

THE MISTY FLATS

DAVID EARLE LEWIS*

IT seems significant that the very age that has offered us a standard of living so absurdly higher than any other should also be an age in which a truly happy person is a phenomenon, when neuroses ride the land as chief of the four horsemen. A superficial logic suggests that by having material comforts to the degree we have (and thus eliminating the onerous demand of much of our work), we should have more time to enjoy ourselves and to benefit from our possessions. However, it is becoming a general conclusion that it is these very material possessions from which spring many of the neurotic tendencies tormenting our civilization. If, thus, we are miniature Frankensteins and have created monsters of our lives which in turn have gained control of us, then it is pathetic proof that we are the victims of false values.

Canada is still a young country. In comparison with the worldly, ancient decadence of many countries, Canada is still in a robust adolescence. Our accent is still on growing, on gaining our stature, and money is the yardstick we use to measure the success we have had. In a personal sense, the accumulation of money is the trademark of a successful life. This naive supposition has meant many misdirected lives, standardizing the behavior pattern of too many families as that of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Happiness is an elusive quality, and since it is primarily a personal one, refutes generalization. But it must be true that happiness comes from within, and not from without. It is a mental outlook, a harmonious balance between the mind, the body and the soul.

Thus if this harmony is achieved, one may be happy in a log cabin, or in a palace, or in Majorca or in Saint John. It has nothing to do with the outside environment. Yet what can produce this mental, physical and spiritual balance is a personal problem. Chopin can delight me and bore my neighbour. Stendhal brings a gleam to the eye of a friend of mine and leaves me indifferent. It might be a permissive indulgence to suggest that much happiness lies in the act of creating, in expressing one's personality through an artistic medium, while in others happiness is inherent in appreciating rather than the actual creation. I am at peace with the world in listening to Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto, more so than he was in com-

*Of Bridgetown, Nova Scotia.

posing it or the artists under the strain of interpreting it. Mendelssohn, however, enjoyed his composing, and I do not enjoy his compositions. But within the field of creating and appreciating (both of which are necessary to give meaning to any work of art), lies a tremendous field of happiness. To others, speed is important. There are those pathetic souls who judge the success of their vacation trip by the mileage shown on their speedometer, and whose lives are spent in running for the 3.10 car instead of the 3.15.

In more ways than one this might be called the age of de-hydration. In an age where it has become customary to pay for every possible kind of service and convenience, this also becoming the practise to pay others to do our thinking for us. We have news-commentators, paid to put the steak of world-affairs through their personal meat-choppers and feed us the light, quick hamburger, flavoured in any way they, not we, individually wish it. We have book clubs that choose the novel we shall read each month, and mail it to us for a nominal fee. Hilaire Belloc's whimsical epitaph

When I am dead, I hope it may be said—
His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.

will certainly not become possible unless an author happens to be selected by a book club. Magazines have sprung up that do little but offer condensations of novels and capsules of news. We are fed the vignette, the novelette, the storiette—it is little wonder that we have national indigestion.

Even in the field of music the Tin Pan Alley butchers have sharpened their knives and sliced off tunes here and there from Tschaiikowsky, Chopin, Grieg. There are piano concertos offered in three-minute versions, blared by the never-silent juke box, a state that suggests the platitude that every restaurant has one so its clientele will have something to listen to while they're talking.

It seems intelligent to assume that these short cuts might be justified if the time they saved was devoted to something worthwhile. Therein lies the fallacy. There is nothing more insidious than having time on one's hands and nothing to do with it. There is little in this life more frustrating than to be all dressed up and nowhere to go. Our ancestors were not hard workers because they were healthy—they were healthy because they were hard workers. But our emphasis is ever increasing on the desire to depend on outside devices to do our work, and

then in our spare time to entertain us. The juke-box has replaced the piano in the home. The motion picture theatre has moved the emphasis out of the evening spent at home making one's entertainment. We have forgotten that there is nothing more satisfying than doing something ourselves. It is simpler to listen to Alec Templeton or Jose Iturbi than to take no lessons. It is easier to read a news commentator's views and adopt them than read the news and form our own. We have lost the art of self-entertainment.

Montaigne once said, "Nature has presented us with a large faculty of entertaining ourselves alone—to teach us that we owe ourselves partly to society, but chiefly and mostly to ourselves." We find ourselves in the paradoxical position of having more time than ever before and less equipment to handle it. Boredom is merely the child of inactivity. And bored inactivity is the surest incubator of neuroses.

Somerset Maugham once remarked that conversation was one of the greatest pleasures of life but it wanted leisure. And leisure today is a rare commodity on the market. Leisure is not the mere process of having nothing to do. Leisure is the ability to relax, to enjoy spare time in a pleasant, peaceful way. Too many today devote leisure to a restless, keyed-up search for recreation. They become victims of nervous energy—and thus spend more energy in a desperate grim rat-race to amuse themselves than in actually working. It is impossible to enjoy leisure until the mind is as relaxed as the body. It is a time of mental growing, of reading, of listening to music, of contemplating, of admiring nature, of reflection. Beauty is existent only to the degree to which we are conscious of it. The appreciation and understanding of it requires, like Maugham's conversation, leisure. It demands a cultivation of oneself, a mental stimulation and growth, and that cannot be bought with a thirty-cent ticket. 'Let Joe do it', that increasingly popular slogan, does not belong here. It does require that we slow down a bit, let the speedometer slacken. It needs more leisure and less nervous, useless activity. It means developing the latent and potential qualities in each one of us, which in turn will pay handsome dividends in entertainment and satisfaction.

In our preoccupation with saving time and wasting energy, few have sat down and analysed just what they are doing with the time they have saved. We are too busy eating the meal to enjoy it. We drink the wine by the glassful instead of sipping it. Relaxation teaches one that satisfaction is as much ex-

pectancy as fulfillment. Often it is the acquiring, the working-for-it, that provides much of the satisfaction. It is the up-hill climb, and the moment at the top, that is worth the battle, not the trip down the other side. And many of us tend to go charging up the hill, and we are half-way down before we realize the fact. We are too busy dashing from one meal to earn the money for the next, to enjoy either.

It is ultimately a matter of where we place our values, once we have convinced ourselves that we have been intelligent in choosing them. There is the anecdote of two monks who were walking in the garden of the monastery and they decided they would like to smoke. One went in, to ask the Father Superior for permission, and came out dejectedly. The other went in, and a few moments later came out with a cigarette in his mouth.

"How did you manage it?" asked the first monk.

"How did you ask him?"

"I merely asked him if I might smoke while I was meditating".

"Oh", answered the other, calmly continuing his walk, asked him if I might meditate while I was smoking."

We have had surfeit of high-speed advertising, of high tension radios (that insidious disease known as 'radiolaty'), of high-powered cars. What we need is time to relax, a return to the old-fashioned and precious emphasis on leisure. We need the quiet reflection of our own thoughts, the mental house-cleaning of false values. It is only then that we can escape John Oxenham's misty flats:

To every man there openeth
 A way, and Ways, and a Way.
 And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
 And the Low Soul gropes the Low.
 And in between on the misty flats,
 The rest drift to and fro.
 But to every man there openeth
 A Highway and a Low,
 And every man decideth
 The Way his soul shall go.