

FRANCIS

Asceticism is a thing which in its very nature, we tend in these days to misunderstand. Asceticism, in the religious sense, is the repudiation of the great mass of human joys because of the supreme joyfulness of the one joy, the religious joy. But asceticism is not in the least confined to religious asceticism: there is scientific asceticism which asserts that truth is alone satisfying; there is æsthetic asceticism which asserts that art is alone satisfying; there is amatory asceticism which asserts that love is alone satisfying. There is even epicurean asceticism, which asserts that beer and skittles are alone satisfying. Wherever the manner of praising anything involves the statement that the speaker could live with that thing alone, there lies the germ and essence of asceticism. When William Morris, for example, says that 'love is enough,' it is obvious that he asserts in those words that art, science, politics, ambition, money, houses, carriages, concerts, gloves, walking-sticks, door-knockers, railway-stations, cathedrals and any other things one may choose to tabulate are unnecessary. When Omar Khayyam says:

'A book of verse beneath the bough A loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou
Sitting beside me in the wilderness O wilderness were Paradise enow.'

It is clear that he speaks fully as much ascetically as he does æsthetically. He makes a list of things and says that he wants no more. The same thing was done by a mediæval monk. Examples might, of course, be multiplied a hundred-fold. One of the most genuinely poetical of our younger poets says, as the one thing certain, that

'From quiet home and first beginning Out to the undiscovered ends--
There's nothing worth the wear of winning But laughter and the love of
friends.'

Here we have a perfect example of the main important fact, that all true joy expresses itself in terms of asceticism.

But if in any case it should happen that a class or a generation lose the sense of the peculiar kind of joy which is being celebrated, they immediately begin to call the enjoyers of that joy gloomy and self-destroying. The most formidable liberal philosophers have called the monks melancholy because they denied themselves the pleasures of liberty and marriage. They might as well call the trippers on a Bank Holiday melancholy because they deny themselves, as a rule, the pleasures of silence and meditation. A simpler and stronger example is, however, to hand. If

ever it should happen that the system of English athletics should vanish from the public schools and the universities, if science should supply some new and non-competitive manner of perfecting the physique, if public ethics swung round to an attitude of absolute contempt and indifference towards the feeling called sport, then it is easy to see what would happen. Future historians would simply state that in the dark days of Queen Victoria young men at Oxford and Cambridge were subjected to a horrible sort of religious torture. They were forbidden, by fantastic monastic rules, to indulge in wine or tobacco during certain arbitrarily fixed periods of time, before certain brutal fights and festivals. Bigots insisted on their rising at unearthly hours and running violently around fields for no object. Many men ruined their health in these dens of superstition, many died there. All this is perfectly true and irrefutable. Athleticism in England is an asceticism, as much as the monastic rules. Men have over-strained themselves and killed themselves through English athleticism. There is one difference and one only: we do feel the love of sport; we do not feel the love of religious offices. We see only the price in the one case and only the purchase in the other.

The only question that remains is what was the joy of the old Christian ascetics of which their asceticism was merely the purchasing price. The mere possibility of the query is an extraordinary example of the way in which we miss the main points of human history. We are looking at humanity too close, and see only the details and not the vast and dominant features. We look at the rise of Christianity, and conceive it as a rise of self-abnegation and almost of pessimism. It does not occur to us that the mere assertion that this raging and confounding universe is governed by justice and mercy is a piece of staggering optimism fit to set all men capering. The detail over which these monks went mad with joy was the universe itself; the only thing really worthy of enjoyment. The white daylight shone over all the world, the endless forests stood up in their order. The lightning awoke and the tree fell and the sea gathered into mountains and the ship went down, and all these disconnected and meaningless and terrible objects were all part of one dark and fearful conspiracy of goodness, one merciless scheme of mercy. That this scheme of Nature was not accurate or well founded is perfectly tenable, but surely it is not tenable that it was not optimistic. We insist, however, upon treating this matter tail foremost. We insist that the ascetics were pessimists because they gave up threescore years and ten for an eternity of happiness. We forget that the bare proposition of an eternity of happiness is by its very nature ten thousand times more optimistic than ten thousand pagan saturnalias.

Mr Adderley's life of Francis of Assisi does not, of course, bring this out; nor does it fully bring out the character of Francis. It has rather the tone of a devotional book. A devotional book is an excellent thing, but we do not look in it for the portrait of a man, for the same reason that we do not look in a love-sonnet for the portrait of a woman, because men in such conditions of mind not only apply all

virtues to their idol, but all virtues in equal quantities. There is no outline, because the artist cannot bear to put in a black line. This blaze of benediction, this conflict between lights, has its place in poetry, not in biography. The successful examples of it may be found, for instance, in the more idealistic odes of Spenser. The design is sometimes almost indecipherable, for the poet draws in silver upon white.

It is natural, of course, that Mr Adderley should see Francis primarily as the founder of the Franciscan Order. We suspect this was only one, perhaps a minor one, of the things that he was; we suspect that one of the minor things that Christ did was to found Christianity. But the vast practical work of Francis is assuredly not to be ignored, for this amazingly unworldly and almost maddeningly simple--minded infant was one of the most consistently successful men that ever fought with this bitter world. It is the custom to say that the secret of such men is their profound belief in themselves, and this is true, but not all the truth. Workhouses and lunatic asylums are thronged with men who believe in themselves. Of Francis it is far truer to say that the secret of his success was his profound belief in other people, and it is the lack of this that has commonly been the curse of these obscure Napoleons. Francis always assumed that everyone must be just as anxious about their common relative, the water-rat, as he was. He planned a visit to the Emperor to draw his attention to the needs of 'his little sisters the larks.' He used to talk to any thieves and robbers he met about their misfortune in being unable to give rein to their desire for holiness. It was an innocent habit, and doubtless the robbers often 'got round him,' as the phrase goes. Quite as often, however, they discovered that he had 'got round' them, and discovered the other side, the side of secret nobility.

Conceiving of St Francis as primarily the founder of the Franciscan Order, Mr Adderley opens his narrative with an admirable sketch of the history of Monasticism in Europe, which is certainly the best thing in the book. He distinguishes clearly and fairly between the Manichæan ideal that underlies so much of Eastern Monasticism and the ideal of self-discipline which never wholly vanished from the Christian form. But he does not throw any light on what must be for the outsider the absorbing problem of this Catholic asceticism, for the excellent reason that not being an outsider he does not find it a problem at all.

To most people, however, there is a fascinating inconsistency in the position of St Francis. He expressed in loftier and bolder language than any earthly thinker the conception that laughter is as divine as tears. He called his monks the mountebanks of God. He never forgot to take pleasure in a bird as it flashed past him, or a drop of water as it fell from his finger: he was, perhaps, the happiest of the sons of men. Yet this man undoubtedly founded his whole polity on the negation of what we think the most imperious necessities; in his three vows of

poverty, chastity, and obedience, he denied to himself and those he loved most, property, love, and liberty. Why was it that the most large-hearted and poetic spirits in that age found their most congenial atmosphere in these awful renunciations? Why did he who loved where all men were blind, seek to blind himself where all men loved? Why was he a monk, and not a troubadour? These questions are far too large to be answered fully here, but in any life of Francis they ought at least to have been asked; we have a suspicion that if they were answered we should suddenly find that much of the enigma of this sullen time of ours was answered also. So it was with the monks. The two great parties in human affairs are only the party which sees life black against white, and the party which sees it white against black, the party which macerates and blackens itself with sacrifice because the background is full of the blaze of an universal mercy, and the party which crowns itself with flowers and lights itself with bridal torches because it stands against a black curtain of incalculable night. The revellers are old, and the monks are young. It was the monks who were the spendthrifts of happiness, and we who are its misers.

Doubtless, as is apparent from Mr Adderley's book, the clear and tranquil life of the Three Vows had a fine and delicate effect on the genius of Francis. He was primarily a poet. The perfection of his literary instinct is shown in his naming the fire 'brother,' and the water 'sister,' in the quaint demagogic dexterity of the appeal in the sermon to the fishes 'that they alone were saved in the Flood.' In the amazingly minute and graphic dramatisation of the life, disappointments and excuses of any shrub or beast that he happened to be addressing, his genius has a curious resemblance to that of Burns. But if he avoided the weakness of Burns' verses to animals, the occasional morbidity, bombast and moralisation on himself, the credit is surely due to a cleaner and more transparent life.

The general attitude of St Francis, like that of his Master, embodied a kind of terrible common-sense. The famous remark of the Caterpillar in 'Alice in Wonderland'--'Why not?' impresses us as his general motto. He could not see why he should not be on good terms with all things. The pomp of war and ambition, the great empire of the Middle Ages and all its fellows begin to look tawdry and top-heavy, under the rationality of that innocent stare. His questions were blasting and devastating, like the questions of a child. He would not have been afraid even of the nightmares of cosmogony, for he had no fear in him. To him the world was small, not because he had any views as to its size, but for the reason that gossiping ladies find it small, because so many relatives were to be found in it. If you had taken him to the loneliest star that the madness of an astronomer can conceive, he would have only beheld in it the features of a new friend.

ROSTAND

When 'Cyrano de Bergerac' was published, it bore the subordinate title of a heroic comedy. We have no tradition in English literature which would justify us in calling a comedy heroic, though there was once a poet who called a comedy divine. By the current modern conception, the hero has his place in a tragedy, and the one kind of strength which is systematically denied to him is the strength to succeed. That the power of a man's spirit might possibly go to the length of turning a tragedy into a comedy is not admitted; nevertheless, almost all the primitive legends of the world are comedies, not only in the sense that they have a happy ending, but in the sense that they are based upon a certain optimistic assumption that the hero is destined to be the destroyer of the monster. Singularly enough, this modern idea of the essential disastrous character of life, when seriously considered, connects itself with a hyper-æsthetic view of tragedy and comedy which is largely due to the influence of modern France, from which the great heroic comedies of Monsieur Rostand have come. The French genius has an instinct for remedying its own evil work, and France gives always the best cure for 'Frenchness.' The idea of comedy which is held in England by the school which pays most attention to the technical niceties of art is a view which renders such an idea as that of heroic comedy quite impossible. The fundamental conception in the minds of the majority of our younger writers is that comedy is, 'par excellence,' a fragile thing. It is conceived to be a conventional world of the most absolutely delicate and gimcrack description. Such stories as Mr Max Beerbohm's 'Happy Hypocrite' are conceptions which would vanish or fall into utter nonsense if viewed by one single degree too seriously. But great comedy, the comedy of Shakespeare or Sterne, not only can be, but must be, taken seriously. There is nothing to which a man must give himself up with more faith and self-abandonment than to genuine laughter. In such comedies one laughs with the heroes and not at them. The humour which steeps the stories of Falstaff and Uncle Toby is a cosmic and philosophic humour, a geniality which goes down to the depths. It is not superficial reading, it is not even, strictly speaking, light reading. Our sympathies are as much committed to the characters as if they were the predestined victims in a Greek tragedy. The modern writer of comedies may be said to boast of the brittleness of his characters. He seems always on the eve of knocking his puppets to pieces. When John Oliver Hobbes wrote for the first time a comedy of serious emotions, she named it, with a thinly-disguised contempt for her own work, 'A Sentimental Comedy.' The ground of this conception of the artificiality of comedy is a profound pessimism. Life in the eyes of these mournful buffoons is itself an utterly tragic thing; comedy must be as hollow as a grinning mask. It is a refuge from the world, and not even, properly speaking, a part of it. Their wit is a thin sheet of shining ice over the eternal waters of bitterness.

'Cyrano de Bergerac' came to us as the new decoration of an old truth, that merriment was one of the world's natural flowers, and not one of its exotics. The gigantesque levity, the flamboyant eloquence, the Rabelaisian puns and digressions were seen to be once more what they had been in Rabelais, the mere outbursts of a human sympathy and bravado as old and solid as the stars. The human spirit demanded wit as headlong and haughty as its will. All was expressed in the words of Cyrano at his highest moment of happiness. 'Il me faut des géants.' An essential aspect of this question of heroic comedy is the question of drama in rhyme. There is nothing that affords so easy a point of attack for the dramatic realist as the conduct of a play in verse. According to his canons, it is indeed absurd to represent a number of characters facing some terrible crisis in their lives by capping rhymes like a party playing 'bouts rimés.' In his eyes it must appear somewhat ridiculous that two enemies taunting each other with insupportable insults should obligingly provide each other with metrical spacing and neat and convenient rhymes. But the whole of this view rests finally upon the fact that few persons, if any, to-day understand what is meant by a poetical play. It is a singular thing that those poetical plays which are now written in England by the most advanced students of the drama follow exclusively the lines of Maeterlinck, and use verse and rhyme for the adornment of a profoundly tragic theme. But rhyme has a supreme appropriateness for the treatment of the higher comedy. The land of heroic comedy is, as it were, a paradise of lovers, in which it is not difficult to imagine that men could talk poetry all day long. It is far more conceivable that men's speech should flower naturally into these harmonious forms, when they are filled with the essential spirit of youth, than when they are sitting gloomily in the presence of immemorial destiny. The great error consists in supposing that poetry is an unnatural form of language. We should all like to speak poetry at the moment when we truly live, and if we do not speak it, it is because we have an impediment in our speech. It is not song that is the narrow or artificial thing, it is conversation that is a broken and stammering attempt at song. When we see men in a spiritual extravaganza, like Cyrano de Bergerac, speaking in rhyme, it is not our language disguised or distorted, but our language rounded and made whole. Rhymes answer each other as the sexes in flowers and in humanity answer each other. Men do not speak so, it is true. Even when they are inspired or in love they talk inanities. But the poetic comedy does not misrepresent the speech one half so much, as the speech misrepresents the soul. Monsieur Rostand showed even more than his usual insight when he called 'Cyrano de Bergerac' a comedy, despite the fact that, strictly speaking, it ends with disappointment and death. The essence of tragedy is a spiritual breakdown or decline, and in the great French play the spiritual sentiment mounts unceasingly until the last line. It is not the facts themselves, but our feeling about them, that makes tragedy and comedy, and death is more joyful in Rostand than life in Maeterlinck. The same apparent contradiction holds good in the case of the drama of 'L'Aiglon,' now being performed with so much success. Although the

hero is a weakling, the subject a fiasco, the end a premature death and a personal disillusionment, yet, in spite of this theme, which might have been chosen for its depressing qualities, the unconquerable pæan of the praise of things, the ungovernable gaiety of the poet's song swells so high that at the end it seems to drown all the weak voices of the characters in one crashing chorus of great things and great men. A multitude of mottoes might be taken from the play to indicate and illustrate, not only its own spirit, but much of the spirit of modern life. When in the vision of the field of Wagram the horrible voices of the wounded cry out, 'Les corbeaux, les corbeaux,' the Duke, overwhelmed with a nightmare of hideous trivialities, cries out, 'Où, où sont les aigles?' That antithesis might stand alone as an invocation at the beginning of the twentieth century to the spirit of heroic comedy. When an ex-General of Napoleon is asked his reason for having betrayed the Emperor, he replies, 'La fatigue,' and at that a veteran private of the Great Army rushes forward, and crying passionately, 'Et nous?' pours out a terrible description of the life lived by the common soldier. To-day when pessimism is almost as much a symbol of wealth and fashion as jewels or cigars, when the pampered heirs of the ages can sum up life in few other words but 'la fatigue,' there might surely come a cry from the vast mass of common humanity from the beginning 'et nous?' It is this potentiality for enthusiasm among the mass of men that makes the function of comedy at once common and sublime. Shakespeare's 'Much Ado about Nothing' is a great comedy, because behind it is the whole pressure of that love of love which is the youth of the world, which is common to all the young, especially to those who swear they will die bachelors and old maids. 'Love's Labour Lost' is filled with the same energy, and there it falls even more definitely into the scope of our subject since it is a comedy in rhyme in which all men speak lyrically as naturally as the birds sing in pairing time. What the love of love is to the Shakespearian comedies, that other and more mysterious human passion, the love of death, is to 'L'Aiglon.' Whether we shall ever have in England a new tradition of poetic comedy it is difficult at present to say, but we shall assuredly never have it until we realise that comedy is built upon everlasting foundations in the nature of things, that it is not a thing too light to capture, but too deep to plumb. Monsieur Rostand, in his description of the Battle of Wagram, does not shrink from bringing about the Duke's ears the frightful voices of actual battle, of men torn by crows, and suffocated with blood, but when the Duke, terrified at these dreadful appeals, asks them for their final word, they all cry together 'Vive l'Empereur!' Monsieur Rostand, perhaps, did not know that he was writing an allegory. To me that field of Wagram is the field of the modern war of literature. We hear nothing but the voices of pain; the whole is one phonograph of horror. It is right that we should hear these things, it is right that not one of them should be silenced; but these cries of distress are not in life as they are in modern art the only voices, they are the voices of men, but not the voice of man. When questioned finally and seriously as to their conception of their destiny, men have from the beginning of time answered in a thousand

philosophies and religions with a single voice and in a sense most sacred and tremendous, 'Vive l'Empereur.'