

CHAPTER VI.

THE BITTER COST OF A BAD SYSTEM.

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with factitious cares and superfluously coarse labours of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the labouring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to me; his labour would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials before we judge of him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.—*Thoreau.*

And I believe that this claim for a healthy body for all of us carries with it all other due claims; for who knows where the seeds of disease, which even rich people suffer from, were first sown? From the luxury of an ancestor, perhaps; yet often, I suspect, from his poverty.—*Wm. Morris.*

I have been asked to contribute to the purchase of the Alexandra Park, and I will not; and beg you, my working readers, to understand, once for all, that I wish your *homes* to be comfortable, and refined; and that I will resist, to the utmost of my power, all schemes founded on the vile modern notion that you are to be crowded in kennels till you are nearly dead, that other people may make money by your work, and then taken out in squads by tramway and railway, to be revived and refined by science and art. Your first business is to make your homes healthy and delightful; then, keep your wives and children there, and let your return to *them* be your daily "holy-day."—*Ruskin.*

The chief struggle of your life, Mr. Smith, is the struggle to get a living. The chief object of these letters is to convince you of three facts:—

1. That with all your labour and anxiety you do not get a good living.
2. That you might and should get a good living with a third of the trouble you now take to keep out of a pauper's suit.
- 3. That though you worked twenty hours a day and piled the earth with wealth you could have no more than a good living out of all the wealth you produced.

Nature declares, Mr. Smith, that a man shall live temperately, or suffer for it; Nature also declares that a

man shall not live very long. So that in the richest state a citizen can enjoy no more than a natural amount, and that a small one, of material things, nor can he enjoy those for many years.

In short, the material needs of life are few and easily supplied.

But the range of the spiritual and intellectual pleasures and capacities is very wide. That is to say that the pleasures and powers of the mind are practically boundless.

The *great* nation is not the nation with the most wealth; but the nation with the best men and women.

Now the best part of man is his mind, therefore the best men and women are those with the best minds.

But in this country, and at this time, the bulk of the people do not cultivate their minds.

We have here, in the untrained, unused minds of a noble race of people an immense power for greatness lying fallow, like an untilled field. This is a more serious national loss, as I hope to show you, than if all our mines and farms had never been "opened up to commerce."

Well, my ideal, as I said before, is Frugality of Body and Opulence of Mind.

I propose to make our material lives simple; to spend as little time and labour as possible upon the production of food, clothing, houses, and fuel, in order that we may have more leisure.

And I propose to employ that leisure in the enjoyment of life and the acquirement of knowledge.

It is as though I said, "You have in each day 24 hours. You give 8 hours to sleep, 10 or 12 to work ('earning a living'), and the rest, or most of it, to folly; go, then, and of your sixteen waking hours spend but four in 'getting a living,' and the other twelve in pleasure and in learning."

Before I attempt to show you in detail how I think you might profitably spend your leisure time, allow me to call your attention to some of the ways in which you now waste your time; yes, and waste your labour also.

We will begin by a brief inquiry into the ordinary domestic waste of time and labour and money that goes on in an average working-class home.

In my last letter I spoke of the drudgery of Mrs. Smith's

life. You know that each family has its own dinner cooked daily; that each wife has her own washing day and baking day; that she has her own cooking range and implements; and that she makes a special journey to the shops once a day, or once a week, and buys her food and other necessaries in small quantities.

Take a working-class street of one hundred houses. Consider the waste therein. For the convenience of one hundred families you have

One hundred small inconvenient wash-kitchens.

One hundred ditto ditto ovens.

One hundred ditto ditto drying-grounds.

One hundred wringing machines—turned by hand.

You have one hundred dinners to cook every day. You have, every week, one hundred miserable washing days; you have one hundred women going out to buy a pound of tea and sugar, or other trifles.

Consider the cost of the machines, the cost of coal, the labour and the trouble of the wives expended.

Now cast your eyes over these extracts. This is from "Problems of Poverty," by John A. Hobson, M.A. (Methuen, 2s. 6d.):—

The poor, partly of necessity, partly by habit, make their purchases in minute quantities. A single family has been known to make *seventy-two* distinct purchases of tea within seven weeks, and the average purchases of a number of poor families for the same period amount to twenty-seven. Their groceries are bought largely by the ounce, their meat or fish by the halfpenny-worth, their coal by the hundredweight or even by the pound.

This is from the same book:—

Astounding facts are adduced as to the prices paid by the poor for common articles of consumption, especially for vegetables, dairy produce, groceries, and coal. The price of fresh vegetables, such as carrots, parsnips, &c., in East London is not infrequently *ten times the price* at which the same articles can be purchased wholesale from the growers.

This is from "The Co-operative Movement To-Day," by G. J. Holyoake (Methuen, 2s. 6d.):—

It may be assumed that 100 shops earn on an average £2 a week, or £100 a year; thus the hundred shops would earn £10,000 a year. Thus it is evident that every 4,000 poor families in a town *actually pay* £10,000 a year for having their humble purchases handed to them over a counter.

And Mr. Holyoake proceeds to show how by establishing one great central store the great bulk of this loss would be saved.

I said to you, when I began these articles, that I am a practical man, and speak from what I have seen. I know all about those small purchases, and big prices. I have picked up half-a-dozen empty bottles off as many ashpits, when a child, and sold them for a penny to buy coal. I have gone out many a time to buy a quarter of an ounce of tea and a farthing's worth of milk. They taught stern lessons in my school.

Now let me describe a different kind of experience, in a different school.

A company of soldiers numbers from eighty to a hundred men. The allowance of food to each man is $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. of meat and 1lb. of bread. But besides that each man pays 3d. a day for "groceries," consisting of tea, coffee, milk, vegetables, and extra bread.

Now, if each man had a separate kitchen and cooked his own meals, that would mean a great waste of room and money and time, and it would also mean very poor feeding.

But each company strikes a man off duty as cook, and there is a general kitchen, where the cooks of the whole, or sometimes half the battalion prepare the meals. The result is better and cheaper messing and less labour and dirt.

Take, again, the case of a sergeants' mess. The sergeants have the same ration—1lb. of bread and $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. of meat a day, and they pay about 6d. a day for "messing." One sergeant is appointed "caterer," and his duty is to expend the messing money and superintend the messing. He is, in fact, a kind of temporary landlord, or club steward.

I often filled that place, and I found that when, as occurred on detachment, we had only five or six sergeants in mess, it was very difficult to feed them on the money; but at head-quarters, with thirty in mess, we could live well and afford luxuries on the same allowance per head.

With these facts in our mind, let us go back to our Manchester street of one hundred working-class families. Suppose, instead of keeping up the wasteful system I described, we abolish all those miserable and imperfect

drying-grounds, wringing machines, wash-kitchens, and kitchen-ranges, and arrange the street on communal lines.

We set up one laundry, with all the best machinery; we set up one big drying-field; we set up one great kitchen, one general dining-hall, and one pleasant tea-garden. Then we buy all the provisions and other things in large quantities, and we appoint certain wives as cooks and laundresses, or, as is the case with many military duties, we let the wives take the duties in turn. Don't you see how much better and how much cheaper the meals would be? Don't you see how much easier the lives of our poor women would be? Don't you see how much more comfortable our homes would be? Don't you see how much more sociable and friendly we should become?

So with the housework when we had simple houses and furniture. Imagine the difference between the cleaning of all the knives by a rapid knife machine turned by an engine, and the drudgery of a hundred wives scrubbing at a hundred clumsy knife-boards.

I need not go into greater detail; you can elaborate the idea for yourself. Let us now turn from domestic to commercial waste.

Commercial waste is something appalling. The cause of commercial waste is competition. The chief channels of commercial waste are account-keeping, bartering, and advertising. If we produced goods simply for *use* instead of for sale, we should save all this waste. But consider the immense number of cashiers, bookkeepers, clerks, salesmen, shopmen, accountants, commercial travellers, agents, and advertisement canvassers employed in our British trade.

Take the one item of advertisement alone. There are draughtsmen, paper-makers, printers, bill-posters, painters, carpenters, gilders, mechanics, and a perfect army of other people all employed in making advertisement bills, pictures, hoardings, and other abominations—for *what*?

To enable one soap or patent medicine dealer to secure more orders than his rival. I believe I am well within the mark when I say that some firms spend £100,000 a year in advertisements.

And who pays it? *You* pay it; *you*, the practical, hard-headed, shrewd British workman. You pay for everything, you silly fellow.

There is another element of waste, which consists in the production of useless things; but of that I will speak at another time.

I will also show you in a future letter, how the same competition which causes waste causes also a wicked obstruction of progress. At present just consider these questions. Why do gas companies oppose the establishment of electric-lighting companies? Is it because they think gas is the better light? Hey, John?

I said just now that we would consider the question of how to employ the leisure we should secure in a well-ordered state. Let us get an idea what that leisure would be.

At present less than one-third of the population are engaged in producing necessaries.

This one-third of the people produce enough necessaries for all.

Now take the sum in two ways. If one-third produce enough for all, then three-thirds will produce three times as much as we need. Or, if one-third produce enough for all by working nine hours a day, then three-thirds will produce enough for all by working three hours a day.

So we shall have plenty of leisure. What are we to do with it?

One use for it is the acquirement of knowledge. I will give you two very striking examples of the kind of work that needs doing.

Take, first, the Germ theory of disease. I am a very ignorant man, and can only offer hints. Read this:—

If the particular microbe of each contagious disease were known, the conditions of its life and activity understood, and the circumstances destructive of its life ascertained, there is great probability that its multiplication might be arrested, and the disease caused by it be abolished.

Consumption, typhoid and typhus fevers, cholera, and many other plagues are spread by small creatures called microbes. At present we do not know enough about these microbes to exterminate them. That is *one* thing well worth finding out.

Take next the subject of agricultural chemistry. Read this:—

In studying the utilisation of vegetable products for obtaining the various animal matters which are used as food, &c., agricultural chemistry enters into a higher and more difficult field. Although many useful practical results have been obtained, this department of our knowledge is extremely incomplete.

You remember what I told you about the yield of the land. Given a thorough knowledge of agricultural chemistry, and there is no doubt that we might produce more food with less labour. So that is *another* thing worth knowing.

Now I know your absurd modesty, John Smith, and how ready you are to despise your own efforts; and I can almost *hear* you saying, "What can ignorant men like us do in these difficult sciences?"

But, John, I don't flatter you, as you know, but you have brains, and *good* brains, if you only had the chance to use them. Sometimes a few of you *do* get a chance to use them. There was William Smith, the greatest English geologist, he was a poor farmer's son, and chiefly selftaught; there was Sir William Herschel, the great astronomer, he played the oboe in a watering-place band; there were Faraday, the bookbinder, and Sir Humphrey Davy, the apothecary's apprentice, both great scientists; there were James Watt the mathematical instrument maker, and George Stephenson the collier, and Arkwright the barber, and Jacquard the weaver, and John Hunter the great anatomist, who was a poor Scotch carpenter. Those men did some good in science; and why not others?

Ah! Why not? That is the question. The common people are like an untilled, unwatered, and unweeded garden. No one has yet studied or valued the capacities of men. We know that some few of the Hunter and Herschel stamp have come out well, and some of us think that when a man has brains he *must* come out well; but that is a mistake. Only here and there, chiefly by good luck, does one of our clever poor men succeed in being useful, and in developing his force—or part of it.

I will speak from personal experience. I know several men, poor and unknown, who have in them great capacity. I have now in my mind's eye a young Lancashire man, who *might* have been a very fine writer. But he is poor, and he has no knowledge of writing, no knowledge of style or

grammar, and if he had would find it very difficult to get work.

I once knew a blacksmith, a man of strong character, of great probity, a born orator, a man of intellect. Often I have heard him, as he beat on the red iron, beat out also, in rough homely language, most beautiful and forcible thoughts. John, he could not read or write. He was of middle-age, he had a large family, he did not suspect that he was clever.

Take my own case. I became a writer by accident—by a series of accidents—and not that until I was thirty-four. And I have done fairly well, and have been very lucky. But I am sure I should have done better at a quite different kind of work. And I am sure that if my mother had not taught me to read and encouraged me to love literature, I should never have been a writer at all.

But suppose my mother had died when my father died, or suppose she had been an ignorant woman, or a careless one. Where would Nunquam have gone to? He would probably be now in the grave, or in a prison. Yet he would have taken with him to the churchyard or the treadmill the same mind that is now struggling with this task—a task too great for it—the task of persuading John Smith, of Oldham, to do his duty as a husband, as a father, as a citizen, and as a man.

So consider, what chance have the poor? Education is so dear. The sciences and the arts are locked up, and the privileged classes hold the key; and down in Ancoats and the Seven Dials the wretched mothers feed our young Faradays and Miltons on gin, and send them out ignorant and helpless to face the winter wind and the vice and disease of the stews.

It makes me angry when I think of it, and I must be calm and practical, because you, John Smith, are such a shrewd, hard-headed man—God help you.

John, John Smith, of Oldham, remember what noble men and women have come from the ranks of the common people.

Now, at present the working people of this country live under conditions altogether monstrous. Their labour is much too heavy, their pleasures are too few, and in their

close streets and crowded houses decency and health and cleanliness are well-nigh impossible.

It is not only the wrong of this that I resent, it is the *waste*. Look through the slums, John, and see what childhood, girlhood, womanhood, and manhood have there become. Think what a waste of beauty, of virtue, of strength, and of all the power and goodness that go to make a nation great is being consummated there by ignorance and by injustice.

For, depend upon it every one of our brothers or sisters ruined or slain by poverty or vice, is a loss to the nation of so much bone and sinew, of so much courage and skill, of so much glory and delight.

Cast your eyes, then, my practical friend, over the Registrar-General's returns, and imagine if you can how many gentle nurses, good mothers, sweet singers, brave soldiers, and clever artists, inventors, and thinkers are swallowed up every year in that ocean of crime and sorrow, which is known to the official mind as "The high death-rate of the wage-earning classes."

Alas, John, the pity of it.

Well, I want to stop that waste, my practical friend. I want to give those cankered flowers light and air, and clear their roots of weeds.

And in *my* "Merrie England" there will be great colleges for the study of science, and the training of the *people*, so that the whole force of the national mind may be brought to bear upon those important questions of agriculture, of manufactures, and of medicine, which are now but partly understood, because it is the rich and not the clever who consider them, and because *they* only work selfishly and secretly, in opposition instead of in mutual helpfulness.
