

**THE ART OF OPTIMISM
AS TAUGHT BY
ROBERT BROWNING**

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The Art of Optimism as Taught by Robert Browning by William DeWitt Hyde

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WILLIAM DEWITT HYDE

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BY

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THE ART OF OPTIMISM

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THE world we live in is a world of mingled good and evil. Whether it is chiefly good or chiefly bad depends on how we take it. To look at the world in such a way as to emphasize the evil is the art of pessimism. To look at it in such a way as to bring out the good, and throw the evil into the background, is the art of optimism. The facts are the same in either case. It is simply a question of perspective and emphasis. Whether we shall be optimists or pessimists depends partly on temperament, but chiefly on will. If you are happy it is largely to your own credit. If you are miserable it is chiefly your own fault. I propose to show you both pessimism and optimism; give a prescription for each, and leave you to take whichever you like best: for whether you are a pessimist or an optimist does n't depend on whether the world is wholly good or wholly bad, or whether you have a hard lot or an easy one. It depends on what you like, and what you want, and what you resolve to be. Perchance you are the most fortunate and happy person among my readers. There are thousands of people who would be miserable were they situated precisely as you are. They would make themselves miserable, because that is their temperament; that is their way of looking at things. And even in your happy and enviable con-

dition, with all your health and wealth, and hosts of friends, and abundance of interests, they would find plenty of stuff to make their misery out of. On the other hand, you may be the person of all others among my readers who has the hardest time, who has lost dearest friends, who has the severest struggle with poverty, who has worst enemies, who meets cruelest unkindness, who seems to have least to live for. Thousands of people would be supremely happy if they were in precisely your circumstances. Life is like the ocean. It drowns one man, because he yields to it passively and blindly. It buoys up the other because he strikes it skilfully, and buffets it with lusty sinews.

There is enough that is bad in every life to make one miserable who is so inclined. We all know people who have plenty to eat, a roof over their heads, a soft bed to lie in, money in the bank to cover all probable needs for the rest of their days, plenty of friends, good social position, an unbroken family circle, good education, even the profession of some sort of religion; who yet by magnifying something that happened to them a long while ago; or something that may happen to them at some time to come; or what somebody has said about them; or the work they have to do; or the slight some one has shown them, or even without anything as definite as even these trifles, contrive to make themselves and everybody else perpetually wretched and uncomfortable. These people have acquired the art of pessimism.

The material which both pessimists and optimists build their theories out of is precisely the same. The fundamental fact at the basis of both theories is this: The universe is infinite; we are finite. Therefore the little piece of the universe that we can bite off in any partic-

ular mouthful, and call our own at any given time, is, in comparison to what remains unappropriated, very small. Hence we are never content with what we have, but are always striving for something beyond our reach. The moment anything is gained it ceases to satisfy, and we crave still the unattained. In other words, a satisfied desire is a contradiction in terms. If you desire you are not satisfied. If you are satisfied you no longer desire. But since life without desire would be not life, but death, therefore unsatisfied desire is the characteristic feature of human life. That is the common fact out of which both pessimism and optimism are constructed. Dwell on the impossibility of ever getting a state of complete and permanent satisfaction with what you have, and you become a pessimist. Dwell on the opportunity for endless growth and conquest which this same fact makes possible, and you become an optimist. In a word, live in the passive voice, waiting for good to come to you ready-made, and you will be a pessimist, miserable to the end of your days. Live in the active voice, intent on the progress you can make and the work you can accomplish, and you will acquire the art of optimism, and be happy forevermore.

This common root of pessimism and optimism in the impossibility of perfectly satisfied desire is well set forth in Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus": "Man's unhappiness, as I construe, comes of his greatness; it is because there is an infinite in him, which with all his cunning he cannot quite bury under the finite. Will the whole finance ministers, and upholsterers, and confectioners of modern Europe undertake, in joint-stock company, to make one shoeblack happy? They cannot accomplish it, above an hour or two: for the shoeblack also has a soul quite

other than his stomach; and would require, if you consider it, for his permanent satisfaction and saturation, simply this allotment, no more, and no less: God's infinite universe altogether to himself, therein to enjoy infinitely, and fill every wish as fast as it rose. Try him with half a universe, he sets to quarrelling with the proprietor of the other half, and declares himself the most maltreated of men. Always there is a black spot in our sunshine: it is the shadow of ourselves."

In the simple life of primitive communities these facts of the fleeting and unsatisfying nature of all objects of human desire, and the greatness of the soul that can rise above it all, lie side by side in unreconciled opposition. That is what gives the inimitable pathos to the literature of primitive peoples; and to the folk-songs as we find them in unsophisticated communities to-day. In these conditions you get neither optimism nor pessimism; but the material out of which both are made. I could hardly give a better example of this than in the Roumanian folk-songs, which Carmen Sylva has translated for us under the title "The Bard of the Dimbovitza." Here you see together in the same poems the material out of which more reflective minds would build either an optimism or a pessimism; but which these simple people, who take the bitter and the sweet as they come, present in native simplicity.

I will take first a subject from nature, entitled "Hay," and then a human theme, the soldier's fate, in a little poem entitled "I Am Content." In each of them you will perceive the unsatisfied finite desire, which is the material of pessimism; and the nobleness of the loving heart and will, which is the spring and source of all true optimism. Each of these poems, like all in the collec-

tion, begins and ends with a refrain which gives the emotional key in which the whole song is written.

“HAY.

“Yesterday's flowers am I,
And I have drunk my last sweet draught of dew.
Young maidens came and sang me to my death ;
The moon looks down and sees me in my shroud,
The shroud of my last dew.

“Yesterday's flowers, that are yet in me
Must needs make way for all to-morrow's flowers.
The maidens, too, that sang me to my death
Must even so make way for all the maids
That are to come.

And as my soul, so too their soul will be
Laden with fragrance of the days gone by.
The maidens that to-morrow come this way
Will not remember that I once did bloom,
For they will only see the new-born flowers.
Yet will my perfume-laden soul bring back,
As a sweet memory, to women's hearts
Their days of maidenhood.

And then they will be sorry that they came
To sing me to my death.

And all the butterflies will mourn for me ;
I bear away with me

The sunshine's dear remembrance, and the low
Soft murmurs of the spring.

My breath is sweet as children's prattle is ;
I drank in all the whole earth's fruitfulness,
To make of it the fragrance of my soul
That shall outlive my death.