

THE ORDINARY INDIVIDUAL.

THROUGH the earlier part of this century the subject of this paper held a proud position in literature. Wordsworth and other poets, in an over indulgent mood, assigned to him the seat of honour at the banquet of life, and stored his trencher with a guileless feast of their choicest vegetables. But æstheticism has dealt hardly with the worthy man. The poet of the period in the capacity of master of ceremonies, has come up to him and tapping him on the shoulder with his poetic stave, has uttered the gruff command, "Friend, give this man place"—introducing at the same time a lank and shadowy form as a candidate for the position. And thus it is that a wan invalid is seen in the seat of honour, ogling a bouquet of lilies and sunflowers in a fragment of a vase.

My sympathies go out to the banished one, so rudely relegated to a seat below the salt. It is true he has not the chameleon soul of his supplanter, changing rapidly from the red glow of passion to the pale ash of melancholy, or the black cinders of ennui and satiety. There is a healthy mediocrity about his emotions, which commends him to the philosopher however repugnant it may be to the poet. He is neither without feeling nor is he all heart, a Laodicean state of mind, testifying to the healthy temper of his blood. His sensibilities if not keen are constant and reliable. They are the despair of the æsthetic poet, they are also the hope and confidence of the scientist. In fact our worthy friend may look back without envy at the Barmecidal dainties his rival enjoys, in view of the kind hands into which he himself has fallen. Though occupying a lower station he is among those who delight to do him honour. His repast is substantial and wholesome, and is served by skilful, officious fingers. It is true he may be a little bored with questions respecting his pedigree, about which his new friends seem particularly anxious to learn somewhat: but when he looks up and sees the poetic tribe pour their odes of fulsome laudation into the famished ears of his rival, he may well rest contented and thankful.

It is not wonderful that scientific sages are enamoured with the qualities of the ordinary individual. He wears well. There is no self-abandonment about him. The pulse of life which beats in him keeps time with the music of the spheres. There is no vicious breaking of the harness which fastens him tandem fashion to the car of progress. He is a planet whose revolutions are uniform, with a future before it, about which predictions may be made, no flimsy comet that moth-like flirts about the sun and flaunts a showy shroud. There are no anomalous forces operating in him to cause him to run riot. His tastes and passions are paltry viewed separately, but every one of them is potent, and their number sums up to a grand total. He loves, but with a calm equipoise that should give his loved one hope of a speedily resurrected feeling in him beyond her death and grave. His ambitions if not lofty are at least attainable. Contented and cheerful, modest in his demands on fortune, his stock of happiness remains at par, and his drafts upon it are duly honoured. To such a being, built on a working and progressive plan, belongs the strongest position in the march of the human race to civilization. He may not make a very interesting hero, full as he is of the petty loves and hates which serve as the necessary friction on the wheels of life to keep from slipping the bands that give it motion. But for the rough and ready work of the world, the sink-or-swim struggle which is the fate of most men, none are better equipped either for retreat or victory than the Ordinary Individual.

It is not, however, in his isolated individuality, but rather in his relational capacities that this personage is seen to the best advantage. I do not hold him up as a model, but as a companion. He will not rouse your enthusiasm in any walk in life, his voice is not that of a trumpet to spur your flagging energies into fresh vigour. This is the prerogative of the great man, who like a stage painting is made to be seen at a distance. Such an one is usually an intellectual monstrosity, a compound of abnormal growths and dwarlings that will not bear too close inspection. His companionship might not prove desirable, even if it were attainable. He is removed from the plane of fellowship both by distance and elevation. Therefore his influence over us, though it may be spasmodically stimulating, could not if constantly exercised be either uniform or healthful. Lives of great men are more apt to remind us that our lives are not sublime than to fit us for or reconcile us to, the lowly fate through which our path of duty lies. Their successes cast the shadow of despair over our own poor performances, often making us underrate our powers and shirk our obligations. But with what faithful persistency does the Ordinary Individual follow us from day to day! Neither so large as to frighten or obscure, nor so trivial as to be insignificant, but like our own shadow, both in size and constancy, his influence makes the practical private pillar of cloud for each of us in our wanderings through life. No sophistical arguments can deaden the goads of conscience when it is awakened by seeing the familiarly common features of our friend constantly appearing in unexpected and higher places than those we occupy.

These same good-natured, albeit somewhat stupid, features, reassure us amid the difficulties and trials that are the common lot of all. When our inmost heart is touched with self-commiseration, when our bowels of compassion are moved beyond measure at the sight of our own misery, there is no more mildly corrective draught than a sip from the cup of the wormwood of life which we see our humble friend so bravely drinking. When years come crowding in upon us, snatching huge portions of our lives away and leaving little in their place but the memories of failures, we sink into some lowly and long scorned station with better grace from the sight of this faithful friend who has arrived there before us, and is discharging its duties in contented cheerfulness. In short, it is the presence of this useful and ubiquitous companion which makes the wastes of futurity, through which we all journey, other than a howling desert.

But though so pleasant and attentive a friend, we are not to presume

upon the good nature of the Ordinary Individual. Of the follies of which his unmicroscopical mind is able to take cognizance there is no severer judge than he. The large-minded see many mitigating circumstances, the large-hearted have charitable imaginations, the man of little mind and heart is pitiless. He knows his own strength, or at least fancies he knows it, and taking this standard for a measure, constructs therewith a procrustean bed upon which he binds the object of his wrath, smiting woefully, the exposed parts of his character. He takes little note of time, place, degree, cause, or effect, in his judgments of error, which are characterized rather by interjectional implacability than adverbial leniency.

Mankind moves forward not in Indian file but in battalions. In this army of progress our hero fights bravely as a private. To bivouac under starless skies, to struggle through swamps and thickets, to cheerily level the musket over fallen comrades, to mete out swift punishment to deserters, to be satisfied with a nameless grave, such are the special capabilities of the Ordinary Individual.

WILLIAM MCGILL.

MRS. LILY SWEETWICH'S COFFEE.

ONCE my friend Mrs. Sweetwich was betrayed into the frank statement that she did not belong to that class of people who resent being looked at. And since the implied permission was granted, I have availed myself of it without stint. It may be urged in my defence that the time might be less pleasantly employed. Mrs. Sweetwich is a perfect blonde, tall and slight and with a soft, peach-bloom complexion like a baby's. Her eyes are a clear deep blue, and her hair is the colour of ripe wheat. The huge, golden masses of it she builds up into a sort of coiled tiara on her head. There is a bewitching dent in her chin and more dimples in her face when she laughs. Her laughter comes readily and there is usually the dawn of a smile somewhere, I cannot say whether from dimples or lips or eyes. Her eyes can be serious and earnest at the right time and look as untroubled as the windless, cloudless blue of the sky. It seems only fitting that she should have scores of friends and a handsome young husband who adores her and gives her everything that wealth and taste can supply. Her home is the house beautiful, and an hour in Mrs. Sweetwich's daintily appointed library, with Mrs. Sweetwich lying back in her favourite arm chair, doing you the honour of talking to you and letting you look at her, is an hour to be treasured by a poor youth with his heart full of reverence for women and passionate love for beautiful things.

I think she is very happy. Once when we were talking of university education for women and how girl-students ran the risk of not caring for home and the duties of home, she defended them. She thought that great, wise Mother Nature would take care of that and set all right.

"Wait till love comes," she said. There was a wall-lamp above her head and the light falling downwards made dim yellow shadows round her eyes and she smiled as if she had waited and knew.

She is fond of music, has been well taught, and plays well though she thinks she does not; her favourite compositions are soft and dreamy, speaking of consolation and peace out of pain. When she sits at her little, ebony piano, I almost forget to listen sometimes as I watch her slender fingers and their white doubles in the polished wood.

She is even fonder of flowers than of music; has them about her, tends them, and knows legends of them, how the Master gave the forget-me-not its name and why the lily-of-the-valley is so white. She is even said to eat violets. This may be true for in violet-time she always has one between her lips, and it is no more unnatural or unfitting than seeing any two flowers together.

One evening Mrs. Sweetwich made up a party of young people to attend the great university affair, the annual conversazione, and chaperoned us herself. As usual, we listened to music in the great hall with its wonderful roof and wood-carvings, promenaded the long corridors and libraries, looked at the pretty girls and the odd people who always throng to such functions and whom you see no where else, watched curious experiments in dark rooms and finally came back to "The Witcheries," as their house is called for a quiet evening. There were just a few friends; we talked, had some music, and amused ourselves with charades. Mrs. Sweetwich's clever little friend, Red-cap, kept us laughing with her vivacity and witty impromptus. She was an accomplished actress, and her black eyes danced with fun. We had supper and Mrs. Sweetwich poured out for me herself, that remarkable cup of coffee. I was sitting near her, but, as she was the hostess, she could not allow any one guest to engross her attention. I remember looking at the service as from a long distance. It was a pretty one; tiny cylindrical cups of a blue pattern, and toy silverware in chased work. I sat looking at it in dreamy wonderment, till it seemed to rise before me, a sublimed spiritual coffee-service, the universal of all coffee-services; and my fair friend was a beneficent Circe, or a gracious-eyed Medea busied in the mystic brewing of draughts, more potent than the Soma juice. The coffee itself was rich, and fragrant, and strong. I sipped it delicately, but even as I did so the prudent thought occurred that late coffee keeps awake. It did not, however, and that alone would prove its unusual quality. My sleep that night was sweet and sound; and the warm glow that cup of coffee diffused through me when I drank it seemed to last and wrap me round with a languorous Indian summer for days. The reality and dreaming of that time have never been disentangled. It was a time for weaving verses and fancies, for reveries and the long, long, thoughts of youth. I passed acquaintances on the street without bowing, friends spoke twice before I answered, even college lectures turned to fairy-tales. What was the cause of it all? Was it the smile when she handed it to me, or the simple, courteous words she spoke, or her fingers touching the china, those white slender fingers that made of that cup of coffee, a philtre, a potion?

ARCHIBALD MACMECHAN.