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The Optimist's / Pessimist's Handbook

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Preface

'For myself I am an optimist – it does not seem to
be much use being anything else.'

WINSTON CHURCHILL

CAN YOU BELIEVE that, for every academic paper written on the subject of happiness, there are over a hundred written about depression? What is wrong with people? Does the sun not rise for these doom-mongers each morning? Do birds not sing and flowers not bloom for the pessimist? Stung into action by this outrage, we have produced *The Optimist's Handbook*, an exhaustively researched and beautifully crafted work, to prove that these sour-faced miners of misery have been hacking away in the wrong pit all these years. As someone's cheerful grandmother probably once said: 'Pessimist! Leave thy slagheap of misery behind, and come celebrate life's wealth of riches!'

If only they knew where to dig, they would quickly discover that, right beneath their dirty, sodden boots, lies a bottomless mine positively bursting with sparkling seams of nuggets and gems that celebrate Life. That's celebrate, not denigrate. With infinite care, untold pleasure, and the encouragement of our superb editor, we have weighed and polished our precious finds for your enjoyment, trying them this way and that, moving some about, honing others into shape, always discarding the imperfect. As you will see, only the most glittering jewels remain, and each and every one of them has found its ideal setting, not only complementing its neighbours perfectly, but making its own unique contribution to the whole illuminating display.

'We are all in the gutter,
but some of us are looking at the stars.'

OSCAR WILDE

A Beginner's Guide

IT is never too late to become what you might have been.

ANON

HAD I been present at the Creation, I would have given some useful hints for the better ordering of the universe.

ALFONSO 'THEWISE' OF CASTILE, Spanish monarch, 1221–84

LIFE ain't all beer and skittles, and more's the pity;

But what's the odds, so long as you're happy?

GEORGE DU MAURIER, Punch cartoonist, 1834–97

I CANNOT help being happy. I've struggled against it but no good. There is, I am well aware, no virtue whatever in this. It results from a combination of heredity, health, good fortune and shallow intellect.

ARTHUR MARSHALL, British broadcaster, 1910–89

The Call

Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife,

Throughout the sensual world proclaim,

One crowded hour of glorious life

Is worth an age without a name.

THOMAS OSBERT MORDAUNT, British officer and poet, 1730–1809

I DO not believe that a world without evil, preferable in order to ours, is possible; otherwise it would have been preferred. It is necessary to believe that the mixture of evil has produced the greatest possible good: otherwise the evil would not have been permitted.

GOTTFRIED LEIBNIZ, German philosopher and mathematician, 1646–1716

ALL is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

VOLTAIRE, *Candide*, or Optimism, 1759

THEY say everything in the world is good for something.

JOHN DRYDEN, *The Spanish Friar*, 1681

Happy Thought

The world is so full of a number of things,

I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, 1850–94

OPTIMISM is essential to achievement and it is also the foundation of courage and true progress.

NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER, US presidential adviser, 1862–1947

TRULY the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.

The Bible, Ecclesiastes 11:7

WHAT doesn't kill me only makes me stronger.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 1844–1900

I HAVE tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in.

OLIVER EDWARDS to Samuel Johnson, in Boswell's Life of Johnson, 1791

THERE is one thing which gives radiance to everything. It is the idea of something around the corner.

G. K. CHESTERTON, 1874–1936

OPTIMISM is the cheerful frame of mind that enables a kettle to sing, though in hot water up to its nose.

ANON

WHAT'S lost upon the roundabouts we pulls up on the swings!

PATRICK REGINALD CHALMERS, Irish writer, 1872–1942, Green Days and Blue Days

What's the use of worrying?

It was never worthwhile.

So pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag

And smile, smile, smile.

GEORGE ASAF, English lyricist,

1880–1951

The Pessimist's Handbook:

a companion to despair

Preface

'Not to be born is best.'

SOPHOCLES

TYPICAL, ISN'T IT? When we thought up the idea for this book, we imagined nothing more than a lazy trawl on the high seas of reference, sifting through the flotsam and jetsam of shipwrecked ideas and abandoned dreams, picking up a few miserable facts and desolate quotes to prove the point that life isn't quite as bloody marvellous as our more optimistic friends would have us believe.

We should have known it wouldn't be plain sailing.

Barely had we set out, a limp wind behind us, when quibbles and squabbles erupted among the crew. As we floated aimlessly through the doldrums and straight into a perfect storm of discontent, it was every man and woman for themselves. For a start, we hadn't realized that, lashed by an editor with a conscience, we'd have to track each quotation to its source and, worse, sometimes pay for it! To people who had died 30 years before we were born! And then, with landfall in sight, that we would suddenly be ordered to toss half of our grim haul back overboard: 'We're sinking under the weight of too many words!' our editor whined.

So here – mutiny only narrowly avoided – is The Pessimist's Handbook. Although its contents may afford you a certain bleak satisfaction, it's our expectation that, appalled by the absence of your own favourites, and irked by the arbitrariness of the categories, you will have as little fun reading it as we did writing it.

'I tell you, we're in a blessed drain-pipe,
and we've got to crawl along it till we die.'

H. G. WELLS

A Beginner's Guide

What's the point of weeping over parts of life? All of it calls for tears.

SENECA, c. 4 BC–AD 59

Birth, n. The first and direst of
disasters.

AMBROSE BIERCE, *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911

Nothing begins and nothing ends

That is not paid with moan;

For we are born in other's pain,

And perish in our own.

FRANCIS THOMPSON, English poet,

1859–1907, 'The Dread of Height'

Hope is nothing but the paint on the face of Existence; the least touch of truth rubs it off, and then we see what a hollow-cheeked harlot we have got hold of.

LORD BYRON, letter to Thomas Moore, 28 October 1815

The brevity of our life, the dullness of our sense, the torpor of our indifference, the futility of our occupation, suffer us to know but little: and that little is soon shaken and then torn from the mind by that traitor to learning, that hostile and faithless stepmother to memory, oblivion.

JOHN OF SALISBURY, English author, c. 1115–76

‘Good morning, Little Piglet,’ said Eeyore. ‘If it is a good morning,’ he said. ‘Which I doubt,’ said he. ‘Not that it matters,’ he said.

A. A. MILNE, Winnie-the-Pooh, 1926

But against the palpably sophisticated proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the worst of all possible worlds. For possible means not what we may picture in our imagination, but what can actually exist and last. Now this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would be no longer capable of continuing to exist.

Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is absolutely impossible; and so this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, The World as Will and Representation, 1818

Pessimists get a great deal of pleasure from the feeling that they are facing the worst that can be known. They exchange the bliss of ignorance for the bliss of knowledge, and they would not change back again. Pessimists as a rule live to a ripe old age. It is questionable if a despairing view of the universe even impairs the digestion as much as a single slice of new bread.

ROBERT LYND, Irish writer, 1879–1949, The Money-box

Stupidity is the basic building block of the universe.

FRANK ZAPPA, US musician, 1940–93

The world is disgracefully managed, one hardly knows to whom to complain.

RONALD FIRBANK, British novelist, Vainglory, 1915

This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.

HORACE WALPOLE, English politician, letter, 1776

A man should have the fine point of his soul taken off to become fit for this world.

JOHN KEATS, letter to J. H. Reynolds, 22 November 1817

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers ...

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, 1770–1850

For the world, I count it not an inn but an hospital, and a place not to live but to die in.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE, 1605–82

Anyone happy in this age and place Is daft or corrupt. Better to abdicate
From a material and spiritual terrain
Fit only for barbarians.

ROY FULLER, British poet, 1912–91, 'Translation'