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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen
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A Pessimist In Theory and Practice

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A PESSIMIST;
IN
THEORY AND PRACTICE

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A PESSIMIST.

I.

WISDOM IN THE WOODS.

I had seen and heard little of Hartman since our college days. There he was counted a youth of eminent promise: after that I knew that he had traveled, written something or other, and practised law — or professed it, and not too eagerly: then he had disappeared. Last May I stumbled on him in a secluded region where I had gone to fish and rest, after a year of too close attention to business. We came face to face in the woods, stared at each other, and then our hands met in the old grip. He took me home with him, to a comfortable enough bachelor establishment, and we made a night — or more than an evening — of it. He did not seem curious, but I was.

"What have you been doing with yourself!" I began; "withdrawing from the world?"

"To some extent," he said. "You can't do that entirely, you know. The world is in you as well as around you, unluckily. It is too much with us, as the poet observed. Do you remember the time you had in class over that sonnet?"

"Pass that," I said. "I've given up poetry." ("I should have thought that impossible," he put in, in his nasty nagging fashion; but I took no notice.) "Where have you been all the time?"

"Here, mostly. It's not much of a place, but that is its merit."

He was getting too deep now, as he often did of old; so I said, "But it's so far away."

[8] "That's its other merit. You always had a direct and ingenuous mind, Bob. Here you've hit both bull's-eyes in two shots."

"None of your chaff," said I. "Who do you practice your wits on, up here?"

"My dogs. And there are some hens in the neighborhood, and a few small farmers. Or if my bosom cries too loudly to be eased of its perilous stuff, I can chaff myself, which is more profitable."

"You were always too clever for me. What else do you do?"

"As the Baroness used to say in *The Danicheffs*, in our days of vanity, 'Do you think that is much of a compliment?' I read, and fish, and climb, and ride several hobbies, and meditate on Man, on Nature, and on Human Fate."

"What's the good of that?" I was growing impatient of all this nonsense.

"Well, not much, perhaps," said he. "For you, very little indeed. But intrinsically it is about as profitable as more popular avocations."

"Now look here, Hartman," I said. "You're a better man any day than I—or you were. But here you are, hidden in the backwoods with owls (one of them was making a horrid noise outside), and nothing to show. Now I've got a wife—"

"And seven children," he interposed.

"No, only three. But I have a good business, and a house on the avenue, and a decent social position, and I'm making money. And I don't like to see you throw yourself away like this."

"Old man," said Hartman, "we are just of an age, and you would pass for five years the elder. Your hair is getting gray, and thin on top. You look fagged. And you owed to me that you came here to pick up."

He had me there a little. "Yes, I've been working hard. But I'm in the swim. I do [9] as others do. I help to make the wheels go round." I thought I had him there; but you never can count on Hartman, except for an answer of some kind.

"Wouldn't they go round without your help? And why should they go around, anyway? It might be a variety to have them stop. What's the good of it?"

I stared at him; but his eye looked more rational than his talk sounded. "The good of it is that I am in things generally, while you are out."

"Exactly so. I am out, while you are in. As to things generally, I prefer to be with the outs. It is a matter of taste, no doubt."

"Well, you are beyond me. But I brought myself in merely as an example—not that I set up to be much of that—or an illustration, say. I want to know about you." It may have been foolish, but somehow I felt the old affection coming back as we talked. "What does it all mean, Harty?"

He looked at me. "Do you really want to know, Bob?"

"Of course I do. Do you suppose I've forgotten the larks we used to have, and the scrapes you got me out of, and how you coached me through that exam, in Calculus? It's long ago, Jim; but I took it rather hard, the way you dropped me."

He began to look as he used to: he wasn't a selfish fellow in those days. "I never meant to be hard on you, Bob, nor supposed you'd take it so: and I doubt if you did, though you think so at this moment. It was part of a system; and systems are poor things, though we can't do without them. I'll tell you how it was."

"Wait till I fill up. — Now go ahead."

"You don't smoke as you used to, Bob. Does the Madam object?"

"She doesn't like tobacco about the house, of course. And I'm not sure it's good for me."

[10] "Ah. Sorry to be leading you astray. There is no one to interfere with my little vices. Well, Bob, I got tired of it. Not that that alone would matter: one could stand being bored in a good cause. But I couldn't see that it was a good cause."

"Would you mind explaining?" said I. "What cause?"

"Helping to make the wheels go round. Being in the swim. Doing as others do. Trying to make a little money and a little name, and following the fashions of a carnal-minded generation. I could see no point to it, Bob; the game never seemed worth the candle."

"And so you came out in the woods, like what's his name—that Concord fellow. Do you find this any better?"

"Negatively. I am not so much a part of the things I despise. The pomps and vanities are conspicuous chiefly by their absence. It is a simpler life, comparatively laudable for there being less of it."

"And don't you get bored, out here? A week or so of it is well enough in a way; but take it the year round, I should think you'd find it worse than civilization."

"I get bored, of course: that is incidental to life, and chronic with one who has looked beneath the surface and sifted values. But it's not so oppressive as in town. There are no shams here, to speak of. Having no business and no society, we don't pretend to be very different from what we are."

"O, if you come to that, the women still improve on nature, and the street has its little tricks and methods; but you could keep out of them. You were in the law."

"It's all the same, Bob. The law now is worked much more as a business than as a science. Look at Jones, and Brown, and Jenkins: they are getting on, I hear. I don't want to get on in that way."

"But you might have taken the scientific [11] side of it. With your head piece, and your high and mighty notions, there was a field for you."

"So is theology a field, or physic, or Greek roots, or chiropody—for him, who believes in them. I was not able to see that one line of thought has a right to crowd out all the rest, or to sink my whole soul in a profession. That's what they want of you now—to make a little clearing, and put up palings all round it, and see things outside only through the chinks of your blessed fence. Be a narrow specialist: know one thing, and care for nothing else. I suppose you can do that with oil."

I thought there was some uncalled-for bitterness in this; but the poor fellow can't be contented, with his lonesome and aimless life. "We're not talking about me, Jim. You're the topic. Stick to your text, and preach away: my soul is not so immersed in oil that I can't listen. But I don't blame you for going back on the law; a beast of a

business, I always thought it. Why didn't you go for a Professorship?"

"My poor friend, you were at college four years, and graduated—without honors, it is true. Don't you remember how little we cared for the Profs. and their eminent attainments? We took it for granted that it was all right, and they understood what they were at; but it was a grind, to them and to us. If a man was an enthusiast for his branch, we rather laughed at him; or if his name was well up, we were willing to be proud of him—at a distance—as an honor to Alma Mater; but we kicked all the same, if he tried to put extra work on us. It was all fashion, routine, tradition. The student mind doesn't begin to look into things for itself till about the senior year, and then it's full of what lies ahead, in the great world outside—poor innocents! With those of us who had anything in us, it took most of the time to knock the nonsense out.—And [12] then if a man wants a chair, he must take it in a western concern, where he'll be expected to lead in prayer-meeting, and to have no views of geology that conflict with the Catechism."

"Well then, why not go on with literature? That was in your line: you might have made a good thing of it."

"Yes, by 'unremitting application,' much the same as at law, and taking it seriously as a profession, I might in time possibly have made five hundred a year off the magazines, and won an humble place among our seven hundred rising authors. What's the good of that, when one is not a transcendent genius, destined for posterity? The crowd seems to be thickest just there: too many books, too many writers, and by far too many anxious aspirants. Why should I swell the number? The community was not especially pining to hear what I might have to say; and I did not pine so much as some to be heard."

"I fear you lacked ambition, Harty. You would have made a pretty good preacher; but I suppose you weren't sanctified enough."

"Thanks: scarcely. I prefer to retain some vestiges of self-respect. That will do for the youths on the beneficiary list, who are taken in and done for from infancy, to whom it is an object to get a free education and into a gentlemanly profession. That's the kind they mostly make parsons of now, I hear. My boy, to do anything really in

that line, a man ought to have notions different from mine—rather. Why don't you advise me to set up a kindergarten? That would suit as well as chronicling ecclesiastical small beer. Cudgel your brains, and start something more plausible."

This did not surprise me at all; but my suggestion-box was getting low. Then I made a rally. "How about the philanthropic dodge? Robinson is on the Associated Charities [13] in town. I saw in the paper that he made a speech the other night."

"If he does nothing better than speech-making, he might as well drop it. There might be something in benevolent efforts, if one had just the temperament and talents for them. But as it is, I fear most of it is humbug; mutual admiration, seeing your name in the paper, and all that. And how they get imposed on! How they pauperize and debauch those they try to raise! It's a law of nature, Bob, that every tub must stand on its own bottom: you can't reform a man from without. Natural selection will have its way: the shiftless and the lazy must go to the wall. If you could kill them off, now, that might do some good. The class that needs help is not like us—not that we are anything to brag of: they've not had our chance. It's very well to say, give 'em a chance; but that's no use unless they take it, which they won't. 'Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow.' If they wouldn't, you are bound to respect their right of choice. Your drunken ruffian will keep on breaking the furniture, till another like him breaks his skull. His wife, the washerwoman with six small children, will continue getting more and making things worse. This part of it at least ought to be regulated by law: but that would be a restriction of personal liberty, which is the idol of this age, and not without reason. We're between two millstones, and I see no way out."

"How would you like politics? The gentleman is supposed to have an opening there now."

"A doubtful and difficult one. If it had come in my time I might have tried it. But it would be uphill work, a sort of Sisyphus affair: you may get the stone to the top, but the chances are against it. And which party is one to join, when he sees nothing in either [14] but selfish greed and stale traditions? Viewed as a missionary field, Bob, it's just like the ministry: you are weighed down with a lot of dead

conventions which you must pretend to believe have life and juice in them yet. Before you can do anything you must be a partisan, and that requires a mediæval state of mind. Mine, unluckily if you like, is modern. It wouldn't go, Bob. Try again, if you have more on your list."

"Well, there's pure Science: you wouldn't care for the applied, I know. But you used to like beetles and things. Truth for Truth's sake is a fine motto, now?"

"Yes, if they lived by it. There was Bumpus, old Chlorum's favorite student—in the laboratory, you remember. The old man died, and Bumpus stole all his discoveries, and published them as his own; made quite a pretty reputation, and is one of our leading chemists. You know how the books on Astronomy are made? A man finds out a thing or two for himself, cribs the rest from other books, changes the wording, and brings it all out with a blare of trumpets as original research. Those methods are approved, or at least tolerated, in the best scientific circles, and other folks don't know the difference. O, I belong to a few societies yet, and once in an age go to their meetings, when I get tired up here."

"So the outside world still has charms, eh? Have to go back to it now and then, to keep alive, do you?"

"Yes, when I need to be reconciled to solitude; much as you go to hear Ingersoll when your orthodoxy wants confirming, or Dr. Deadcreed if your liberalism is to be stirred up. Let us spice the insipid dish with some small variety. The lesser evil needs the greater for its foil."

"Look here, Harty; this sounds like pure perverseness; opposition for its own sake, you [15] know. I believe your money has been the ruin of you. It's not an original remark, but if you'd had nothing you'd have done something; gone into business like the rest of us, and made your way."

"Of course, if I had been obliged to; but I should have loved it none the better. Poor Bayard Taylor said a man could serve God and mammon both, but only by hating the mammon which he served from sheer necessity. Say I got my living by a certain craft, would that make the craft noble? 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians,'

because we sell her images! Why should I desire to supply the confiding public with shoes, or sugar, or sealing-wax? Plenty of others can do that better, and find it more amusing, than I should."

"If it's amusement you're after, most men find it in Society. You're not too old for that yet."

"Blind guide, I have been there. So long ago, you say, that I've forgotten what it's like? Not quite. Last winter I had to attend an execution: couldn't get out of it, you know. My cousin married a Washington belle, and I had to be there a week, and take it all in. Ah well, this is a threadbare theme; but I could understand how men fifteen hundred years ago fled from Alexandrian ball-rooms to Nitrian deserts. The emptiness of it—the eternal simper, the godless and harrowing routine! If a man has brains or a soul about him, what can he do with them in such a crowd? Better leave them at home with his pocket-book, or he might lose them—less suddenly, but more certainly, I fancy. No, the clubs are not much better; I don't care for horse-talk or the price of shares. See human nature? not in its best clothes—and you may read that remark either way you like. Why man, you can get all this in *Punch* and the novels, with far less fatigue, and lay them down when you have had enough. An hour on Broadway sickens me [16] for the wild-flowers, the brooks, the free breeze or the mountain side."

He was getting violent now, and I thought I had better calm him down. "Oho! the rhyme and reason of a rural life, is it? Soothing effect of Nature on a world-worn bosom, and all that? So you do believe in something, after all?"

"I told you it was but a choice of evils, and this is the less. Nature has neither heart nor conscience, and she sets us a bad example. She has no continuity, no reliableness, no self-control. I can see none of the fabled sublimity in a storm; only the pettishness of a spoiled child, or of an angry man bent on breaking things. The sunset is better to look at, but it has no more moral meaning than a peep-show. Yet this is a return to primitive conditions, in a way. I can throw off here the peddler's pack of artificialities that Vanity Fair imposes, and carry only the inevitable burden of manhood. The air is less poisonous to body and mind than in the cities. The groves were God's first temples, and may be the last."

"See here, Hartman. Suppose people in general were to take up with these cheerful notions of yours, and go away from each other and out in the backwoods— what then?"

"It might be the best thing they could do. But don't be alarmed, Bob: I am not a Nihilist agent. Preserve your faith in the Oil Exchange and the general order. I speak only for myself, and I'm not proselyting to any great extent. We'll have a week's fishing, and then I'll send you back to your wife in good shape. Or if you find yourself getting demoralized, you can skip earlier, either home or to a place further up that I'll tell you of, where the few inhabitants are as harmless as your youngest baby."

But I was not to be bluffed off in this way. "Jim," I said, "there is something behind all this. Was it that girl you met at Newport [17] and afterwards in Naples? You told me once—"

"Never mind the girl," he said. "You are a married man, and I an old bachelor. Leave girls to those who have use for them. If we are to get any trout to-morrow, it's time we turned in. And if you won't stay, I'll go with you to the tavern and knock up old Hodge: he's been asleep these four hours." I thought he had talked enough for one night, so I said no more, but got back to bed.

II.

WORSE YET.

Hartman had asked me to stay with him, but there is no use of overloading friendship, and I like to be my own master as well as he does. I might get tired of him, or he of me; and it's not well to be chained to your best friend for a solid week. Not that I am afraid of Hartman; he is not a lunatic, only a monomaniac; but I can cheer him up better when I have a good line of retreat open. He took me next morning to some superior pools, where the trout were fat and fierce; but I had not my usual skill. The truth is, Jim was on my mind; and after missing several big fish and taking a good deal of his chaff, I begged off—said I had letters to write—and so got to the tavern in time for dinner, which they have at the pagan hour of half-

past eleven. Then I set to work thinking. I am not quite so dull as I may seem, but Hartman always had the ascendancy at college, and last night I fell into the old way of playing chorus to his high tragedy. This will not do, and I must assert myself. He was much the better student of course, but I have knocked about and seen more of the world than he has, [18] shut up in these woods like a toad in a tree. He is too good a sort to go to seed with his confounded whimses; so I determined to take a different tone with him. And I wrote to my wife about it: Mabel is a competent woman, and sometimes has very good ideas where mine fail—though of course I seldom let her see that. That evening I took him in hand.

"Jim," I said, "I've been thinking—about you."

"Ah," said he. "Large results may be expected from such unusual exertion. Impart them by all means."

"James Hartman, you are lazy, and selfish, and unprincipled."

"Yes?" said he, in an inquiring tone. "That is your thesis. Prove it."

I went on. "A man should be doing something: you are doing nothing. A man should have a stake in the community. What have you got? Three dogs and an old cow. A man should be in connection and sympathy with the great tides of life. Here you are with nobody but yokels to talk to, and the pulse of the region about two to the minute."

"Twin brother of my soul, companion of the palmy days of youth, methinks—as they say in the wild and wondrous West—you hit me where I live. But none of these things move me. I am lost in admiration of your oratory: really, Bob, I didn't think it was in you. But you said all this, in simpler language, last night."

I saw I had overshot the mark: when he takes that tone, you are nowhere. "Jim," I said, "let's be serious. Begin where we left off, then. Granted that you don't care for making money, and the ends most of us are after. By character and fortune you are above the usual selfish motives. Still you are a man, a member of the community: you have [19] duties to your fellows. Let the nobler motives come in. Do something to make the world happier, wiser, better. You have the power, if you had the will. Are not private talents a public trust? You used to berate the hogs of Epicurus' sty. It seems

to me you've fallen back on mere self-indulgence. Your life here is a huge egoism. Cut loose from these withering notions: there is a better side to things than the one you see. Come back to the world, and be a man again."

His eye was very bright now—not that it was ever dull—but I could not quite make out what it meant; perhaps mere curiosity. "Robert," he said, "I should believe that somebody had been coaching you, but there's no one in range who could do it except myself. It's not like you to have brought books along; and you've not had time to hear from home. What put you up to this?"

"Hartman," I said, "look me in the eye and see whether I mean what I say. Go back with me next week. Make your home at my house till you can look round. I'll introduce you to some men who are not shams—and women, if you like. I know a few who have souls and consciences, though they do go to parties. I'll help you all I'm worth. You can make a new start. Something went wrong before. Better luck this time."

"Bob," said he, "I'll take your word for it. Deeply touched by such unexpected and undeserved consideration—no, I won't chaff. You're not half a bad lot. But, my dear boy, you see the thing from your standpoint; mine is different. I'll try to explain. But what would you have me do?"

"Whatever is best for you. Anything, so you get an object in life."

"Do you remember what De Senancour says, in *Obermann*?"

"Not I. Put it in your own English, please: no French morals in mine."

[20] "What is there to be done that is worth doing? It seems to me that everything is overdone. I go into a town, big or little: ten stores where one is needed. How do all these poor creatures live? Do you see anything noble in this petty struggle for existence? I can't. I serve my kind best by getting out of their way: that makes one less in the scramble."

"I shouldn't expect you to sell tape or taffy, Jim. You could deal in a higher line of goods, and do it in your own way."

"They don't want my goods, Bob, and I can't do it in my own way. I have tried—not much, but enough to see. There is no market for my wares: and I'm not sure they are worth marketing—or that any man's are. Truth as I see it is the last article to be in demand."

"As you think you see it just now, very likely. Your eye is jaundiced, and sees all things yellow. Get well, and you can find a market. Fit your mind to the facts, and receive a true impression."

"Exactly what I have done—so far as any impression is true. That's the point I've been waiting for you to come to. 'The Universe is change, and Life is opinion.' As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he; and as he thinks of things outside himself, so are they to him. One can do no more than use his eyes and brains, and then rule himself by what he sees. I have looked at matters more carefully and dispassionately than some do, and seen a little deeper into them: the prospect is not edifying, Bob. I am prejudiced, you say? No, I have cast aside prejudice. Most of you are misled by the love of life: you want to give a favorable account of your own belongings, and the wish is father to the thought: so you blink what is before you, and won't own the truth. Perhaps you are wise in your way: you gain such bliss as is in ignorance. Keep it if you can: I have no desire to disturb it."

[21] "Jim, mayn't there be a little conceit of superior wisdom here?"

"Very possibly: as the lamented Bedott observed, we are all poor creatures. 'I do not speak as one that is exempt:' doubtless I have my full share of infirmity."

"Then why not take the benefit of it, with the rest of us? There's a better as well as a worse side. Take things as they are, and make the best of them."

"I do. The best is the least, and I get away from things as much as possible. To minimize life is to make the best of it."

"Now you're at it again; begging the question, and dodging the argument—you'd say, summing it up, I suppose. I tell you, it's all mental, and your mind's diseased. You think you're injured by the scheme of things. Well, change your opinion, and the injury is gone. Didn't one of your old philosophers say something like that?"

"He didn't give it quite the application you do, Bob. How can I change an opinion that is based accurately on facts? I don't make the facts: if I did, my opinion of myself would be yet worse than it is. I have a brain—such as it is—and a conscience: I can keep them clean and awake, even on Crusoe's island. Nothing better than that, my boy. 'What is the good of man? Rectitude of will, and to understand the appearances of things.'"

"Well, Hartman, if you had two or three kids, as I have, you'd see things differently. They would give you an interest in life."

"A tragically solemn one, no doubt. That responsibility at least can't be forced on a man. He can let his part of the curse die out with him."

"Jim, you *are* selfish. You were made to gladden some woman's eye and fill her heart. You were the strongest man of the nine, and the best oar in the crew. We all envied your looks, and there's more of them [22] now. You could outshine all the gilded youth I know, and hold your own with the best. I remember a girl that thought so, a dozen years ago. Somewhere a woman is waiting for you to come and claim her. Why will you rob her and the world? This wilful waste is selfish wickedness, that's what it is."

"Think so if you must: it's a free country. But you sugar the pill too much. Who misses me—or what if some few did for a while? They've forgotten me long ago. I tell you, I served society by deserting it."

"It's all very well now, Jim, while your youth and strength last. But after you turn forty, or fifty say, these woods and whims will lose their charm; you'll get bored as you've never been yet. The emptiness and dreariness that you theorize about will become stern realities: you'll pine, when it's too late, for human affection and some hold on life. My lad, you are storing up for yourself a sad old age."

I thought I had him at last. His surface lightness was all gone: he looked intent and solemn. "No doubt of it, Bob; not the least in life. I am human, and the worst is yet to come. But do you think me such a cad as to go back on my principles in search of so poor a shadow as happiness? Shall I, in base hope of easing my own burden, throw

it on somebody else who but for me might go through existence lightly? Should I call sentient beings out of the blessed gulf of nothingness, that they may pay a duty to my weakness by and by, and curse me in their hearts? That would be somewhat too high a price to pay for broth when I am toothless, and the coddling comforts of one who has lived too long."

I am not thin-skinned, but his tone shocked me. "Dear boy," I said, "they wouldn't look at it in that light. They would be your wife and your children."

"Yes," he said, still savagely, "they would [23] be my wife and children—supposing your un-supposable case. Grant that my notions are as false and monstrous as you think them: a pleasant lot for my wife, wouldn't it, to be in constant contact with them? And my children would have my blood in them—the taint of eccentricity, perhaps of madness: O, I've seen it in your eye. Others would think so too—most, no doubt. No, Bob; better let it die out with me."

"Jim, you make me tired. I'll go back to the tavern." I was disappointed, and he saw it.

"Don't make yourself wretched about me, old man. Let this thing go—you can't mend it. Follow your own doctrine, and take what you find. We have the May weather, good legs, and our tackle, and the brooks are full of trout. I kill nothing bigger than fish, but if you want a change I'll show you where you can have a chance for deer. And for the evenings, there are other topics besides ourselves—or rather myself. You can tell me about your children; they are likely to be healthier than mine would be. Good night, my boy: sound sleep, and no dreams of me."

[24]

III.

COMPLICATIONS.

After that I found it best to do as Hartman had said. The sport was good, but I failed to enjoy it. I suppose I was a fool, for each of