

# I, Rose Wilder Lane, am the Only Truly HAPPY Person I Know

And I Discovered  
the Secret of  
Happiness on  
the Day I Tried to

# Kill Myself

I AM a happy person even though once I was so desperately miserable that I tried to kill myself.

My present complete happiness is my only claim to distinction, but I realize that it is a stupendous one. It means—almost—that I am unique. If there are other happy persons in this world, they are certainly few. In all the populations between San Francisco and Bagdad I have never met another happy person.

Once upon a time, as we all know, there was a king who sent out messengers to find a happy man and bring back his shirt. After many years they found such a man—but he had no shirt. The moral was that riches don't bring happiness, but that poverty does. The idea is idiotic.

Anyone who may be pursuing a similar quest today is welcome to choose from my dozen or more expensive and very becoming blouses. Any king or millionaire who wishes to abdicate his throne in my favor need only mention it; I accept with pleasure. On the other hand, if I spend my declining days—as I not improbably may—in an old ladies' home, or as a beggar sitting on the steps of a mosque in Oriental sunshine, I shall not mind. The number of shirts or other possessions that one may have, or not have, has nothing to do with happiness.

Everywhere people want to be happy. Hardly anyone is. Yet there is no reason why everyone shouldn't be happy.

I have learned how to be happy.

The gift of a "happy nature" was not one of those in my cradle. I was not a happy child. Few children are happy. The myth of happy childhood is created by adults, sighing, "Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight! Make me a child again—" The adult is perfectly safe, knowing that Time will not do it.

Children are piteous little creatures confronted by a world with which they are quite unprepared to deal. Pain is their teacher, even in such simple facts as that fire will burn and cats scratch. The best—and the worst—that can be done for a child, is to shelter him from facts; this is merely postponing the natural miseries of childhood to a later date.

In my own case, this postponing was impossible, though my parents did their best. I was an only child; and I was three years old when the last of seven successive years of crop failure on the Dakota prairies ruined my prosperous farmer-father, complications of work, worry and diphtheria left him an invalid, and our house burned. My mother was barely twenty-one. I stood beside her at the window, my eyes just above the sill, on the July harvest day when she watched a hail-storm drive into the ground the hundreds of acres of ripe wheat that would have paid the mortgages.

I was taken away from home, and told nothing—kind adults answering my questions with "Hush!" until I asked no more—during those weeks when my father and mother were expected to die of diphtheria, and I knew it. And later it was I, alone in the kitchen and helpfully trying to put more wood in the stove, who set fire to the house. My mother was still ill in bed. She saved herself and me, but nothing else. I quite well remember watching the house burn, with everything we owned in the world, and knowing that I had done it.

I was always very quiet. No one knew what went on in my mind. Because I loved my parents I would not let them suspect that I was suffering. I concealed from them how much I felt their poverty, their struggles and disappointments. These filled my life, magnified like horrors in a dream. My father and mother were courageous, even gaily so. They did everything possible to make me happy, and I gallantly responded with an effort to

persuade them that they were succeeding. But all unsuspected, I lived through a childhood that was a nightmare.

When I was seven, I was a sullen-looking, barefoot child whose home was a one-roomed log cabin in the Ozarks. From that log cabin and its few acres of poor, uncleared land my parents have built Rocky Ridge Farm, which would be a country estate in England, a château in France. But that year they had only the cabin and their courage. Too poor to buy a cow, we lived on corn bread and a very little fat pork, with wild berries and nuts. I was barefoot under protest. My father and mother would have kept me in shoes, but I pretended that I wanted to go barefoot, and stormed until they let me. I knew what shoes cost.

I have since seen something of human barbarities, in the Near East and elsewhere, but they were no surprise to me. No sensitive child who has gone to school from a poverty-besieged home in patched clothes, with second-hand books, fails to learn that human beings are barbarous. Schoolmates demonstrate that.

In a few years we were not so poor. My clothes were pretty and my books were new. But the attitude taken toward me by the girls and boys still persisted, and I was too shy, too sensitive to break it down. I was not invited to parties; I was "left out." I was hurt and lonely. And I knew that I would be happy, only I could be pretty and popular, "like other girls." It seemed to me that I might escape from myself, be like other girls, if I could escape from the small town.

AT SEVENTEEN I was proudly self-supporting and in a city. I was not unpopular, I had discovered that I was pretty enough, and my clothes were all that I desired. Living offered pleasant possibilities—and the greatest of these was the escape from living offered by a book. At every opportunity I fled from living and slammed the covers of a book behind me. I did not realize that I was doing this, but when I found Schopenhauer, with his central doctrine that life is pain, I swallowed it whole. It is noteworthy that young people usually do. I was too young to be struck by the fact that Schopenhauer himself spent his life in enthusiastic effort to prove that no effort is worth making.

Then I fell in love. Now people in love are not happy, but they always think they are going to be. Being in love is a delirious process of gathering together all imagined happinesses, and believing that some other human being is the sum of them. You will be happy when you get it. The conclusion is almost mathematical. Millions of young people arrive at it, just as we did. When we were married we would be happy ever after.

The numbers of persons who are not happy, though married, should have suggested to us that there was a flaw somewhere in our reasoning. But it didn't.

We were married, and we were not happy.

In those days a seriously unhappy marriage was supposed to wreck two lives. The point of view is old-fashioned, now when so many lives survive so many marriages. Yet there still exist millions of persons who think they would be happy if they were not married. Their thought-process is exactly the opposite of falling in love. They now gather together all their unhappiness, and imagine that wife or husband is the sum of them. They would be happy if they could get rid of it.

The number of persons who are not happy, though unmarried, should suggest that there is a flaw in this reasoning. Marriage, in fact, has no more to do with happiness than material possessions have.

The value of my own experience with marriage was that it made me as unhappy as anyone can possibly be. If only the



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☐ Rose Wilder Lane, Author of "He Was a Man."

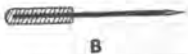
...usual events of the usual marriage had happened to me, I should  
...probably have accepted them and managed to live without  
...being either happy or greatly unhappy. Most people do, and I  
...m not an unusual person. The things that did happen were  
...tragedies, and my unhappiness was no negative thing.  
...Unhappiness can be as vital an emotion as anger or hate.  
...Mine was. Such unhappiness is not a sentimental woe that ex-  
...presses itself in sighs. It breeds clear, rational thinking.

Quite simply, there seemed to be no need of struggling through  
fifty years or so to an inevitable end which might as easily  
come now.

All this time, to all outward appearance, I had been living  
normally enough. I decided one morning to kill myself, and at  
once I felt better. I felt, as one does in illness when the fever  
goes, a little weak but blessedly cool and convalescent. Some  
friends had been invited to luncheon; (Continued on page 140)



Why the  
Ever-Ready  
Blade gives  
more and  
better shaves



A SHAVING edge, to be perfect, must be *hollow ground*; and a blade, to be hollow ground, must be *heavier*. You can see that the Ever-Ready Blade (A) is staunch in cross-section, that it is reinforced with a metal backbone, and that it provides ample steel for hollow grinding to a super-keen and durable edge.

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## Ever-Ready Blades



35c the  
package

## The Secret of Happiness (Continued from page 43)

they came, and the little party was quite successful. It was nothing new to me to feel detached and far away, to talk and act through a sense of unreality; I had been doing that for years. After my friends had gone I put the apartment in order, bathed and dressed as usual for dinner. There was a bottle of chloroform in the bathroom. No doubt I had gained my vague ideas of methods of suicide from some forgotten novel. If there had been gas at hand, I might have turned it on. But there wasn't, and chloroform seemed quite satisfactory to me; simple, convenient, and not messy.

No one can be more alive to the ludicrous aspects of that scene than I am now.

I was quite serious. I lay down comfortably on the couch in the living-room, emptied the chloroform onto a handkerchief and buried my face in it. I would not have to live any more, I thought, and felt very peaceful.

Immediately I was aware of a terrific struggle. It seemed to me that every separate cell of my body was vigorously alive, and fighting for life. But I had undertaken to die, and now was determined to do it. I pressed my face against the handkerchief and breathed deeply. To the ultimate instant I drew in the fumes with all my strength, and at the very last thought triumphantly, "My body wants to live, but I am stronger; I have killed it."

I woke with a very bad headache. I thought, amazed, "I am alive." My head ached so badly that it took my whole attention for a time. Then quite suddenly I saw that the whole thing had been absurd. Ridiculous. How could I have been so serious? How could anyone take herself, life, the immense and careless universe, with such desperate seriousness? I felt like a fool. But I was more struck by the fact—never fully realized until then—that I was alive.

I looked about me, and saw strangeness everywhere. It was as though I had never before seen the most commonplace thing. Why, I had not even been fully acquainted with the properties of chloroform, the contents of one bottle in my bathroom cabinet. I didn't, really, know anything about this world. A chair—scores of questions about a chair rushed into my mind, questions whose answers I didn't know. Just to become thoroughly acquainted with the objects in that one room would fill more than one lifetime with interest. Here I was, a stranger in a world filled with things to ask questions about.

It is difficult to put quite clearly the changed attitude that began in me then. It was not a sudden change; some years went by before I fully realized it myself. The old unhappiness would come back, but I was no longer serious about it. I said, "Of course, no one is happy in this world, no one gets anything permanently satisfying, and all of us die. But what does that matter?" Saying "What does it matter?" often enough will kill any unhappiness eventually.

This method, of course, also kills all the bright fancies usually called "illusions," for one has illusions only when something matters a great deal. Illusions are projections of our passionate desire to believe that the world is what we want it to be. We believe, for example, that there is good in everyone because we desperately want to believe it. We believe that happiness is just around the corner and that we will have it—"if"—because we desperately want to be happy. When those illusions are smashed now and then by some stubborn fact, we suffer. And we hasten to set up other illusions, usually. But if you don't care whether there is good in everyone or not, if you cease to care even about being happy, then you can begin to find out what the world really is.

It was some time before I realized that I was happy. I had been happy a long time before I recognized that to be happy it is necessary only to be alive, and not to expect

happiness from anything else. Human beings lose their way to happiness because they look for it where it is not. So long as one thinks of happiness with an "if," one does not reach it. Happiness is not in possessions, nor in lack of them; it is not in love or friends or travel; it is not in satisfied vanities or realized ambitions. Material things are not particularly satisfying when one has them, and they are most annoying when one does not have them. Love is an experience always desirable, but it is not happiness. Friends are good to have, and very rare. But try to build your happiness on friends, and we shall hear you wailing aloud of sad disappointments and betrayals. Satisfied vanities give a great glow to the spirit, but the vanity will next day be weeping for more of the same. And when we realize our ambitions, we always wonder why we took all that trouble for an end so commonplace.

But, far down under all these varieties of experience, there is a very simple something that is life itself. And if one neither seeks nor expects happiness anywhere else, it is there. Just to be alive, if *nothing else matters to you*, is to be happy.

When death is near enough, most persons will perceive the truth of what I have said. Lay a knife to the throat of the unhappy wretch, and he will know what I mean. "What! You wish to live? You, with your unfaithful friends, your unhappy home, your pressing creditors?" Indeed you do. With that bright knife-edge against your startled windpipe, nothing else matters. All you want, at that moment, is to live. And you want it desperately. For five minutes after your escape you will be profoundly thankful, you will realize that nothing else matters but the bare life you have been spared.

I cannot advise all unhappy persons to try suicide. Some of them might succeed—which is the last thing they really wish to do. For one sees them every day, in their multitudes, warily escaping automobiles and hastening to doctors to save the lives which they will say are worthless to them. They will say they wish to live because of their hope of that happiness which has, until now, eluded them. But as long as they look for happiness anywhere save in the bare fact of their being alive, it will elude them. And one day, dying, as they must, they will for one brief instant glimpse the happiness of living, the happiness they have had for so many years and have never let themselves enjoy.

Every morning I awake in a most interesting world. I shall die before I have had time to explore even a little bit of it. Every moment that I have is precious to me. Given only one moment in this world, how precious it is! And one never has more than one moment at a time. Having been dead once—though so ludicrously—I found that everything I saw struck upon my mind and senses as something new, strange and infinitely interesting. That sense of freshness, of novelty, has increased and still increases.

It is now fifteen years since I began to enjoy living, and I enjoy it more every day. I have sometimes had a great deal of money, and sometimes none at all; I have had friends, and lost them; I have many times dined at Foyot's, and I have starved on mountains and in deserts; I have been ill and most acutely uncomfortable in caravanserais on the Euphrates; I have been well and comfortable for months surrounded by human beings who were the stupidest, least interesting of humankind; and all the time I have been happy. I am always keenly aware that every experience, of every kind, is a part of living, and I have an appetite for living that grows by what it feeds upon. I'm sorry that I shall die some day, but it doesn't really matter now; for now I am alive. I like being alive. I like it every minute. Just as long as I'm alive, anything that may happen to human beings may happen to me, and I shall still be happy.