

CHAPTER II.

The Plea of a Laborer.*

I never could believe that Providence had sent a few men into the world, ready booted and spurred to ride, and millions ready saddled and bridled to be ridden.—Richard Rumbold, last words spoken on the scaffold. (Macaulay's History of England.)

The complaints of the day-laborer do not often find their way into print, except as they are imagined by some sympathetic writer of another class of society. This is especially true of the farm-hand in America and of the peasant in Europe. They carry their heavy burden scarcely knowing why, and their own case against their fellows remains usually inarticulate. But now, at last, a Russian peasant has felt himself charged with the mission of protesting, in the name of his fellow-workers, against the oppression of the upper classes. His name is Timothy Michailovitch Bondareff, and he is a *moujik* (peasant) of Manoussinsk in Siberia, where he has a little house of his own. Until he was seven-and-thirty he was a serf on the estate of a landed proprietor of the Don. His master made him enlist as a soldier—a fate which all peasants dread—but finally he was allowed to settle in Siberia. Although he is sixty-five years old, he can do two men's work, and can support thirty people by his labor. He has a right therefore, he says, to rank as a general among laborers; he should sit at the same seat as a general.† Nay, a general should remain standing before him. "Why?" the reader will ask in alarm. "Because the general eats bread produced by my

*This chapter appeared originally in the "Arena," and is here published by consent of the editor.

†The title of "general" is given in Russia to those who are far advanced in all the higher careers.

labor, while the converse is not true." His book is entitled "Work, According to the Bible."* It is really a petition to the educated classes, and, as I know of no more imperative duty than that of forwarding a petition to its address, I here give abstract of its contents:

"I write," says the author, "in the name of all tillers of the soil and against all those, whoever they may be, who do not produce the bread which they eat by the labor of their hands." The human race is divided into two classes, he continues (I shall continue to paraphrase his words),—the rich, plentifully supplied with dainty food and fine raiment, and the poor, worn out with hard labor, standing in rags at the threshold, humble and sad. "Why," I ask my comrades, "why do we hold our peace before them like the beasts of the field?" I feel an unseen and mysterious hand impelling me to write, and I take up my pen in spite of myself. Heaven has marked me out to seal with my blood and bathe with my tears the truth which I preach. Perchance after my death the commandment which I proclaim will be accepted. Nay, I cannot believe otherwise.

How many millions of men since the creation have been trodden upon by you, masters of the world! An angel could not submit to such treatment, and I, who am a man, have been at fault in submitting in silence so long. Often have I wished to speak forth in peace and quietness, but as soon as I begin to write my heart is so kindled that I forget my resolutions.

Adam had hoped by eating of the tree of life to be able to live without work, but God cast him forth from the Garden of Eden and pronounced this judgment against him, "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou knead (sic) thy bread." This is the first, the fundamental commandment. What shall we say of those who wish to live with white hands under umbrellas and all their lives eat the bread of others' labors? We, the tillers of the soil, are near the tree of life, but you, who flee from labor, are near the tree of death. All the food that you eat, O upper classes, is produced by our toil. We nourish you as a father does his children. The tiller of the soil

*"Le Travail selon la Bible." Paris: C. Marpon & E. Flammarion, publishers.

is your father. Before you sit down to your meals you should give thanks to him. If God sent you food as He sent manna to the children of Israel you would do well to give thanks to Him, but as you receive it from our hands you should give us thanks, who nourish you as if you were infants or sick people.

Did Adam try to place his punishment on others' shoulders, as many now do who think it a crime to take from another a wisp of straw or a grain of wheat, but who do not consider it a crime to take and eat the bread of others' labor which is served at their table? Adam accepted his penalty and was absolved. And thou, upper class, branch of the same trunk from which we spring, why dost thou refuse to submit and yet eatest thrice every day? They often arrest thieves in the world; but these culprits are rather rogues than thieves. I have laid hands on the real thief who has robbed God and the Church. He has stolen the primal commandment which belongs to us who till the fields. I will point him out. It is he who does not produce his bread with his own hands and eats the fruit of others' toil. Seize him and lead him away to judgment. All crimes such as robberies, murders, frauds, and the like, arise from the fact that this commandment is hidden from men. The rich do all they can to avoid working with their hands, and the poor to rid themselves of the necessity. The poor man says, "There is such an one who can live on others' labor; why should not I?" And he kills, steals, and cheats in consequence. Behold now what harm can be done by white hands, and what good grimy hands can make gush forth from the earth! You spread out before the laborer the idleness of your life, and thus take away the force from his hands. Your way of living is for us the most cruel of offences and a shame withal. You are a hundredfold more wise and learned than I am, and for that reason you take my bread. But because you are wise you ought rather to have pity on me who am weak. It is said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." I am your neighbor, and you are mine. Why are we coarse and untaught? Because we produce our own bread and yours too. Have we any time to study and educate ourselves? You have stolen our brains as well as our bread, by trickery and violence.

How blind thou art, O wise man; thou that readest

the Scriptures and seest not the way in which thou mightest free thyself and the flock committed to thee from the burden of sin. Thy blindness is like unto that of Balaam, who, astride his ass, saw not the angel of God, armed with a sword of fire, standing in the way before him. Thou art Balaam; I am the ass, and thou hast ridden upon my back from childhood.

Why did not God prescribe to Adam, as penance, some act of recognized merit, such as fasting, prayer, the sacraments, but only work, which men look down upon? And what punishment did He lay upon the woman? He said to Eve, "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children."* This penance is fulfilled to the letter by woman, and no attempt is made to conceal its meaning. The Czarina and the peasant's wife undergo their fate alike. If a woman of rank should say: "I have no time to have children; I have more important business; if I devote my attention to maternal duties, society would lose more than it would gain; I will hire another woman to have a child for me," would the child be hers? Nay, it would belong still to its own mother. And so it is of bread; the title to it cannot be bought, for it remains the property of him who produced it. Some women take poison to kill their children before they are born, and some even make way with them after. What punishment do they deserve? The same which should be meted out to men who do not produce their own bread. Now, why do women who accomplish their penance have to work besides? Because they have to do the work of the men who are idle.

My book is summed up in two questions: 1. Why, according to the first commandment, do you not labor to produce the bread that you eat? 2. Why in your books are the cultivation of the soil and the cultivator not only not regarded with favor, but, on the contrary, treated with the greatest contempt?

Throughout the world arise complaints against God. If God's mercy is infinite, whence comes the misery of the poor? But is it God's fault if we have rejected His law, which, if observed, would re-establish equality among men? If all men knew this law they would hasten, as if driven by hunger or thirst, to fulfil it. If man could but penetrate into the profound mysteries of nature, he would not say,

*We apply the term "labor" to both penalties.

"Give me bread," but "Take of my bread," and no one would wish to eat the bread of others' toil. "But," you say, "there are many persons employed in factories in large cities. Where would you find land for so many?" Could you not build mills in the country, so that men could work alternately in the fields and in the workshop? That would be easy to arrange.

We should only give bread to women who fulfill God's command to bear children, to old men who have finished their life's work, to the infirm, and to children who will in time be called upon to labor.

Make haste to teach the child the first commandment, however noble his family may be. Show him by your example how to produce his bread. Then, if misfortune comes upon him, he will not sigh; he will throw himself eagerly into the labor of tilling the soil. "For a long time," will he cry, "have I wished to work, but I have not had the strength to resist fortune; to-day I thank God for having delivered me from this heavy burden, which made me fall into sin," and rolling up his sleeves he will take the plough, already familiar to him, and go singing to his task.

Enforce this law, that no one should eat the bread of others' labor, and men will draw nearer to each other. I often hear that they wish to unite men in one religion. Found religion upon the only primal law, without adding to it, and soon the world will be united. You cannot realize your dream otherwise.

"But," you will say, "our ancestors worked and have left us what they earned." Why then am I not rich? My ancestors were all honest working men. Where is the result of their toil? What robber has stolen our fortune? Tell me truly, O rich man, whence came your treasures?"

All your precious labor, for which you pay each other so generously, is naught beside ours. The treasures which fill your houses have no value beside the bread in our barns. All your great wisdom is weak beside our little wits. Your millions are miserable beside our little possessions. **Other work is indeed praiseworthy, but only after bread, that is, when one has fed himself with bread produced by his own hands.**

The rich man excuses himself thus: "I give money to people so that they may work for me, and it is a good action on my part for which God will reward

me. How could they earn money without me?" I answer: "You are claiming to help men by the fruit of their own labor. Who earned the money that you are spending? Why, the laborers themselves." Money makes men blind and mad. "I pay for my bread," is your only answer. Sometimes I go two months without a single one of your pennies, and yet I have enough to eat. But if you went two months without my bread, what kind of song would you sing? Now tell me, reader, which one of us is dependent on the other? Which of us is entitled to the head of the table? Is it not I? Why, then, have you taken it? Make a good defence for yourself or stop eating our bread. Cultivate an acre of land and then sit down at the table. Before you pass on the merits of my book, O reader, I beseech of you not to eat of our bread for two days. But no; in an hour you will again stretch out your hand to our tree of life, forbidden to you,—I mean the bread produced by others' toil. If you despise us why do you eat our bread? If I were wise and learned as you are I should always eat money.

The peasants with their little children swarm in the fields like bees, but the upper classes are the drones who buzz about and eat the fruit of others' labor. The bees cut the drones' wings in order that they shall not eat their honey. Your turn has come, parasites, and we have cut your wings so that you may not eat the bread of our labor. I know that you will go on eating it, but when you carry it to your mouth your conscience will take you by the throat, and nothing will deliver you from its grasp. We must persuade people by good advice, but never by force. We should print these, our counsels, in primers and prayer books, charge the clergy of all nations and religions to preach the doctrine and to point out the merits of him who executes scrupulously the primal law of God, and the shortcomings of him who shamefully avoids compliance with it.

Labor includes love, which is therefore a secondary virtue, but love does not include labor. Love is hidden in work; work is the house that love dwells in.

It is impossible to explain to the world this law of labor which I have learnt for myself. I feel this law through my whole being. You cannot see as I do how in a few days this law could bind all men in one belief, one church, one love, for it is the principle

underlying all virtues. You would gain, O upper classes, if you held the head of virtue; but you hold its tail—and by its tail I mean love. Love inspires in you words and not actions. Why? Because money has blinded you, and you cannot tell the head from the tail. We are poor by your riches, and you rich by our poverty. O rich men, have mercy upon us! How many thousands of years you have been galloping on our backs like a runaway horse! You have long since torn us flesh from bone. The bread that you eat is our body; the wine that you drink is our blood. There is nothing more wicked, more infamous, than bread produced by others' labor; nothing more holy, more salutary, than the bread of one's own toil. And yet, nevertheless, you load men with burdens grievous to be borne, and you yourselves touch them not with one of your fingers.

Have pity on us, O upper classes; do not blot out my words. If they are contrary to law, make me to perish, but let my book be kept in the archives of state with the most precious documents. At some future day a man may be found just enough to publish it. May I die, if only the millions of tillers of the soil who will live after me obtain some relief from their labors.

I shall direct my son to bury me in the soil which, cultivated by my arms, has furnished my daily bread. On my grave till the end of time they will harvest bread. This is the monument that I prefer to all others.*

And now, my readers, farewell until we meet again, if not in this world, in the other. I trust that by your eloquence and skill you will justify yourselves before God better than I could do it for you.

Such is the plea of the peasant Bondareff. I do not see how any conscientious man who reads it and knows that he himself is to a greater or less

*Compare the following lines translated from the French of Alexander Dumas, the younger:

Not in a graveyard would I lie,
 When at the last to death I yield,
 But rather lay my body by
 In some well-tilled and furrowed field.
 Then, though my life bore naught of use,
 It would console me, when I die,
 To know, my death might help produce
 A single grain of wheat or rye.

extent "eating the bread of others' labor," can fail to take his words to heart. Is there truth in them or is there not? Is it not a fact that this day, this hour, working men are wearing themselves out in all parts of the earth for us? Coolies are at work preparing our tea in the fields of China; fellaheen in the Delta, Negroes on Southern plantations are toiling from sunrise to sunset to provide us with cotton; farmers in the West are, with the sweat of their brows, watering the broad prairies that give us the staff of life; factory hands in Great Britain and Germany and France, as well as here at home, are leading cheerless, steam-driven lives to supply us with luxuries; miners in Pennsylvania and Colorado and Cornwall are robbed of the light of day that we may have comfort or pleasure. These are all laboring for us (I do not speak of those of the higher ranks of society who may be also working for us, for they are amply repaid and have no grievance), these are all laboring for us. How can we avoid the question, What are we doing for them?

And, first of all, Bondareff is clearly right when he says that money makes men blind. We cannot discharge our duty to others by the payment of money, except where the money was earned by the useful and not overpaid labor of the person who spends it. In that one case the money fairly represents the labor of its owner, and he is entitled to dispose of it as if it were his labor. He is really giving work for its equivalent, and his money is confined to its legitimate function of facilitating the exchange of the products of labor. In all other cases, however, where the money spent was not fairly earned by the spender, but came from gift, speculation, exorbitant pay, or as the reward of useless or harmful work, money loses the moral foundation which justifies its use, and becomes simply the means of providing a substitute. I pay a man a dollar and a half of such money, and I merely authorize him to employ a third person to do a day's work; that third person is my substitute, and I only enter into the

transaction as a man of straw, although I take all the benefit of it to myself. Such payments of money are not an equivalent—moving from me—for what I receive. I am put into the world, say for seventy years, to do my share of the work of the world. I am sent as one of the crew to man her, and I can lay no claim to being treated as a first-cabin passenger. When I render an account of my passage, and am asked what I did to help the world along, can I say that I provided substitutes? Can such a plea be proffered to the Creator? Can it be accepted in the forum of conscience?

We are morally bound, therefore, to give a *quid pro quo* in work and not in money for all that we receive from the laboring masses who toil for us. We must keep our balance of account with them and with the world at large in our favor. We are bound by every moral consideration to give as much as we get. Now, there are two ways to retain a balance in our favor: one is to keep down the debit side of the account, and the other is to increase the credit. We can keep down the debit side by taking as little as possible from others, by making as little use as possible of their labor, by dispensing with luxuries and by leading a temperate and frugal life. On the other hand, we can increase the credit side by being as useful to others as possible, and especially to those who need our help the most—the toiling classes. Above all we should choose a useful calling for ourselves and for those for whom we have the privilege of choosing.

Opinions will differ widely about the usefulness of any particular career, and every occupation will have its supporters and opponents. No hard and fast rule can be laid down, such as Bondareff's when he insists that we all should be farmers. A farmer's work is not always useful. Near my home there are many fields of rye where the ploughman and reaper can be seen in the proper season doing their work, and yet they know not while they toil whether the ripened grain will go

into the loaf of bread or into the whiskey bottle. Neither can we draw any fine distinction as some do between manual and intellectual labor. Is the printer a manual laborer? And if so, are not the typewriter and the copyist? If we answer "yes," we must then also include the author who writes out his own manuscript, and the bookkeeper and the clerk. And how shall we classify the dentist? No; the true distinction is between useful work, and work which is useless or worse than useless. The usefulness must largely be left to each man's conscience; but one thing we must insist upon, and that is, that in estimating the usefulness he should disregard its market value. The fact that people are ready to pay for work is no proof of its usefulness. Nothing is too foolish or wicked to claim its price in this world; and many of the most approved occupations will not bear the examination of an unprejudiced mind.

In a society of natural tastes, and in which money was spent by those only who fairly earned it, the willingness of men to pay for a service might indeed justify such service, and the price that they would be ready to pay would be a just price, for they would know the value of money. But so soon as men begin to spend money earned by others, they lose all sense of its value, and they can no longer measure the value of labor. Then it is that they pay their thousands for tulip bulbs, give salaries to court fools, and waste their substance on all kinds of absurdities. It is to accumulations of wealth in the hands of those who did not earn it that the leading men in our professions, in finance, in business often owe their swollen incomes. I know of only one professional man whose pay is fixed by those who have a right to fix it, namely, the walking delegate, when he represents a useful trade and no undue influence is exerted on those who support him. He gets his money directly from those who honestly earn their bread, who know the value of their money, and are satisfied with the services rendered to them in return.

Yet I cannot altogether set aside Bondareff's preference for agriculture. It is after all the most necessary of all occupations, the foundation of them all, and the source of our very existence. I cannot but believe with Thomas Jefferson that those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God. There is much to be said, too, in favor of the Russian peasant's plan of establishing manufactories in the country where the factory hand would be near his base of supplies, and where the unemployed could cultivate the soil. Everything useful—food, raw material—all comes from the country. How foolish it is to attract the population into cities where all their supplies have to be sent after them!

Neither, in considering the difference between manual and mental labor, can I disregard the argument drawn from nature, that every man has brains and hands and was clearly intended to work with both. The folly of those otherwise useless athletic exercises which are necessary to keep men of sedentary life in health is evident when we consider how much useful work they could perform and attain the same end incidentally. Furthermore in deciding between the merits of labor with the hand or with the head, we must remember that as society is now organized a very large share of intellectual work is devoted to the task of outwitting competitors, of speculating in values, of securing and protecting unjust privileges and of reaping their fruits, and that a comparatively small proportion is of any direct benefit to the masses of the people. The brains which manage the machine of business are less occupied with the problem of meeting the wants of mankind than with that of living on other people's labor. Even if we admit that business is honest in the ordinary sense of the term and free from fraud, misrepresentation, adulteration, and perjury (which it is not), it is difficult for a scrupulous man to find within its system a career which will permit him so to work with his head as to satisfy the demands of his conscience, for the first requi-

site of success in business is to blunt your moral sense. As for the higher planes of intellectual work—philosophy, poetry, music, art—there is something repugnant to any nice mind in the idea of disposing of the products of such labor for money. To write a poem wrung from the heart by the death of a friend and then sell it over the counter for cash—could anything but the stern facts of every-day history make us believe that such things are possible? If all work of this kind were done gratis, it is true that our artists and sages would be obliged to support themselves by other labor, and it is not likely that many of them could live in luxury. I am confident, however, that they would not lose by the change; nor can I bring myself to believe that Homer, feeling his way on the sands of the sounding Aegean, or Walt Whitman in his Camden garret, was a less dignified figure than Virgil growing rich at the court of Augustus, or Sir Walter Scott on his estate at Abbotsford. One thing remains to be said about brain work: much of it requires very little brains. A skilled mechanic uses his mind far more than many a clerk or small tradesman. If anyone supposes that cabinetmaking, plumbing, or marble-cutting requires intellect of a low order, let him try his hand at it himself.

On the whole then we must admit that there is a good deal of force in the attack which Bondareff makes upon our industrial system, and that his criticisms apply to the entire civilized world and not to Russia alone. And it is worth while to spend a little time in examining that system, tracing its defects to their source and endeavoring to find some method of removing them.