

The Simple Life

By CHARLES WAGNER
Translated From the French by Mary Louise Herdend
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CHAPTER III.
SIMPLICITY OF THOUGHT.

IT is not alone among the practical manifestations of our life that there is need of making a clearing; the domain of our ideas is in the same case. Anarchy reigns in human thought. We walk in the woods without compass or sun, lost among the brambles and briars of infinite detail.

When once man has recognized the fact that he has an aim, and that this aim is to be a man, he organizes his thought accordingly. Every mode of thinking or judging which does not make him better and stronger he rejects as dangerous.

And first of all he frees the too common contrary of amusing himself with his thought. Thought is a tool, with its own proper function; it isn't a toy. Let us take an example. Here is the studio of a painter. The implements are all in place; everything indicates that this assemblage of means is arranged with view to an end. Throw the room open to a breeze. They will climb on the benches, aching from the cold. They themselves in dappled, soft themselves with slippers, jungle with brushes, nibble the colors and piece the canvases to see what is behind the paint. I don't question their enjoyment. Certainly they must find this kind of exercise extremely interesting. But an atelier is not made to let monkeys loose in. No more is thought a ground for acrobatic evolutions. A man worthy of the name thinks as he is, as his tastes are; he goes about it with his whole heart, and not with that furtive and sterile curiosity which, under pretext of observing and noting everything, runs the risk of never experiencing a deep and true emotion or accomplishing a right deed.

Another habit in urgent need of correction, ordinary attendant on conventional life, is the mania for examining and analyzing oneself at every turn. I do not invite men to neglect introspection and the examination of conscience. The endeavor to understand one's own mental attitudes and motives of conduct is an essential element of good living. But quite other is this extreme vigilance, this incessant observation of one's life and thoughts, this dissecting of oneself, like a piece of mechanism. It is a waste of time and goes wide of the mark. The man who to prepare himself the better for walking, should begin by making a rigid anatomical examination of his means of locomotion would risk dislocating something before he had taken a step. You have what you need to walk with, then forward! Take care not to fall, and use your forces with discretion. Potters and scruple mongers are soon reduced to inaction. It needs but a glimmer of common sense to perceive that man is not made to pass his life in a self centered trance.

And common sense—do you not find what is designated by this name becoming as rare as the common sense customs of other days? Common sense has become an old story. We must have something new, and we create a fictitious existence, a refinement of living, that the vulgar crowd has not the wherewithal to procure. It is so agreeable to be distinguished! Instead of conducting ourselves like rational beings and using the means most obviously at our command we arrive, by dint of absolute singularity, at the most astonishing singularities. Better off the track than on the main lines. All the bodily defects and deformities that orthopedy treats give but a feeble idea of the lumps, the tortuosities, the distortions we have inflicted upon ourselves in order to depart from simple common sense, and at our own expense we learn that one does not deform himself with impunity. Novelly, after all, is ephemeral. Nothing endures but the eternal commonplace.

And if one departs from that it is to run the most perilous risks. Happy he who is able to reclaim himself, who finds the way back to simplicity.

Good plain sense is not, as is often imagined, the innate possession of the first chance comer, a mean and paltry equipment that has cost nothing to any one. I would compare it to the old folk songs, unperfumed, but deathless, which seem to have risen out of the very heart of the people. Good sense is a fund slowly and painfully accumulated by the labor of centuries. It is a jewel of the first water, whose value he alone understands who has lost it or who observes the lives of others who have lost it. For my part I think no price too great to pay for gaining it and keeping it for the possession of eyes that see and a judgment that discerns. One takes good care of his sword that it is not bent or rusted; with greater reason should he give heed to his thought.

But let this be well understood: An appeal to common sense is not an appeal to thought that grovels, to narrow positivism which denies everything it cannot see or touch; for to wish that man should be absorbed in material sensations, to the exclusion of the high realities of the inner life, is also a want of good sense. Here we touch upon a terrible point, around which the greatest battles of humanity are waging. In truth, we are striving to attain a conception of life, searching it out amid countless obscurities and griefs, and everything that touches upon spiritual realities becomes day by day more painful. In the midst of the grave perplexities and transient disorders that accompany great crises of thought it seems more difficult than ever to escape from any simple principles. Yet necessarily itself comes to our aid, as it has done for the men of all times. The programme of life is terribly simple after all, and in the fact that existence so impudently forces herself upon us she gives us notice that she precedes any idea of her which we may make for ourselves and that no one can put off living pending an attempt to under-

stand life. Our philosophes, our explanations, our beliefs, are everywhere confronted by facts, and these facts, prodigious, irrefutable, call us to order when we would delude life from our eyes and ended philosophizing. It is this happy necessity that prevents the world from stopping while man questions his route. Travelers of a day, we are carried along in a vast movement to which we are called upon to contribute, but which we have not foreseen nor embraced in its entirety nor penetrated as to its ultimate aims. Our part is to fill faithfully the role of private, which has devolved upon us, and our thought should adapt itself to the situation. Do not say that we live in more trying times than our ancestors, for things seem from afar as often seen imperfectly. It is, moreover, scarcely gracious to complain of not having been born in the days of one's grandfather.

What we may believe least contestable on the subject is this: From the beginning of the world it has been hard to see clearly; right thinking has been difficult everywhere and always. In the matter the ancients were in no wise privileged above the moderns, and it might be added that there is no difference between men when they are considered from this point of view. Master and servant, teacher and learner, writer and artisan, discern truth at the same cost. The light that humanity acquires in advancing is no doubt of the greatest use, but it also multiplies the number and extent of human problems. The difficulty is never removed; the mind always encounters its obstacle. The unknown controls us and hems us in on all sides. But just as one need not exhaust a spring to quench his thirst, so we need not know everything to live. Humanity lives and always has lived on certain elemental provisions.

We will try to point them out. First of all, humanity lives by confidence. In so doing it but reflects, commensurate with its conscious thought, that which is the hidden source of all beings. An imperturbable faith in the stability of the universe and its intelligent ordering steps in everything that exists. The flowers, the trees, the beasts of the field, live in calm strength, in entire security. There is confidence in the falling rain, in the dawning day, in the brook running to the sea. Everything that is seems to say: "I am, therefore I should be. There are good reasons for this, rest assured."

So, too, mankind lives by confidence. From the simple fact that he is, man has within him the sufficient reason for his being—a pledge of assurance. He reposes in the power which has willed that he should be. To safeguard this confidence, to see that nothing disconcerts it, to cultivate it, render it more personal, more evident toward this should tend the first effort of our thought. All that augments confidence within us is good, for from confidence is born the life without haste—tranquil energy, calm action, the love of life and its fruitful labor. Deep seated confidence is the mysterious spring that sets in motion the energy within us. It is our nutriment. By it man lives much more than by the bread he eats. And so everything that shakes this confidence is evil—poison, not food.

Dangerous is every system of thought that attacks the very fact of life, declaring it to be an evil. Life has been too often wrongly estimated in this century. What wonder that the tree withers when its roots are watered with corrosives. And there is an extremely simple reflection that might be made in the face of all this negation. You say life is an evil. Well, what remedy for it do you offer? Can you combat it, suppress it? I do not ask you to suppress your own life, to commit suicide—of what advantage would that be to us?—but to suppress life, not merely human life, but life at its deep and hidden origin, all this upspringing existence that pushes toward the light and, to your mind, is rushing to misfortune; I ask you to suppress the will to live that troubles through the immensities of space, to suppress, in short, the source of life. Can you do it? No. Then leave us in peace. Since no one can hold life in check it is not better to respect it and use it than to go about making other people disgusted with it? When one knows that certain folk is dangerous to health he does not eat it. Well, when a certain fashion of thinking robs us of confidence, cheerfulness and strength we should reject that, certain not only that it is a nutriment noxious to the mind, but also that it is false. There is no truth for man but in thoughts that are human, and pessimism is inhuman. Besides, it wants as much in modesty as in logic. To permit oneself to count as evil this prodigious thing that we call life one needs have seen its very foundation, almost to have made it. What a strange attitude is that of certain great thinkers of our times! They act as if they had created the world very long ago, in their youth, but decidedly it was a mistake, and they had well repented it.

Let us nourish ourselves from other meat, strengthen our souls with cheering thoughts. What is truest for man is what he best fortifies him.

If mankind lives by confidence, it lives also by hope—that form of confidence which turns toward the future. All life is a result and an aspiration; all that exists supposes an origin and tends toward an end. Life is progression; progression is aspiration. The progress of the future is an infinitude of hope. Hope is at the root of things and must be reflected in the heart of man; no hope, no life. The same power which brought us into being urges us to go up higher. What is the meaning of this persistent instinct which pushes us on? The true meaning is that something is to result from life, that out of it is being wrought a good greater than itself, toward which it

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