

CHAPTER V.

THE LIFE OF THE WORKER.

The people live in squalid dens, where there can be no health and no hope, but dogged discontent at their own lot, and futile discontent at the wealth which they see possessed by others.—*Thorold Rogers.*

It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough, called by the Latins *aes alienum*, another's brass, for some of their coins were made of brass; still living, and dying, and buried by this other's brass; always promising to pay, promising to pay to-morrow, and dying to-day insolvent; seeking to curry favour, to get custom, by how many modes—only not state-prison offences; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbour to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries for him; making yourselves sick that you may lay up something against a sick day, something to be tucked away in an old chest or in a stocking behind the plastering, or more safely in the brick bank, no matter where, no matter how much or how little.—*Thoreau.*

I feel sure that the time will come when people will find it difficult to believe that a rich community such as ours, having such command over external Nature, could have submitted to live such a mean, shabby, dirty life as we do.—*Wm. Morris.*

The problem of life is, "Given a country and a people, show how the people can make the most of the country and themselves." Before we go on, let us try to judge how far we in Britain have succeeded in answering the problem.

The following are facts which no man attempts to deny:—

1. Large numbers of honest and industrious people are badly fed, badly clothed, and badly housed.

2. Many thousands of people die every year from preventable diseases.

3. The average duration of life amongst the population is unnaturally short.

4. Very many people, after lives of toil, are obliged to seek refuge in the workhouse, where they die despised and neglected, branded with the shameful brand of pauperism.

5. It is an almost invariable rule that those who work hardest and longest in this country are the worst paid and the least respected.

6. The wealthiest men in our nation are men who never did a useful day's work.

7. Wealth and power are more prized and more honoured than wisdom, or industry, or virtue.

8. Hundreds of thousands of men and women, willing to work, are unable to find employment.

9. While on the one hand wages are lowered on account of over-production of coal, of cotton, and of corn, on the other hand many of our working people are short of bread, of fuel, and of clothing.

10. Nearly all the land and property in this country are owned by a few idlers, and most of the laws are made in the interests of those few rich people.

11. The national agriculture is going rapidly to ruin to the great injury and peril of the State.

12. Through competition millions of men are employed in useless and undignified work, and all the industrial machinery of the nation is thrown out of gear, so that one greedy rascal may overreach another.

And we are told that all these things must remain as they are, in order that you may be able to "get a living."

What sort of a living do you get?

Your life may be divided into four sections: Working, eating, recreation, and sleeping.

As to work. You are employed in a factory for from 53 to 70 hours a week. Some of your comrades work harder, and longer, and in worse places. Still, as a rule, it may be said of all your class that the hours of labour are too long, that the labour is monotonous, mechanical, and severe, and that the surroundings are often unhealthy, nearly always disagreeable, and in many cases dangerous.

Do you know the difference between "work" and "toil"? It is the difference between the work of the gardener and the toil of the navy—between the work of the wood carver and the toil of the wood chopper.

We hear a good deal of talk about the idleness of the labouring classes and the industry of the professional classes. There is a difference in the *work*. The surgeon, or the

sculptor, following the work of his *choice*, may well work harder than the collier, drudging for a daily wage.

An artist loves his work, and sees in it the means of winning fame, perhaps fortune; an artisan sees in his toil a dull mechanical task, to be done for bread, but never to be made to yield pleasure, or praise, or profit.

As a rule, your work is hard and disagreeable.

Now, what are your wages?

I don't mean how many shillings a week do you get; but what *life* do you get as the reward of your toil?

You may get fifteen shillings a week, or a pound, or twenty-five or thirty-five shillings, or two pounds; but the question is how do you *live*? What will your money *buy*?

As I have shown already, you do not get enough leisure, nor enough fresh air, nor enough education, nor enough health, and your town is very ugly and very dirty and very dull. But let us go into details.

I have often seen you turn up your nose with scorn at the sight of a gipsy. Yet the gipsy is a healthier, a stronger, a braver, and a wiser man than you, and lives a life more pleasant and free and natural than yours.

Not that the gipsy is a model citizen; but you may learn a great deal from him; and I doubt whether there is anything he could learn from you.

And now let us see how you live. First of all, in the matter of food. Your diet is not a good one. It is not varied enough, and nearly all the things you eat and drink are adulterated.

I am much inclined to think that a vegetarian diet is the best, and I am sure that alcoholic liquors are unnecessary. But this by the way. If you *do* drink beer and spirits, it would be better to have them pure. At present nearly all your liquors are abominable.

But there is one thing about your diet worse even than the quality of the food, and that is the cookery. Mrs. Smith is an excellent woman, and I hereby make my bow to her, but she does not know what cookery means.

John Smith, it is a solemn and an awful truth, one which it pains me to utter, but you never ate a beefsteak, and you never saw a cooked potato.

God strengthen thy digestion, John, 'tis sore tried. Oh,

the soddened vegetables, the flabby fish, the leathery steak, and the juiceless joint, I know them. Alas! Cookery is an *art*, and almost a lost art in this country; or shall we say, an art unfound?

Poor Mrs. Smith gets married and faces the paste-board and the oven with the courage of desperation, and the hope of ignorance. She resembles the young man who had never played the fiddle, but had no doubt he could play it if he tried. And sometimes he *does* try, and so Mrs. Smith tries to cook.

From food we will turn to clothing. Oh, it is pitiful. Do you know the meaning of the words "form" and "colour"? Look at our people's dress. Observe the cut of it, the general drabness, greyness, and gloom. Those awful black bugles, those horrific sack coats, those deadly hats and bonnets, and they do say, that crinoline—Ah, heaven! That we should call these delicate creatures ours and not their fashion plates. The dresses, but especially the Sunday clothes, of the British working classes are things too sad for tears.

Costume should be simple, healthy, convenient, and beautiful. Modern British costume is none of these.

This is chiefly because the fashion of our dress is left to fops and tailors, whereas it ought to be left to artists and designers.

But beside the ugliness of your dress, it is also true that it is *mean*. It is mean because hardly anything you wear is what it pretends to be, because it is adulterated and jerry-made, and because it is insufficient. Yes, in nearly all your houses there is, despite our factory system, a decided scarcity of shirts and socks and sheets and towels and table linen.

Come we now to the home. Your houses are not what they should be. I do not allude to the inferior cottage—*that* is beneath notice. Here in Manchester we have some forty thousand houses unfit for habitation. But let us consider the abode of the more fortunate artisan. It has many faults. It is badly built, badly arranged, and badly fitted. The sanitation is bad. The rooms are much too small. There are no proper appliances for cleanliness. The windows are not big enough. There is a painful

dearth of light and air. The cooking appliances are simply barbarous.

Again, the houses are very ugly and *mean*. The streets are too narrow. There are no gardens. There are no trees. Few working-class families have enough bedrooms, and the bathroom is a luxury not known in cottages.

In fine, your houses are ugly, unhealthy, inconvenient, dark, ill-built, ill-fitted, and dear.

This is due, in a great measure, to the cost of land. I will tell you soon why land is so expensive.

Moreover, instead of your making the most of your room you will persist in crowding your house with hideous and unnecessary furniture. Furniture is one of your household gods. You are a victim to your furniture, and your wife is a slave. Did it ever occur to you that your only use for the bulk of your household goods is to clean them? It is so, and yet you keep on striving to get more and more furniture for your wife to wait upon.

Just cast your eye over the following description of a Japanese house, John, and see if it does not suggest something to you; and *do* read "Walden." It is only a shilling, and if you read it well it will save you much money in furniture, and your wife much toil in acting as a slave to the sideboard and best parlour suite:—

Simplicity and refinement are the essential characteristics of life in Japan, observes the *Hospital*. The houses, which are spacious, are constructed without foundations. Light wooden uprights resting on flat stones support the thatched or tiled roof. The walls, both outside and those which divide the rooms, are formed of latticed panels which slide over one another, or can be removed altogether if desired. These panels are filled with translucent paper. At night the house is closed in with wooden shutters. The rooms, which are raised about a foot above the ground, are covered with soft padded matting kept spotlessly clean. In the centre of the living room is a shallow, square pit lined with metal and filled with charcoal, for the purposes of cooking and warming, or the rooms are warmed with movable metal braziers. *There is no furniture present, no chairs, tables, beds, chests of drawers, pictures, or knick-knacks.* The matted floor serves alike for chairs, table, and bed. To keep it absolutely clean, all boots, shoes, and sandals are left on the ground outside. The absence of furniture means the absence of many cares, and as two wooden chopsticks and small lacquer bowls serve for all the purposes of eating, there is no need for plate,

glass, knives, forks, spoons, dinner services, and table linen. Thus life is simplified, though it loses at the same time none of its refinement, for *no people can be more dainty and particular in their food, more neat and beautiful in dress, and more courteous and self-restrained in manner than the Japanese.* Kneeling on the floor, all work is done, and at night time the padded quilts or futons are spread on the matting, and, with one quilt beneath and another above, sleep can be enjoyed as comfortably as in bed. Before the evening meal is taken, it is the invariable custom throughout Japan for every member of the household to take a dip in the family bath, which is heated to a temperature of 110 deg. to 120 deg., at which heat it is found to be very refreshing.

Poor Mrs. John Smith, her life is one long slavery. Cooking, cleaning, managing, mending, washing clothes, waiting on husband and children, her work is never done. And amid it all she suffers the pains and anxieties of child-bearing, and the suckling of children. There are no servants, and few workers, so hard-wrought and so ill-paid as the wife of a British artisan. What are her *hours of labour*, my trade union friend? What pleasure has she, what rest, what prospect?

Cannot be helped, do you say? Nonsense. Do you suppose the Japanese wife works as your wife works? Not at all. My dear John, in your domestic as in your industrial and political affairs, all that is needed is a little common sense. We are living at present in a state of anarchy and barbarism, and it is *your* fault, and not the fault of the priests and politicians who dupe and plunder you.

And now we come to the last item in your life, your recreation. Here, Mr. Smith, you are very badly served. You have hardly anything to amuse you. Music, art, athletics, science, the drama, and nature are almost denied to you. A few cheerless museums filled with Indian war clubs, rag ends of tapestry, and dried beetles; a few third-rate pictures, a theatre or two where you have choice between vulgar burlesque and morbid melodrama, a sprinkling of wretched music (?) halls, one or two sleepy night-schools, a football field and sometimes—for the better paid workers—a cricket ground, make up the sum of your life's pleasures. Well—yes, there are plenty of public-houses, and you can gamble. The betting lists and racing news have a corner in all the respectable papers.

One of the most palpable and painful deficiencies, John, in all your towns is the deficiency of common-land, of open spaces. This is because land is so *dear*. Why is land dear? I will tell you by-and-bye.

The chief causes of the evils I have pointed out to you, John, are competition, monopoly, and bad management. There is a penny pamphlet, called "Milk and Postage Stamps," by "Elihu," sold by Abel Heywood. Read it. It shows you the waste of labour that comes of competition.

Go into any street and you will see two or three carts delivering milk. A cart, a pony, and a man to carry milk to a few houses; and one postman serves a whole district; as one milkman and one horse could, were it not for competition.

Again, in each house there is a woman cooking a dinner for one family, or washing clothes for one family. And the woman is over-worked, and the cooking is badly done, and the house is made horrible by steam and the odours of burnt fat. So with all the things we do and use. We have two grocers' shops next door to each other, each with a staff of servants, each with its own costly fixtures. Yet one big store would do as well, and would save half the cost and labour. Fancy a private post-office in every street. How much would it cost to send a letter from Oldham to London?

So now let me tell you roughly what I suggest as an improvement on things as they now are.

First of all I would set men to work to grow wheat and fruit and rear cattle and poultry for our own use. Then I would develop the fisheries and construct great fish-breeding lakes and harbours. Then I would restrict our mines, furnaces, chemical works, and factories to the number actually needed for the supply of our own people. Then I would stop the smoke nuisance by developing water power and electricity.

In order to achieve these ends I would make all the land, mills, mines, factories, works, shops, ships, and railways the property of the people.

I would have the towns rebuilt with wide streets, with detached houses, with gardens and fountains and avenues

of trees. I would make the railways, the carriage of letters, and the transit of goods as free as the roads and bridges.

I would make the houses loftier and larger, and clear them of all useless furniture. I would institute public dining halls, public baths, public wash-houses on the best plans, and so set free the hands of those slaves—our English women.

I would have public parks, public theatres, music halls, gymnasiums, football and cricket fields, public halls and public gardens for recreation and music and refreshment. I would have all our children fed and clothed and educated at the cost of the State. I would have them all taught to play and to sing. I would have them all trained to athletics and to arms. I would have public halls of science. I would have the people become their own artists, actors, musicians, soldiers, and police. Then, by degrees I would make all these things *free*. So that clothing, lodging, fuel, food, amusement, intercourse, education, and all the requirements for a perfect human life should be produced and distributed and enjoyed by the people without the use of money.

Now, Mr. John Smith, practical and hard-headed man, look upon the two pictures. You may think that mine represents a state of things that is unattainable; but you *must* own that it is much fairer than the picture of things as they are.

As to the possibility of doing what I suggest, we will consider all that in a future chapter. At present ask yourself two questions:—

1. Is Modern England as happy as it might be?
 2. Is *my* England—Merrie England—a better place than the England in which we now live?
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