

Response of
Clarence Darrow
to Birthday Greetings
April 18, 1918

A BIRTHDAY RESPONSE

by

CLARENCE DARROW

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A number of friends gave a dinner to Clarence Darrow at the Auditorium Hotel, Chicago, on April 18, 1918, his 61st birthday.

As is usual on such occasions, the remarks of his friends were very eulogistic. After the responses of the evening, Mr. Darrow was called on and spoke as follows:

If I had known just what I was to run into here I would have worn a gas mask. A man is never painted as he is. One is either better or worse than the picture that is drawn. This is the first time that I have felt that I was worse. No one ever gave me a dinner like this before and I really do not know how my friends happened to take into their heads to do it this time. I am sure it has been pleasant, although in spots more or less embarrassing; still on the whole I prefer the embarrassments incident to this dinner, rather than the ones I often get.

Like most others who reach the modest age of sixty-one, I have hardly noticed it. Still this morning for the first time in more than twenty years I felt a twinge of rheumatism. A gentle reminder on this birthday that I am no longer a "spring chicken." On the whole the years have passed by rap-

idly. Some of them, it is true, have dragged, but mainly they have hurried as if anxious to finish the job as soon as they possibly could. So quickly have they sped that I hardly realize that so many have been checked off, in fact I have scarcely thought about it as they went by.

I have been congratulated a good many times today, no doubt on the fact that I am so nearly done with it all. One scarcely feels as they go along that they are getting—well older. Of course I know my intellect is just as good as it ever was; I am sure of that. Every one tells me that I am looking younger. I had my hair cut about a month ago; a friend remarked; “It makes you look ten years younger,” so I had it cut again. Perhaps I shall keep on getting it cut. Of course, one more or less doubts the truthfulness of these old friends, when they say you are getting younger, but at the same time you try

to believe them and do not contradict. Now my good friend, Professor Foster and I have been in the habit of publicly debating all sorts of questions. When he says something, I feel that it is up to me to deny it; but I am bound to say that he talked sensibly tonight.

Perhaps it would be proper at a time like this to reminisce more or less, but I am always afraid to do it. I am never quite sure whether I might not have said the same things before. Neither am I certain that I shall not say something I had better leave unsaid. If one has lived an active life, as he grows old he finds that he has gathered a large fund of facts and fictions that he should keep to himself; and yet he always feels an urge to tell. Then I have had Tolstoi's frightful example before me all my days. You know he lived a busy, useful life, getting about all there was out of it, and then after he got—well

past sixty-one, he grew good and began to moralize. I presume Tolstoi did not know just what was the matter with him. Now, of course, allowances should be made for the actions and habits of life of a man when he grows old. No doubt you will sometime need to make allowance of mine, but, if ever I begin moralizing, I trust I shall have some good, kind friend who will hit me on the head with an axe. It is all right to be as you are and feel as you feel when you are old, but it is silly to moralize. It give you away. So I trust I shall die before I begin moralizing.

One at sixty, or even younger, begins to take on airs; or at least most people do. I am so inherently modest that I haven't commenced taking them on. I remember the first case I had after I began practicing law, just before I was twenty-one. An old country pettifogger, the terror of the community, was on the other side. I intended

to overwhelm him, but the first time he noticed that I was present he called me "bub." This dampened my ardor. For many years I never met a lawyer as young as I. These older lawyers always patronized me, excused my innocence and ignorance,—especially my ignorance. Now I seldom meet a lawyer as old, and I hope I do not patronize the young ones as the older lawyers patronized me. For after all it is a foolish habit of old people and older people to patronize the young and to advise them what to do, whether the young are children or only a little younger. The fact is that age does not necessarily bring wisdom; it may here and there bring caution, but not always that. If the child behaved as the grown people, there would be no children. The child or young person has as good reason to think that he is right as the old person; perhaps better. The young person has a better guarantee that he

is right than the old person who believes that the child would be right if he followed the advice of the old. Still, the world is full of moralizing and teaching and preaching to the young. The only satisfaction is that the young pay no attention to it. Parents, teachers, preachers and the like are forever condemning in children the things they once did themselves. They have so little imagination that they cannot bridge the space of years between them and childhood, and understand that the emotions and feelings of youth are right for youth, and, without them, the child could never come to be the man. The law for youth is one thing, and the law for old age is quite another; and it is idle and senseless for age to lay down precepts for youth. The young would not keep them if they could and they could not keep them if they would. Each must work out the experiment of life according to his own

age, his own experience, and the emotions and tendencies that are incident to his own machine.

Perhaps in some respects my life has not been quite the same as others. I have always had a feeling that I was doing what I wished to do, but a certain knowledge that I never did anything I chose to do. I have always had an ambition for freedom, but I know that I never had the slightest influence over myself. I am sure that I have everlastingly been controlled by the influences before me and the infinite influences around me, and that I have never known what freedom is. I keep on working for it and hoping for it and wanting it, but I know that I never shall have it. In this, no doubt, my life has been like the life of every being that ever lived. Even while I have fought for freedom, the freedom of others and the freedom of myself, I have always had a consciousness that

I was doing it to amuse myself, to keep myself occupied so I might forget myself; which after all is the best thing that any of us can do as we go along. I remember reading a while ago a statement of Anatole France. He said that the chief business of life is "killing time." And so it is. What is the difference if we gather all the facts of the universe into our brains for the worms to eat? They might give the worms indigestion. What matters it how much we get together?—it lasts but a short time. It never brings what we expect. All we get from it is the self-forgetfulness that comes from gathering it. We get from the gleaning the loss of self-consciousness, which after all is the only thing that makes life tolerable to the ordinary person, or the extraordinary for that matter. One can imagine nothing more tiresome and profitless than sitting down and thinking of one's

self. If you are bound to work and can not avoid work, and can be lost in the work, it is the most tolerable life after all that one can have.

Now, I never was industrious, I could prove that by a number of people here tonight. Still I have always worked. Some task is always waiting for me and someone always calling to me. And I could not avoid the task or ignore the call. So the sixty-one years of my life have slipped by and I have scarcely known it.

In spite of the manifold troubles and cares that go with living, still life is not bare of joys. When I was a boy the thing that gave me the greatest pleasure was baseball. I would always leave school when I could, and of course work if I could to play baseball. I once thought that when the time should come that I could no longer play ball there would be nothing left in life. But

I passed that age and then found that there were other things quite as interesting as baseball to fill in my time. And when I wonder what can take the place of the ones I have still to leave behind, I remember the past and feel that later there will yet be other things as interesting as the ones that I must give up.

I used to wonder what old people could find to do that would bring them any joy—of course I am not old, I am still quite young. I am not boasting. I used to wonder what boys could do to have fun after they were twenty years old; then I raised it to twenty-five; then I raised it to thirty. I have been raising it ever since and still wondering what people can do for pleasure when they are old. But we are there with the same old illusions and the same old delusions, with fantasies promising us and beckoning us; with castles that we begin to build, never stopping to think whether these castles will be fin-

ished; we get our satisfaction and we kill our time listening to the voices, and building the castles. Whether the voices fade in the distance or the castles tumble down, does not seriously matter. I fancy it would be as much fun to tear down the Masonic Temple as to build it, if we really wished to do it. The main thing is to be occupied with our work.

There is not so much difference as you get older; at least so far I can see but little. I am not sure how it would be if I really should get old. There is not so much difference in life. As I have remarked, my intellect is all right. Of course I need to watch my diet more carefully than I once did; and then the Lord never did seem to know much about teeth. This is one place where he especially fell down. I visit the dentist oftener than I used to. But there are very clever dentists to take your money away from you and they fix you

up all right. I remember when I found that two teeth on each side were not doing good service, and that I should get some store ones to take their place. The dentist fixed up a contrivance, so that I could put these in, to take the place of the imperfect ones that nature furnished. These new ones did good work. I never had any trouble with them and they never hurt me. I generally wear them in my pocket. I seldom have a proposition so tough that I cannot handle it with the ones I have left—and then there are always the store ones to fall back on in case of need.

Of course as you grow older, you can't run so fast. But what is the use of running so fast; you would have to come back anyhow. And then one can learn to stay where he is; the place he would run to is no better than the one that he would leave. Nature by taming your ambitions and cooling your

blood, steps in and helps you out and you hardly know what is happening as the years crowd around you. Then I fancy that if one really grows old Nature is able to handle that job too. She rather fools you. As Oliver Wendel Holmes once said—Nature has a sort of anodyne that she begins giving to her children along when one is older than I am; I don't know just how much older,—probably never shall. This dose is something like the black drop the doctors once gave. It has a deadening narcotic effect; it stuns your sensibilities and leaves you to doze and dream. Oliver Wendel Holmes was right. Nature does not temper the wind to the shorn lamb, but she tempers the shorn lamb to the wind. So after all I fancy that age does not cut so much figure as the young suppose.

I am inclined to think that young people are more apt to suicide than the old. Of course I know that life is not

worth while, but I have never got ready to end it all. I never could see much to be gained by dying today, because you must die tomorrow. Better wait until tomorrow and save the trouble and the muss of it all.

On the whole I think young people get less comfort out of life than older people. The fact is, when we are young we expect too much; we haven't the experience to temper our emotions. If it is raining today, the child cannot temper his disappointment with the thought that the Sun will shine tomorrow; no more if the Sun shines today can he repress his emotion by the thought that tomorrow it will rain.

Bret Harte said that the one sure thing about luck is that it will change. So it doesn't make so much difference what kind of luck you have, if it is bad it will change, and if it is good, it will change, and this sort of evens things up as you go along. Youth is a con-

stant, rapid succession of changes from the mountain top to the bottom of the deepest valley. Age is a plane growing leveler as we walk to the fateful end; the views are not so inspiring from the plane as the mountain top, but the road is easier for dragging feet; and then with young and old alike, there is the hope that springs immortal; the only immortal thing that is sure, and this hope helps us through such hard spots as we must pass as we journey on.

I have always felt that older people commit great crimes against children. I fancy that one who has in his power the destiny of a child should do what he can to make that child's life happy. Childhood is the time of the greatest illusions and these should not be denied. Children are almost helpless in the hands of older people.

Neither the old nor the young can live long without pleasure, or the hope

of pleasure. The denial of this is death or worse than death. Of course, I have done my best to have my full share of pleasure as I lived. I could never resist temptation. As Heine said: "It was very well for Kant to say, 'Act so that your conduct may be a law for all men under similar conditions.' But Kant forgot that **you** are a part of the conditions. Suppose you happen to be one of those fellows to whom all the roses nod and all the stars wink," then what are you to do? Everyone is the heir to all that has gone before; his structure and emotional life is fixed and no two children of Nature have the same heredity. I believe everyone should and must live out what is in him. So no two lives can be the same. Perhaps strong emotions are a grievous burden. If they sometimes lead to the depth of despair, they likewise take you to the mountain top where you see the rising Sun in all its glory and its strength. Some of you

may hear me preach ten years from now. You will think that I have passed into senile dementia—but what I say now goes! One should live out his life according to the law of his being, for why live without joy? Why live for pain and suffering? Of course the good man, the altruist, says you should live to make your fellowman happy. But why should you make your neighbor happy if it is wicked to be happy yourself?

The one thing that gets me, perhaps more than anything else, is the terrible cruelty of man. Some one here said that I loved my fellowman. I don't know whether I do or not. It depends on whether you are speaking intellectually or chemically. Intellectually, I think human beings are a pretty poor lot. Chemically, many of them are all right. Schopenhauer spoke wisely when he said: "Do not consider man's bad will or his narrow understanding,

and diverse ideas, as the former may easily lead you to hate, and the latter to despise him; but fix your attention only upon his sufferings, his needs, his anxieties and his pains. Then you will always feel your kinship with him, you will sympathize with him, and instead of hatred or contempt, you will experience the commiseration that alone is the peace to which the Gospel calls us. Do not look for his alleged dignity, but regard him as an object of pity."

Here and there no doubt is nobility of character, but the Human race is not a proper subject for worship. It has always taken itself too seriously. It amounts to little. If it should die, it would doubtless be as well or better for the rest of creation. The thing I see everywhere present is the cruelty of man. Men torturing animals, regardless of the suffering of the weak. Men torturing each other, simply for the joy of doing it. Man is cruel and one of the

cruellest animals of the brute creation. I remember the great Naturalist, Fabre, said, that there is no other species that devours and enslaves members of its own species; this is left for man alone.

We seem to get pleasure in torturing our fellowmen. I have tried to work out the reason, tried to get my friend, Professor Foster, who works out all questions—except religious ones,—in a philosophical way, to explain why it is. And here with you, who I am sure are higher intellectually than the average people, or you wouldn't be my friends and appreciate me,—even here I venture to say that most of you enjoy telling or hearing some disagreeable thing about your fellowmen. Why is it? There must be some philosophy back of it all. You go home to the old town of your birth and ask “How is John Smith?” “Why John Smith has been in the penitentiary.”

This is the first news you will get of John Smith. "How is Mary Jones?" "Mary Jones has just been divorced." How is that with the great majority of men and women, the first thing that occurs to them about their neighbor is something disagreeable or unkind? As far as I can see, there is no exception to it, for as wise and good as I am, I like to hear these things. I enjoy hearing them, with this exception:—when the persons spoken of are so near to me that to hurt them hurts me, then I do not like to hear these remarks. If a man is nothing to me, if I am indifferent to him, or do not like him, then I am quite sure I am glad to hear them.

Life is an everlasting struggle. It is filled with cares and sorrows of all sorts. Of course, when you come close to your real friends, you find solace and rest. Still, life is hard and all who really live know that it is hard. Man is continually moving between his de-

sire to do certain things and his regret that he has done them. He is always resolving that in the future he will be better and more thoughtful than he has been in the past. We are all makers of resolutions. I "swear off" smoking several times a day, but I smoke again. "Swear off" doing many things, but not seriously. Habits are too strong for me and life is too strong for me. As old Omar said:

"Indeed, indeed repentance oft before
I swore, but was I sober when I swore?
And then, and then came spring and rose
in hand
My threadbare penitence a pieces tore."

My penitence would last if spring did not come; if temptation did not come. In the warmth of spring and the odor of violets, it fades away.

Most of life is hard for those who think. No doubt there are those who believe that "God is in his Heaven and all is right with the world." If one can

live on this delusion, he would be foolish to awaken from his dream. But if we really think and feel, life is serious and hard. All who live a full and long life without illusions, at times, involuntarily look with almost longing eyes to the last release. The plaintive, wistful, mournful words of Swinburne are not unwelcome music to his ears.

“From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever Gods may be;
That no life lives forever,
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.”

From the sterner things of life and death men have turned always to illusions to make things seem what they are not. For those mortals who must look life in the face and cannot dream, there is nothing left but a sense of humor and hard work. Hard work is good. It is good because it brings a loss of

consciousness. It makes man live an intuitive, automatic life, where he forgets that he is living. Hard work, like sleep, is an interruption of life; it is unconsciousness and death and is, therefore, peace.

No doubt some things bring deeper and more lasting happiness than others. Perhaps, too, we learn a little as we live. I want to testify as I get older that the greatest comfort I have is in the companionship of friends. I am deeply sensible of the compliment you pay me in gathering here tonight. I have enjoyed this evening. I am willing you should be deluded all you wish as to who I am and what I am. I am willing to delude myself. Some of you have wished that I might live to be a hundred. Well I shall not—I am sure of that. Still we listen to those things and like to hear them; even while we know better. We can pick up the mortuary tables of the life insurance companies and

find out almost to a day when the bobbin will be wound up. But we do not do it. We know that, given a million people, the average of death is fixed and we can linger only a few days beyond the rest. We could find the time for ourselves if we would. We try to think that our fate will be unlike the rest when we know that it will not.

As other pleasures disappoint us and fail us, we turn more and more to friends. I am frank to say that it is a comfort and consolation to me to have so many as you who are here tonight. I am not sure how much I have done to deserve them. Of course all friends are not always true. Human nature is too weak; men are machines and can stand only a certain pressure.

Perhaps I may be pardoned for saying just a little for myself. I may have earned them as well as most men have. I have tried to play the game fair. I have never judged any man. I have

harmed no one consciously. I have had sympathy for all. I have done my best to understand the manifold conditions that surround and control each human life. I have always wanted friends and tried to get them, but I have tried to get them honestly, with no pretense of being something that I am not; and to know that I have so many as you who are here tonight is a deeper consolation than anything else could be.

As we grow older, friends mean more and more. There are not many who have the capacity for true friendship. The world does not permit it. We have too much to do. We are too busy getting a living and getting money. We are too busy keeping out of the poorhouse and the jail. I have often told young men starting out in business not to make acquaintances, but to make friends. Acquaintances are of little value unless you want to run for office,

and I know that each of you have an ambition higher than that. But friends are of value as you go through life. They are of value in an infinite number of ways and places that you can never see in advance. They give consolation, comfort, and help, which nothing else can bring. I have often said friendship is like agriculture—the intensive kind is the sort that pays. Our American farmer will take five hundred acres and cultivate it poorly and let the weeds grow rank with the grain. The French farmer will take ten acres and cultivate it with thoroughness and care and get more profit from his ten than the American will from five hundred. One can not reach the whole world. We should intensively cultivate our friends; find out the capacities, the sympathies, the depths of nature of those around us and cultivate them until they are our friends and we are theirs.

More and more as we grow older we find friendship the chief thing in life. Omar Khayyam was right in his beautiful philosophy. He was not an optimist—he was a philosopher:

“A book of verses underneath the bough
A Jug of Wine, a loaf of bread and Thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness—
Oh wilderness were Paradise enow”.

I love the “**Thou**” part of it. The word is so intimate and personal and I am quite sure that each one of you know in your hearts whom I mean by “Thou.”

Of course we fight and we work. I have always yearned for peace, but have lived a life of war. I do not know why, excepting that it is the law of my being. I have lived a life in the front trenches, looking for trouble. The front trenches are disagreeable; they are hard; they are dangerous; it is only a question of days or hours when you

are killed or wounded and taken back. But it is exciting. You are living; and if now and then you grow weary and leave the trenches and go back to rest, you think of your comrades in the fight; you hear the drum; you hear the cannon's voice; you hear the bugle call and you rush back to the trenches and to the thick of the fight. There, for a short time, you really live. It is hard, but it is life. Activity is life. Peace is death; and there is no complete peace excepting death. However, hard, if it is the law of our being it can not be changed.

I have always believed that man has little or nothing to do with himself. He is born without willing. He dies when his time is up. He is influenced by everything about him, helpless from the beginning to the end.

In the words of Eugene Ware, the Kansas poet:

“Life is a game of whist. From unseen
sources

The cards are shuffled and the hands are
dealt;

Blind are our efforts to control the forces

That, though unseen, are no less strongly
felt.

I do not like the way the cards are shuffled,

But yet I like the game and want to play;
And through the long, long night I play
unruffled,

The cards I get until the break of day.”

This is life and all there is of life; to
play the game, to play the cards we get;
play them uncomplainingly and play
them to the end. The game may not be
worth the while. The stakes may not
be worth the winning. But the playing
of the game is the forgetting of self,
and we should be game sports and play
it bravely to the end.