

CHAPTER XI.

WASTE.

We, of the so-called "educated" classes, who take it upon us to be the better and upper part of the world, cannot possibly understand our relations to the rest better than we may where actual life may be seen in front of its Shakespearean image, from the stalls of a theatre. I never stand up to rest myself, and look round the house, without renewal of wonder how the crowd in the pit, the shilling gallery, allow us of the boxes and stalls to keep our places! Think of it;—those fellows behind there have housed us and fed us; their wives have washed our clothes, and kept us tidy;—they have bought us the best places,—brought us through the cold to them; and there they sit behind us, patiently, seeing and hearing what they may. There they pack themselves, squeezed and distant, behind our chairs;—we, their elect toys and pet puppets, oiled and varnished, and incensed, lounge in front, placidly, or for the greater part, wearily and sickly contemplative.—*Ruskin*.

We saw just now that competition amongst the workers lowered wages, and that competition amongst the middlemen lowered both wages and profits. We also saw that both kinds of competition lowered the price of goods to the consumer or user.

This is the one great argument in favour of competition—that it reduces the price of commodities or goods.

It is quite true, as I explained before, that we can buy things more cheaply under competition than under a monopoly, and this is urged as sufficient proof that competition is a good thing. "For," say the defenders of the system, "we are all consumers, and what is good for the consumer is good for all."

Now, I will prove to you beyond all question that the one argument advanced in favour of competition is really the strongest argument against it.

I will prove to you beyond all question that this much praised cheapness is not always good for the general consumer, and is never good for the producer—that is to say, for the working class.

First, allow me to expound to you my theory of waste. I call it my theory because I discovered it myself, and because I don't know that any other writer has ever alluded to it, though I may be wrong in that latter particular.

The theory of waste goes to show that excessive cheapness is good for *no one*.

When a thing is too cheap we *waste* it. I give you two common examples of this: salt and matches.

Many years ago, whilst riding in a train, I noticed a drunken man wasting matches. I had noticed the same thing before, but had never thought about it. This time I did think about it.

There happened just then to be a good deal of talk going on about the wretched wages and long hours of the match and match-box makers. I began to add things up.

I saw that at one end of the trade we had people working long hours for low wages to make matches; and that at the other end of the trade we had people wasting matches.

Tell me, from your own experience is it not true that of the gross number of matches bought at least one half are wasted?

I asked myself, firstly, "Why do people waste matches?" The answer was ready—"Because matches are so *cheap*." I asked myself, secondly, "Why are match-makers so badly paid?" The answer was longer coming, but it came at last, in the same words, "Because matches are so cheap."

Now, I saw plainly enough that when I wasted matches I was really wasting the flesh and blood of the fellow creatures who made them. But I could not see so plainly how that waste might be avoided.

"If," I thought, "the price of matches was doubled, that would pay the match-makers good wages, and it would not hurt me, for I should cease to waste them, and so should only need one box where I now use two."

But then came the question, "Would not that throw half the match-makers out of work; and if it did, what would become of them?"

That question puzzled me for some time; but at last I answered it, and then I began to see all the iniquity of our commercial system, and to understand the causes of the trouble.

A few years later in an article on the Salt Trade, I said that salt was too cheap and that the proper remedy was to regulate the price by wages, and not the wages by the price. Thereupon I was attacked by the editor of a northern paper, who denied my statement, and suggested that I was an ass.

This editor said:—

The suggested method of first fixing a good wage for the labour force engaged in production, and afterwards fixing the price for the market of the commodities produced upon the basis of that wage, is chimerical. Take an instance. Blatchford, in his paper, the *Clarion*, a paper devoted to bad economics and music-hall twaddle, instances the Cheshiro salt trade. He thinks the "producers" should have their wages fixed at a decent sum, and the price of salt to the public regulated by this item. Suppose it to be attempted, how would it work? It would involve a higher price for salt in the country to begin with. We could afford that. There would be less salt used, and less called for. That would mean there would be fewer men needed to produce salt. *That is, many men employed in that particular industry would be discharged and would betake themselves to some other congested branch of industry, to overcrowd the workers there, while those that remained would be put on short time! How does this solve the problem?*

Now we can draw two inferences from that statement. The first is, that the only effect of increasing the price of salt would be to throw half the men out of work; the second is, that as those men could find no other employment they had better be left alone.

We will begin with the second statement, and I will show you what nonsense the newspapers of this great country print for your instruction, my practical, hard-headed friend.

To begin with, you see that this editor admits three things, any one of which is sufficient to have shown him that there is something very rotten in our present system of trade.

He owns that if the saltworkers were thrown out of work they could find no means of living, because the other branches of industry are "congested." That is to say, that men able and willing to work cannot find work in this best of all possible countries.

But he does not tell you why this evil exists, nor how to cure it.

He owns that a great deal of salt is wasted, and that the consumer would be quite as well off if he paid double the price he now pays.

Just consider what these admissions mean. They mean that a useful product of nature is being wasted, and they mean that the labour of a large number of men and women

is being wasted, and they mean that both these wastes could be stopped without hurting any one.

But this intelligent editor will not allow us to interfere, because by stopping the waste we should throw a number of men out of work.

What are those men doing? They are wasting their time, and they are wasting salt; but we must let them go on.

Our wise editor acknowledges that the salt they make is being wasted, but yet we are to continue to pay them wages for wasting it. What do you think of him?

His plan is *worse* than that of employing men to dig holes and fill them up again. For *then* they would only waste time. But our clever writer makes them waste salt as well. So that his plan is as foolish as paying men to make salt and throw it into the river. He is one of those stupid people who think it is all right so long as you find the men "employment." It is of no consequence whether their work is useful work or wasteful work, so long as they are kept working. As though a man could eat work, and drink work, and wear work, and put work in the penny bank against a rainy day.

What the people want is food and clothing and shelter and leisure, not *work*. Work is a means, and not an end. Men work to live, they do not live to work.

And the joke of the thing is that if these salt-boilers were out of work, and we suggested that the corporation of their town should employ them to make new roads, or drains, to keep them from starving, this misleader of the people would be the first to sit upon his editorial chair and protest against the employment of the people on "unnecessary work."

Or suppose some Socialist writer turned our editor's argument against the use of machinery, and said that no machinery ought to be introduced, as its effect would be to throw numbers of men out of employment, and drive them to seek work in other industries already congested! What do you think our editor would call that Socialist?

And now allow me to add up the sum in two ways, first as our editor adds it up, and then as I add it up, and see which answer looks most reasonable.

THE EDITOR'S WAY.

Half the domestic salt is wasted. Double the price and the waste would cease. Then only half as much salt would be bought. Therefore only half as much would be made. Therefore only half the hands would be needed. Therefore half the hands would be out of work.

MY WAY.

Half the domestic salt is wasted. Double the price, and *save half the salt*. Then only half as much would be bought.

Therefore only half as much would be made. *Therefore* the salt-makers who now work twelve hours a day, *need only work six hours a day*.

How does that strike you, John? Or you might let them work twelve hours a day, and double their wages. In which case half of them can be sent to do other work. Or you can reduce the hours to eight, and pay them 50 per cent. more wages, in which case a quarter of the men can find other work. The advantages of this plan would be that—

1. No salt is wasted; therefore the supply of salt will last twice as long.

2. The consumer still gets all the salt he can use at the price he paid for salt before.

3. The manufacturer gets the same price for one ton that he used to get for two tons. Therefore he saves enough in carriage, in wear and tear of machinery, in interest on capital, in rent and other ways, to leave him a handsome profit.

4. The worker has only half as much work to do; therefore he secures a six hours' day, and his wages remain as they were.

How does *that* solve the problem? That, John, is my theory of waste. I call it a practical, hard-headed way of looking at things. What do *you* think?

Just apply the idea to all the trades where labour or material is being wasted, and you will begin to know a great deal more than the average newspaper editor, who gets his salary by wasting ink and paper, and perpetuating follies and lies, will ever find out—unless some sensible person comes to help him.