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The Morale of Mirth

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The Morale of Mirth.

By **ETHEL M. FORBES.**

“E'en as he trod that day to God, so walked he from his birth,
In simpleness, and gentleness, and honour, and clean mirth.”

In a clever article in the *New Statesman* on “Christmas,” the writer refers to the decline of the old-fashioned sort of Protestantism—the sort of Protestantism for long rife in Scotland—which saw the Pope behind every bush, including every holly bush. In the same way we might write of the decline of the Puritan temper in its first austerity, which looked askance at mirth. Puritanism made its bid for acceptance, and failed in its latter end because it did not allow for diversity in the complex nature and variety of man. It did not persuade the worldling that the joy of the Lord could counterbalance the pleasures but for a season—

“Dost thou think because thou art virtuous
There shall be no more cakes and ale?”

was the unregenerate retort. And the presentation of a Christianity, even at this good hour, that can only make a Scotch stable lad, being approached on the matter of personal religion, bleat: “But I’m awfu’ feared, mum, I could na’ keep it up,” has surely not struck the right note.

In differing flavour, mirth knows nationality, but is free of age and custom. We are familiar with the current conception of the Scot, for instance—hard-headed, argumentative, requiring a surgical operation to get a joke into him. He ranks in the popular estimate with Dr. John Brown’s historic terrier, whose “life was full o’ sairiousness to him—he just never could get

eneuch o' fechtin'." But I should like at the same time to remind my readers of the hymnal perversion of our Old Hundredth Metrical Scotch Psalm:

"Him serve with mirth."

Who, south of the border, took it upon himself to substitute "fear" for "mirth?" as though Jehovah were ill-pleased at religious hilariousness, the Father frowning down the mirth of the child-heart, which His Son urged as the temper of the twice-born—those worthy to enter the Kingdom. There is a time for mirth and a time for soul solemnity. There is no unfitness in the Christian scheme of things in lively mirth, except we let it defraud the supreme hours of reverence which life, which experience, demand of us. The attitude of negation to mirth receives no commendation from Christ when mirth is seemly. In the playground of the soul, "We have piped unto you, and ye did not dance," was said in rebuke of older children who should have known better. There was no virtue in the restraint.

It is perhaps because our imagination cannot sanctify much of what we call secularity, that the Christian is often incapable of seeing the balance of things. It needs unwarped vision, a certain venturing outside the accepted verdict, not knowing whither we go. Here and there a soul has it. In my daily portion lately, I woke to a sort of deprecating surprise that some verses in ii. Kings should suggest a fecund mind like Chesterton's. "He spake three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon, even to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall." Chesterton has evolved some daring thoughts, too daring perhaps for the orthodox concept of a sanctified man. Take the concluding words of the last essay in "Orthodoxy"—"In reverence," he writes, "there was something that Christ covered constantly, by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked

upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth." Is it, after all, more daring for a modern man so to speak than the Psalmist who affirmed that "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh?" Has up-welling mirth no part in the Creator, who made man in the Divine Image, and evolved in him springs of involuntary laughter? If the God we worship can indulge in ironic laughter at man's folly, would it be less divine that He should smile with His children's saving sense of humour in the stress of things?

It was no purveyor of mere pleasantry who wrote: "I will say boldly that no man feels himself master of his work unless he can afford to jest about it: and that a frolicsome habit of mind is rather a token of deep, genial and superabundant vitality, than of a shallow and narrow nature, which can only be earnest and attentive by conscious and serious effort." It was Kingsley, on whose heart lay the problems of the poor—whose sword slept not in his hand for the cause of the sweated—who went up into the pulpit with the burden of preaching so heavy on him that he wished he was dead, and coming down wished he was "deader." The man, moreover, with such child-like hilarity of mind, that the same pen which wrote "Yeast," and "Alton Locke," produced the "Water Babies," to the undying gratitude of the generations.

In the stress of campaigning, when soldiers are on the march, it has been found that to feed them on a larger percentage of sugar increases their staying power. And for man girded for the greater fight against principalities and powers, laughter, "the sweet of life" can ease a strain which otherwise might meet the fate of the over-taut bow.

I contend that world-wide anomalies, national injustices, blind prejudices, individual peccadilloes can often be brought home to the seat of judgment in man by the ironic pages—picture and letterpress—of our national mirth magazine, *Punch*, in a way that moral appeals and serious argument sometimes fail to achieve

for lack of illuminating power. Is it altogether perversity on our part that the *bon mot* lingers with us when the abstract principle tends to fade from memory?

In the City from which we go no more out, the Prophet promises us playing children in the streets, and so I look for mirth in heaven. For is not play just mirth in action—the soul's laughter in lip and limb?
