he felt no desire to utilize these possessions in the depressing atmosphere of commercial life, and after his father's death loitered first at the benches of Gotha and then at those of Göttingen.

Meanwhile his mother established herself at Weimar, where she soon attracted to her all that was brilliant in that brilliant city. Goethe, Wieland, Fernow, Falk, Grimm, and the two Schlegels were her constant guests. At court she was received as a welcome addition, and such an effect had these surroundings upon her imagination, that in not very many years she managed to produce twenty-four compact volumes of criticism and romance.

During this time her son was not idle. Thoroughly familiar with ancient as with modern literature, he devoted his first year

at Göttingen to medicine, mathematics and history; while in his second, which he passed in company with Bunsen and William B. Astor, he studied physics, physiology, psychology, ethnology and logic; as these diversions did not quite fill the hour, he aided the flight of idle moments with a guitar.

He was at this time a singularly good-looking young man, possessing a grave and expressive type of beauty, which in after years developed into that suggestion of majestic calm for which the head of Beethoven is celebrated, while to his lips there then came a smile as relentlessly implacable as that of Voltaire.

From boyhood he had been of a thoughtful disposition, finding wisdom in the falling leaf, problems in vibrating light, and movement in immobility. Already he had wrung his hands at the stars, and watched the distant future rise with its flouting jeer at the ills of man. In this, however, there was little of the cheap sentimentalism of Byron, and less of the weariness of Lamartine. His griefs were purely objective; life to him was a perplexing riddle, whose true meaning was well worth a search; and as the only possible solution of the gigantic enigma seemed to lie in some unexplored depth of metaphysics, he soon after betook himself to Berlin, where Fichte then reigned as Kant's legitimate successor. But the long-winded demonstrations that Fichte affected, his tiresome verbiage, lit, if at all, only by some trivial truism or trumpery paradox, bored Schopenhauer at first well-nigh to death, and then worked on his nerves to such an extent that he longed, pistol in hand, to catch at his throat, and

cry, "Die like a dog you shall; but for your pitiful soul's sake, tell me if in all this rubbish you really mean anything, or take me simply for an imbecile like yourself." For Schopenhauer, it should be understood, had passed his nights first with Plato and then with Kant; they were to him like two giants calling to one another across the centuries, and that this huckster of phrases should pretend to cloak his nakedness with their mantle seemed to him at once indecent and absurd.

Schelling pleased him no better; he dismissed him with a word, – mountebank; but for Hegel, Caliban-Hegel as he was wont in after years to call him, his contempt was so violent that, with a prudence which is both amusing and characteristic, he took counsel from an attorney as to the exact limit he might touch in abusing him without becoming amenable to a suit for defamation. "Hegel's philosophy," he said, "is a crystalized syllogism; it is an abracadabra, a puff of bombast, and a wish-wash of phrases, which in its monstrous construction compels the mind to form impossible contradictions, and in itself is enough to cause an entire atrophy of the intellect." "It is made up of three fourths nonsense and one fourth error; it contains words, not thoughts;" and then, rising in his indignation to the heights of quotation, he added, "'Such stuff as madmen tongue and brain not.'" Time, it may be noted, has to a great extent indorsed Schopenhauer's verdict. The tortures of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel linger now in the history of philosophy very much as might the memory of a nightmare, and except in a few cobwebbed halls

the teachings of the three sophists may safely be considered as a part of the inexplicable past.

It should not, however, be supposed that because he found the philosophy of the moment so little to his taste he necessarily squandered his time; on the contrary, he turned to Aristotle and Spinoza for consolation, and therewith followed sundry lectures in magnetism, electricity, ichthyology, amphiology, ornithology, zoölogy, and astronomy, all of which he enlivened with rapid incursions to the rich granaries of Rabelais and Montaigne, and moreover gave no little time to the study of the religion and philosophy of India.

It was at this time characteristic of the man, that while his appearance, wealth, and connections would have formed an open letter to the best society in Berlin, which was then heterogeneously agreeable, or even to the worst, which is said to have been charming, he preferred to pass his leisure hours in scrutinizing the animals in the Zoölogical Gardens, and in studying the inmates of the State Lunatic Asylum.

In this *città dolente* his attention was particularly claimed by two unfortunates who, while perfectly conscious of their infirmity, were yet unable to master it; in proof of which, one wrote him a series of sonnets, and the other sent him annotated passages from the Bible.

In the second year of his student life at Berlin the war of 1813 was declared, and Schopenhauer was in consequence obliged to leave the city before he had obtained his degree. He prepared,

however, and forwarded to the faculty at Jena an elaborate thesis, which he entitled the Quadruple Root of Conclusive Reason, – a name which somewhat astounded his mother, who asked him if it were something for the apothecary, – and meanwhile prowled about Weimar meditating on the philosophy which he had long intended to produce. He visited no one but Goethe, took umbrage at his mother's probably harmless relations with Fernow, treated her to discourse not dissimilar to that which Hamlet had addressed to his own parent, received his degree from Jena, and then went off to Dresden, where he began to study women with that microscopic eye which he turned on all subjects that engaged his attention.

The result of these studies was an essay on the metaphysics of love, which he thereupon attached to his budding system of philosophy; an axiom to the effect that women are rich in hair and poor in thought; and the same misadventure that befell Descartes.

His life at Dresden was necessarily much less secluded than that to which he had been hitherto accustomed; he became an *habitué* at the opera and comedy, a frequent guest in literary and social circles, and, as student of men and things, he went about disturbing draperies and disarranging screens, very much as any other philosopher might do who was bent on seeing the world.

Meanwhile, he was not otherwise idle: the morning he gave to work, and in the afternoon he surrendered himself to Nature, whom he loved with a passionate devotion, which increased with his years. The companionship of men was always more or less

irksome to him; and while it was less so perhaps at this time than at any other, it was nevertheless with a sense of relief that he struck out across the inviting pasture-lands of Saxony, or down the banks of the Elbe, and left humanity behind, in search of that open-air solitude which is Nature's nearest friend.

In the companionship of others he was constantly seeking a trait or a suggestion, some hint capable of development; when in the world, therefore, he flashed a lantern, so to speak, at people, and then passed them by; but in the open country he communed with himself, and strolled along, note-book in hand, jotting down the thoughts worth jotting very much after the manner that Emerson is said to have recommended.

With regard to the majority of men, it will not seem reckless to say that their end and aim is happiness and self-satisfaction; but however trite the remark may be, it may still perhaps serve to bring into relief something of Schopenhauer's distinctive purpose. It would, of course, be foolish to assert that he did not care for his own happiness, and disregarded his own satisfaction, for of these things few men, it is imagined, have thought more highly. If his ideas of happiness diverged widely from those generally received as standards, it has but little to do with the matter in hand, for the point which is intended to be conveyed is simply that above all other things, beyond the culture of self, that which Schopenhauer cared for most was truth, and that he pursued it, moreover, as pertinaciously as any other thinker whom the world now honors. Whether he ran it to earth or not,

the reader must himself decide; indeed, it was very many years before any one even heard that he had been chasing it at all. Of late, however, some of the best pickets who guard the literary outposts from Boston to Bombay have brought a very positive assurance that he did catch it, and, moreover, held it fast long enough to wring out some singularly valuable intimations.

In hurrying along after his quarry, Schopenhauer became convinced that life was a lesson which most men learned trippingly enough, but whose moral they failed to detect; and this moral, which he felt he had caught on the wing, as it were, he set about dissecting with a great and sumptuous variety of reflection.

Wandering, then, on the banks of the Elbe, massing his thoughts and arranging their progression, his system slowly yet gradually expanded before him. He wrote only in moments of inspiration, yet his hours were full of such moments; little by little he drifted away from the opera and his friends into a solitude which he made populous with thought, and in this manner gave himself up so entirely to his philosophy that one day, it is reported, he astonished an innocent-minded gate-keeper, who asked him who he was, with the weird and pensive answer, "Ah! if I but knew, myself!"

Meanwhile his work grew rapidly beneath his hands, and when after four years of labor and research "Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung" was so far completed as to permit its publication, he read it over with something of the same unfamiliarity which he would have experienced in reading the work of another author,

though, doubtless, with greater satisfaction.

Fascinated with its merits, he offered the manuscript to Brockhaus, the Leipsic publisher. "My book," he wrote, "is a new system of philosophy, but when I say new I mean new in every sense of the word; it is not a restatement of what has been already expressed, but it is in the highest degree a continuous flow of thought such as has never before entered the mind of mortal man. It is a book which, in my opinion, is destined to rank with those which form the source and incentive to hundreds of others."

Brockhaus, familiar with the proverbial modesty of young authors, lent but an inattentive ear to these alluring statements, and accepted the book solely on account of the reputation which Schopenhauer's mother then enjoyed; a mark of confidence, by the way, which he soon deeply regretted. "It is so much waste paper," he said, dismally, in after years; "I wish I had never heard of it." He lived long enough, however, to change his mind, and in 1880 his successors published a stout little pamphlet containing the titles of over five hundred books and articles, of which the "World as Will and Idea" formed the source and incentive. "Le monde," Montaigne has quaintly noted, "regorge de commentaires, mais d'auteurs il en est grand chierté."

Schopenhauer's philosophy first appeared in 1818; but while it was still in press, its author, like one who has sprung a mine and fears the report, fled away to Italy, where he wandered about from Venice to Naples bathing his senses in color and music. He associated at this time very willingly with Englishmen, and

especially with English artists and men of letters. Germans and Americans he avoided, and as for Jews, he not only detested them, but expressed an admiring approval of Nebuchadnezzar, and only regretted that he had been so lenient with them. "The Jews are God's chosen people, are they?" he would say, "very good; tastes differ, they certainly are not mine." In this dislike he made no exception, and scenting in after years some of the *fætor judaicus* on Heine and Meyerbeer, he refused them the attention which others were only too glad to accord. Schopenhauer's distaste, however, for everything that savored of the Israelite will be perhaps more readily understood when it is remembered that the Jews, as a race, are optimists, and their creed, therefore, to him, in his consistency, was like the aggressive flag to the typical bull.

With the Germans he had another grievance. "The Germans," he said, "are heavy by nature; it is a national characteristic, and one which is noticeable not only in the way they carry themselves, but in their language, their fiction, their conversation, their writings, their way of thinking, and especially in their style and in their mania for constructing long and involved sentences. In reading German," he continued, "memory is obliged to retain mechanically, as in a lesson, the words that are forced upon it, until after patient labor a period is reached, the keynote is found, and the meaning disentangled. When the Germans," he added, "get hold of a vague and unsuitable expression which will completely obscure their meaning, they pat themselves on the

back; for their great aim is to leave an opening in every phrase, through which they may seem to come back and say more than they thought. In this trick they excel, and if they can manage to be emphatic and affected at the same time, they are simply afloat in a sea of joy. Foreigners hate all this, and revenge themselves in reading German as little as possible… Wherefore, in provision of my death, I acknowledge that on account of its infinite stupidity I loathe the German nation, and that I blush to belong thereto."

At various *tables-d'hôte* Schopenhauer had encountered traveling Yankees, and objected to them accordingly. "They are," he said, "the *plebs* of the world, partly, I suppose, on account of their republican government, and partly because they descend from those who left Europe for Europe's good. The climate, too," he added, reflectively, "may have something to do with it." Nor did Frenchmen escape his satire. "Other parts of the world have monkeys; Europe has Frenchmen, *ça balance*."

But with Englishmen he got on very well, and during his after life always talked to himself in their tongue, wrote his memoranda in English, and read the "Times" daily, advertisements and all.

Meanwhile Schopenhauer held his hand to his ear unavailingly. From across the Alps there came to him no echo of any report, only a silence which was ominous enough to have assured any other that the fusee had not been properly applied. But to him it was different; he had, it is true, expected a reverberation which would shake the sophistry of all civilization,

and when no tremor came he was mystified, but only for the moment. He had been too much accustomed to seek his own dead in the great morgue of literature not to know that any man, who is to belong to posterity, is necessarily a stranger to his epoch. And that he was to belong to posterity he had no possible doubt; indeed he had that prescience of genius which foresees its own future, and he felt that however tightly the bushel might be closed over the light, there were still crevices through which it yet would shine, and from which at last some conflagration must necessarily burst.

It was part of the man to analyze all things, and while it cannot be said that the lack of attention with which his philosophy had been received left him entirely unmoved, it would be incorrect to suppose that he was then sitting on the pins and needles of impatience.

Deeply reflective, he was naturally aware that as everything which is exquisite ripens slowly, so is the growth of fame proportioned to its durability. And Schopenhauer meant to be famous, and this not so much for fame's sake, as for the good which his fame would spread with it. He could therefore well afford to wait. His work was not written especially to his own epoch, save only in so far as his epoch was part of humanity collectively considered. It did not, therefore, take him long to understand that as his work was not tinted with any of the local color and fugitive caprices of the moment, it was in consequence unadapted to an immediate and fictitious vogue. Indeed, it

may be added that the history of art and literature is eloquent with the examples of the masterpieces which, unrewarded by contemporary appreciation, have passed into the welcome of another age; and of these examples few are more striking than that of the absolute indifference with which Schopenhauer's philosophy was first received.

It was presumably with reflections of this nature that Schopenhauer shrugged his shoulders at the inattention under which he labored, and wandered serenely among the treasuries and ghosts of departed Rome.

About this time an incident happened which, while not possessing any very vivid interest, so affected his after life as to be at least deserving of passing notice. Schopenhauer was then in his thirty-first year. On coming of age, he had received his share of his father's property, some of which he securely invested, but the greater part he deposited at high interest with a well-known business house in Dantzic. When leaving for Italy, he took from this firm notes payable on demand for the amount which they held to his credit, and after he had cashed one of their bills, learned that the firm was in difficulties. Shortly after, they suspended payment, offering thirty per cent. to those of their creditors who were willing to accept such an arrangement, and nothing to those who refused.

All the creditors accepted save Schopenhauer, who, with the wile of a diplomat, wrote that he was in no hurry for his money, but that perhaps if he were made preferred creditor he might

accept a better offer. His debtors fell into the trap, and offered him first fifty, and then seventy per cent. These offers he also refused. "If," he wrote, "you offer me thirty per cent. when you are able to pay fifty, and fifty per cent. when you are able to pay seventy, I have good reason to suspect that you can pay the whole amount. In any event, my right is perennial. I need not present my notes until I care to. Settle with your other creditors, and then you will be in a better position to attend to me. A wise man watches the burning phœnix with a certain pleasure, for he well knows what that crafty bird does with its ashes. Keep my money, and I will keep your drafts. When your affairs are straightened either we will exchange, or you will be arrested for debt. I am, of course, very sorry not to be able to oblige you, and I dare say you think me very disagreeable, but that is only an illusion of yours, which is at once dispelled when you remember that the money is my own, and that its possession concerns my lifelong freedom and well-being. You will say, perhaps, that if all your creditors thought as I do, it would be deuced hard for me. But if all men thought as I do, not only would more be thought, but there would probably be neither bankrupts nor swindlers. Machiavelli says, Giacchè il volgo pensa altrimente, – although the common herd think otherwise, – ma nel mondo non é se non volgo, – and the world is made up of the common herd, – e gli pocchi ivi luogo trovano, – yet the exceptions take their position, – dove gli molti stare non possono, – where the crowd can find no foot-hold."

By the exercise of a little patience, and after a few more dagger

thrusts of this description, Schopenhauer recovered the entire amount which was due him, together with the interest in full. But the danger which he had so cleverly avoided gave him, so to speak, a retrospective shock; the possibility of want had brushed too near for comfort's sake. He was thoroughly frightened; and in shuddering at the cause of his fright he experienced such a feeling of insecurity with regard to what the future might yet hold that he determined to lose no time in seeking a remunerative shelter. With this object he returned to Berlin, and as *privat-docent* began to lecture on the history of philosophy.

Hegel was then in the high tide of his glory. Scholars from far and near came to listen to the man who had compared himself to Christ, and said, "I am Truth, and teach truth." In the "Reisebilder," Heine says that in the learned caravansary of Berlin the camels collected about the fountain of Hegelian wisdom, kneeled down, received their burden of precious waters, and then set out across the desert wastes of Brandenburg.

At that time not to bend before Hegel was the blackest and most wanton of sins. To disagree with him was heretical, and as few understood his meaning clearly enough to attempt to controvert it, it will be readily understood that in those days there was very little heresy in Berlin.

Among the few, however, Schopenhauer headed the list. "I write to be understood," he said; and indeed no one who came in contact with him or with his works had ever the least difficulty in seizing his meaning and understanding his immense disgust

for the "pachyderm hydrocephali, pedantic eunuchs, apocaliptic retinue della bestia triumphante," as in after years, with gorgeous emphasis, he was wont to designate Hegel and his clique. The war that he waged against them was truly Homeric. He denounced Hegel in a manner that would have made Swinburne blush; then he attacked the professors of philosophy in general and the Hegelians in particular, and finally the demagogues who believed in them, and who had baptized themselves "Young Germany."

For the preparation of such writings as theirs he had a receipt, which was homeopathic in its simplicity. "Dilute a minimum of thought in five hundred pages of nauseous phraseology, and for the rest trust to the German patience of the reader." He also suggested that for the wonder and astonishment of posterity every public library should carefully preserve in half calf the complete works of the great philosophaster and his adorers; and, considering very correctly that philosophers cannot be hatched like bachelors of arts, he further recommended that the course in philosophy should be cut from the University programmes, and the teaching in that branch be limited to logic. "You can't write an Iliad," he said, "when your mother is a dolt, and your father is a cotton nightcap."

There are few debts which are so faithfully acquitted as those of contempt; and as Schopenhauer kicked down every screen, tore off every mask, and jeered at every sham, it would be a great stretch of fancy to imagine that he was a popular teacher. But this at least may be said: he was courageous, and he was

strong of purpose. In the end, he dragged Germany from her lethargy, and rather than take any other part in Hegelism than that of spectre at the feast, he condemned himself to an almost lifelong obscurity. If, therefore, he seems at times too bitter and too relentless, it should be remembered that this man, whom Germany now honors as one of her greatest philosophers, fought single-handed for thirty years, and routed the enemy at last by the mere force and lash of his words.

But in the mean time, while Hegel was holding forth to crowded halls, his rival, who, out of sheer bravado, had chosen the same hours, lectured to an audience of about half a dozen persons, among whom a dentist, a horse-jockey, and a captain on half pay were the more noteworthy. Such listeners were hardly calculated to make him frantically attached to the calling he had chosen, and accordingly at the end of the first semester he left the empty benches to take care of themselves.

Early in life Schopenhauer wrote in English, in his note-book, "Matrimony – war and want!" and when the *privat-docent* had been decently buried, and the crape grown rusty, he began to consider this little sentence with much attention. As will be seen later on, he objected to women as a class on purely logical grounds, – they interfered with his plan of delivering the world from suffering; but against the individual he had no marked dislike, only a few pleasing epigrams. During his Dresden sojourn, as in his journey to Italy, he had knelt, in his quality of philosopher who was seeing the world, at many and

diverse shrines, and had in no sense wandered from them sorrow-laureled; but all that had been very different from assuming legal responsibilities, and whenever he thought with favor of the *petits soins* of which, as married man, he would be the object, the phantom of a milliner's bill loomed in double columns before him.

Should he or should he not, he queried, fall into the trap which nature has set for all men? The question of love did not enter into the matter at all. He believed in love as most well-read people believe in William Tell; that is, as something very inspiring, especially when treated by Rossini, but otherwise as a myth. Nor did he need Montaigne's hint to be assured that men marry for others and not for themselves. The subject, therefore, was somewhat complex: on the one side stood the attention and admiration which he craved, and on the other an eternal farewell to that untrammeled freedom which is the thinker's natural heath.

The die, however, had to be cast then or never. He was getting on in life, and an opportunity had at that time presented itself, a repetition of which seemed unlikely. After much reflection, and much weighing of the pros and cons, he concluded that it is the married man who supports the full burden of life, while the bachelor bears but half, and it is to the latter class, he argued, that the courtesan of the muses should belong. Thereupon, with a luxury of reminiscence and quotation which was usual to him at all times, he strengthened his resolution with mental foot-notes, to the effect that Descartes, Leibnitz, Malebranche, and Kant

were bachelors, the great poets uniformly married and uniformly unhappy; and supported it all with Bacon's statement that "he that hath wife and children has given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or of mischief."

In 1831 the cholera appeared in Berlin, and Schopenhauer, who called himself a choleraphobe by profession, fled before it in search of a milder and healthier climate. Frankfort he chose for his hermitage, and from that time up to the day of his death, which occurred in September, 1860, he continued to live there in great peace and tranquillity.

Schopenhauer should in no wise be represented as having passed his life in building dungeons in Spain. Like every true scholar he was, in the absence of his peers, able to live with great comfort with the dead. He was something of a Mezzofanti; he spoke and read half a dozen languages with perfect ease, and he could in consequence enter any library with the certainty of finding friends and relations therein. For the companionship of others he did not care a rap. He was never so lonely as when associating with other people, and of all things that he disliked the most, and a catalogue of his dislikes would fill a chapter, the so-called entertainment headed the obnoxious list.

He had taken off, one by one, the different layers of the social nut, and in nibbling at the kernel he found its insipidity so great that he had small approval for those who made it part of their ordinary diet. It should not, however, be supposed that this dislike for society and the companionship of others sprang from any of

that necessity for solitude which is noticeable in certain cases of hypochondria; it was simply due to the fact that he could not, in the general run of men, find any one with whom he could associate on a footing of equality. If Voltaire, Helvetius, Kant, or Cabanais, or, for that matter, any one possessed of original thoughts, had dwelled in the neighborhood, Schopenhauer, once in a while, would have delighted in supping with them; but as agreeable symposiasts were infrequent, he was of necessity thrown entirely on his own resources. His history, in brief, is that of the malediction under which king and genius labor equally. Both are condemned to solitude; and for solitude such as theirs there is neither chart nor compass. Of course there are many other men who in modern times have also led lives of great seclusion, but in this respect it may confidently be stated that no thinker of recent years, Thoreau not excepted, has ever lived in isolation more thorough and complete than that which was enjoyed by this blithe misanthrope.

It is not as though he had betaken himself to an unfrequented waste, or to the top of an inaccessible crag; such behavior would have savored of an affectation of which he was incapable, and, moreover, would have told its story of an inability to otherwise resist the charms of society. Besides, Schopenhauer was no anchorite; he lived very comfortably in the heart of a populous and pleasant city, and dined daily at the best *table d'hôte*, but he lived and dined utterly alone.

He considered that, as a rule, a man is never in perfect

harmony save with himself, for, he argued, however tenderly a friend or mistress may be beloved, there is at times some clash and discord. Perfect tranquillity, he said, is found only in solitude, and to be permanent only in absolute seclusion; and he insisted that the hermit, if intellectually rich, enjoys the happiest condition which this life can offer. The love of solitude, however, can hardly be said to exist in any one as a natural instinct; on the contrary, it may be regarded as an acquired taste, and one which must be developed in indirect progression. Schopenhauer, who cultivated it to its most supreme expression, admitted that at first he had many fierce struggles with the natural instinct of sociability, and at times had strenuously combated some such Mephistophelian suggestion as, —

> "Hör' auf, mit deinem Gram zu spielen,
> Der, wie ein Geier, dir am Leben frisst:
> Die schlechteste Gesellschaft lässt dich fühlen
> Dass du ein Mensch, mit Menschen bist."

But solitude, more or less rigid, is undoubtedly the lot of all superior minds. They may grieve over it, as Schopenhauer says, but of two evils they will choose it as the least. After that, it is presumably but a question of getting acclimated. In old age the inclination comes, he notes, almost of itself. At sixty it is well-nigh instinctive; at that age everything is in its favor. The incentives which are the most energetic in behalf of sociability then no longer act. With advancing years there arises

a capacity of sufficing to one's self, which little by little absorbs the social instinct. Illusions then have faded, and, ordinarily speaking, active life has ceased. There is nothing more to be expected, there are no plans nor projects to form, the generation to which old age really belongs has passed away, and, surrounded by a new race, one is then objectively and essentially alone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.