

LAUGHING AT LIFE.

A Series of Gentle Humoresques with a Philosophic Turn

Number One—The Peacock Stage

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LIFE, of course, is a comedy from the moment when a man becomes conscious of himself. And part of the hilarious fun of the odd business of living is the undoubted fact that most of us do not realize how funny we are until we are dead. Dying is tragic; death a long tragedy for the individual, but the comedy of life persists in death. We do not know we are dead—a thought for laughter even in the midst of tears.

A child knows little or nothing of tragedy or comedy. The average healthy young baby, growing from the bib and tucker stage to strenuous boy or girlhood, is largely an appetite and a craving for exercise. The beauty of children is woven round the fact that they do not think. They just wonder and keep on wondering in a world largely composed of make believe. Happy is the child who wonders and wonders. One can believe in two-headed giants, the infallibility of parents, the presence of fairies in the glen, the truth of stories beginning "once upon a time," the certainty of life and the regularity of the food supply. Indeed, a wondering child may believe in anything. I have known a girl child who believed a wholly fictitious Mr. Deeley Darleigh—the nearest phonetic rendering of the name I can get—occupied the entire space of the moon and made little girls good or bad, according to the whim of his moment. I would give my eyes and ears to believe in this stupendously simple idea. The conception of such a personality is much more interesting as a matter of wonder than seriously dwelling upon the intellectual make-up of—shall I say, without political offence—Mr. Asquith or Mr. Bonar Law. Happy the children who wonder. In the words of Polonius, life to them is neither "pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, nor tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." Every bright day is a long fairy tale full of the only refreshing sanity in life—sheer phantasia. The moment the child begins to put two and two together, tragedy enters the life of the individual and comedy incites the looker-on to laughter.

ON GROWING UP.

TAKE the peacock stage. Every boy or girl has a peacock stage. Just as well here to recall the distinguishing features of the peacock. He has a gorgeous tail, of many colours—sharing this in common with Joseph's coat. With the tail spread out in the sun, the peacock, a bird possessing a small head, thinks he is the most glorious of all the glorious things in the world. And the peacock is firmly convinced that he is a singer—one of nature's silvery throated warblers—while all the time his squeaking delivery makes one think of sound as a living entity rolling in the mud, discordantly intoxicated. Myself. I hate to drag the peacock into an elegant article—he is such an ass of a bird—though I forgive him much when he spreads his feathers in the sunlight. But he is youth all over, and one cannot think of adolescent life without seeing the peacock, pouting out his chest, spreading his subtly patterned feathers in the light, and imagining himself, as a singer, to be one of nature's gentlemen.

So it is with our little men and women. They come from the Never-never land to the Ever-present as charming babies. They wander along through the fairyland of childhood, with Jack and his beanstalk, Cinderella, Aladdin, Alice and the Mad Hatter, and the other kings and queens of an enchanted world. They sprawl about as boys and girls—the boys clawing and tigering themselves to exhaustion like puppies playing on a lawn; the girls slapping each other's faces and cementing quarrels with sugar-coated kisses. Little boys attract providential sixpences from kindly old gentlemen and every one may kiss a little girl and load her with caresses. And suddenly the little boys and girls grow up, out of Never-never land, into the hideous Ever-present. They become potential men and women—successors of you or I. From flowers in a garden they develop into excrescences on a landscape, threatening to imitate the adults by growing up. They begin to be men and women—just mere, ugly, undesirable men and women, cumbering a lean and already overburdened earth. They advance through the peacock stage to maturity. Alas that wee children should grow up; that the pat of affectionate regard for the little boy should become the punch one reserves for a male competitor; that the kiss, the rightful salutation for tiny girls, should be transferred into a self-conscious ritual, meet greeting for one who has an engagement ring, talks wholly of furniture, and with the approval of her mother insists on introducing you to all her relations with a wedding-gift accent.

AT THE MIRROR.

YOU, dear readers, know what I am driving at when I speak of the peacock stage—the days when suddenly you realized you were no longer children, but incipient men and women. You hide the secrets from each other, now, when you are lean

and slippered pantaloons, aping the chimney corner, but I give you away wholeheartedly, in the interests of the younger generation, so they may have a weapon against our old saws and wise sayings. Man—middle aged or old, I care not—you remember the day when you first discovered the male might render himself additionally attractive by cunning hair-dressing and an ever-present crease in the trousers. Those hours at the mirror—you remember them—when you operated with an elder sister's curling tongs in the hope that you would achieve the wave made popular by Lewis Waller. And do you recall the first days when you discovered trousers should have a crease from knee to shoestring—how you packed them under the bed and ensured the presence of the crease by sleeping over the garments. Again, remember how, spending hours by the mirror, you discovered the aggressive facts that your mouth was too big, your nose slightly off the straight, your ears mere flapping appendages, your complexion pale and pimply, and your legs inclined to go in at the knees, to be deficient in calf or to run to an extreme length when they turned into feet.

And you, dear lady, seeing yourself now as the mother of three imitators of your own up-rearing—you will remember the thrilling days when you examined your profile through the reflection in a hand mirror held sideways, and decided your nose would not do. You will recall how important a wave became in severely straight hair and how you justified the curling papers. You will smile, when you recall the wrangles you had with mother—shrewd judge of the laundry bill—because she did not see life with you as a matter of pretty white overalls and blue satin bows. You will recall how grateful you were for the present of slippers with glittering clocks upon them—from the same custodian of the family

exchequer; how you discovered silk stockings fitted the shoes with the glittering clocks; how you used powder for the first time and said you were only pale; how you wondered why he remembered your favourite flowers were pink roses; how you danced through every item of the programme and were puzzled because the boy who sent the roses preferred the corridor, the half light, and the privilege of holding your dear hand. Dear hand. Rough now—perhaps. It has worked since then, serving other children and bringing them to the peacock stage. Do you ever look at that dear hand now? Does the man who came to matter to you ever look at it; the man who is not indifferent but blind and forgetful, in these years, when he pays out his jealously hoarded strength as toll to the passing years. With a little smile—the comedy of it; with a deeper sigh—the tragedy of it—both of you still remember. You remember when that hand had more significance than the iridescent glow of one feather in a peacock's tail; when the man, then a boy, held it and thought he had charge of the whole universe.

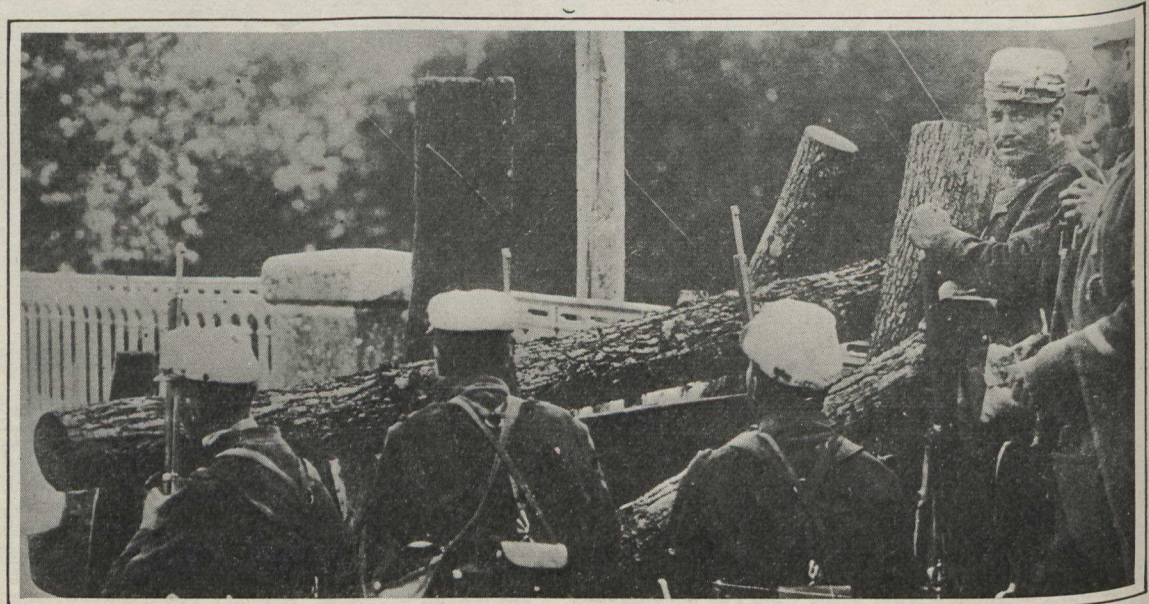
THEIR LITTLE HOUR.

THEY come, tripping down the years—these little people, who tread on the threshold of life. Strutting little boys and simpering little girls. Male hair glistening, immaculate linen and trousers neatly creased; pink faces unspoiled by powder, wavy hair, glad eyes and slender ankles, ending in twinkling feet. Peacocks—all of them; little peacocks full of colour in every feather and every feather full of colour, expecting the sun to pale his ineffectual fires. Collars and ties and extravagant checks, hair combs and beads, bows and bangles, rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, scents, and all the savours of the little feminine people. Peacocks all, despite their sex, their world a gorgeous lawn full of bright sunlight and restful shadows; the lawn a world, and sparsely peopled by one or two splendid heroes and heroines—all merely peacocks.

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