

# THE HUMAN FACTOR

## A WORKINGMAN'S ESTIMATE

[IN considering the bitter struggle now in progress between capital and labor, discussion usually turns on economic principles, while little attention is paid to the intractable human factor very often dominant. Thinking of this, the editor wrote to a friendly correspondent, who, after receiving a classical education, was obliged for his health's sake to give up his position a dozen years ago, and seek his livelihood in the open air as a carpenter and mason. At both these trades he has acquired technical skill. This man knows men. We think his answer to our letter worth printing in full. — THE EDITORS.]

*Sunday, November 2, 1919.*

DEAR ATLANTIC, —

Thank you for your kind note. I am writing you because I cannot otherwise get your letter out of my mind.

From my own observation at close range, I believe that society is being made to stand and deliver. The profiteer set the example, the workingman followed with alacrity, and everyone who can is now trying to 'get his,' and the economic Dance of Death is in full swing. Hence wages and prices are no criterion of the value of work done or of a commodity sold. I erected a small building for a man some time ago and charged him ten per cent less than the regular wage, for I knew he was under heavy expense at the time, and I thought it was only decent so to do. Again, I taught a friend trigonometry last winter for nothing. He wanted to pay me, but I was more than paid by

the pleasure of it. I was getting good pay too from the government at the time, and was in no actual need of the money; and in spite of the saying of an economist, that 'a man who would give his labor for nothing is a social monster,' I know there are many workmen who feel as I do and act as I do when they get a chance. Furthermore, if society chooses to pay me more for driving nails into a board than it pays the man or woman who drives ideas and ideals into the heads of its children, society, it would seem to me, will some day have to go to school to a dictator. When the functions of society are disturbed, the laws that are exponential of those functions are disturbed, too. The law of 'supply and demand' has its limitations, and so has the present, popular law of 'supply and be damned.'

Let me get down to particulars. One Sunday morning in the tropics, I was resting from my work, looking out over the marble surface of the cloud-reflecting ocean, — for it was flat calm, — when a group of waiters started to grind a big ice-cream freezer; and as the work was heavy, they cajoled a stoker, with the promise of a quarter and some ice-cream, to turn it for them. The coal-smeared half-naked wretch, who was glad to get up where he could breathe any cooler air, ground away joyfully, and the sweat ran off him like oily ink, so foul with coal-dust he was. At last the freezer stiffened and the job was done, and he was recompensed by being kicked bodily down the companion-way and told to go to hell where

he belonged. I hunted him up later and found him at his dinner, a kind of hash, which was dumped on a dirty coal-besmirched board. Those who did not own knife, fork, or spoon ate this with their hands. I gave him the quarter, and the only response was a stare and the question, 'How the hell did *you* ever ship on this bloody wagon?'

From that moment I understood the profound meaning of the motto of a once great steamship line: 'To sail the seas is necessary, to live is not necessary.'<sup>1</sup>

Coming into New York harbor on another voyage, I found myself gazing at a man who had been helping wash down the decks. Bare-footed, bare-headed, a splendid specimen of physical power, he stood glaring at one of the passengers, who was quietly reading a magazine as he leaned against the rail. The lips of my fellow toiler of the sea writhed and his eyes dilated. Suddenly walking straight up to the passenger, he snatched the magazine and broke out, 'I can read as well as you.' And he began running his finger up and down the page, and blurting out incoherent attempts at something which, whatever it was, did not come from those, to him, undecipherable pages. The passenger smiled contemptuously, gave him a tip, if you can call it that, and turned on his heel. I have never seen a wilder look of chagrin and despair than came over that man's face as he crumpled the magazine and slunk down the companion-way that led to the 'glory hole.'

Though I tried to find him, I never saw him again, and yet in a sense I have never lost sight either of him or his fellow sufferer, the stoker, for I see these two types again and again in strange places and strange disguises. For instance, last winter, as I was returning one evening from my work in the foun-

<sup>1</sup> 'Navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse est.' — THE EDITORS.

dry at League Island Navy Yard, a man in the crowded trolley-cars suddenly tore open his very handsome silk shirt and began pulling out a portion of his undershirt, also of silk. Then he stretched the heavy ribbed material with both hands, and told us he had paid eighteen dollars for his undershirt, and as long as he lived, would never wear anything cheaper. The crowd — working-men and working-women — cheered. Then another man told us very abruptly that his wife was a lady and that he had bought her a dress for \$140, and that before she went without such a dress he would — here he lunged at a woman and intimated in a very vivid pantomime that he would tear the dress off some more bountifully provided woman to supply any deficiency in his wife's wardrobe. This also was highly pleasing to the crowd.

Now it would be easy to describe all this in a comic vein; but when you realize the pitiable perversion of the very human idea of providing for one's wife, it seems anything but comic. And so I thought, as I gazed on the flushed faces riant with their new wealth: 'Here at last my old friends from the stoke-hole and the fore-castle have forced their way on deck, and what will become of the ship once their hands hold the helm? And not the ship only, but the officers and the passengers, and those who have consigned their wares to her hold?'

It is becoming daily, hourly, more difficult to guide such people. I could multiply similar types indefinitely; but here is another type less tractable to bit or bridle, perhaps. This man is a Neapolitan. He was standing on a ladder, cleaning a window. Quite forgetful of his task, — although he was very industrious, — he was singing in a wonderfully sweet tenor voice the well-known 'La donna e mobile,' from *Rigoletto*. Along comes an electrician, kicks

the ladder from under him, calls him a fool of a —— — ‘Wop,’ and tells him to ‘cut it out, and sing something up to date.’ Several of us intervened and averted a fight, but the Neapolitan would not be pacified till he had given his assailant a piece of his mind. He spoke very good English, much better than his tormentor’s, who had showered him with an unusual amount of abuse.

‘You call me a fool,’ he began; ‘I know two languages and speak and read two, and you know only one. I know the ways of two countries and you know the ways of only one. I came across the ocean. You have never left Philadelphia. You tell me I never go to church, or to the lodge, or to vote. Well, I have been to many churches, but only once to any one. I go to the Socialist meeting, but only once. I go to the political meeting, but only once. It is always the same — always, at all the churches and all the meetings. The priest and the minister say, “Give us your money.” The politician says, “Give us your vote.” So does the Socialist. So does the anarchist. They give you heaven in the next world, hell here, nothing else. When the king or any big man has a dinner, I and my brothers are not there. They forget me and my brothers. We are fighting for them, working for them, dying for them, but they have forgotten us. All these people take from me, they don’t give to me. You don’t see it. I see it. You are the fool, not me. At my house we pass around a cup at supper. I put in ten cents every day. That is the collection in my church. That is for the baby. We go into the country. The children roll on the grass and so do we. We vote for a good time. That is my political meeting. In the evening my little girl and my wife and myself all sing, sometimes together, sometimes to each other. That is my church. My church is my home. There are no

electricians there and we are all happy.’

By accident I found out how to manage a man like this. One lunch-hour I wrote out a few lines of Dante that I happened to remember: ‘Per me si va nella città dolente,’ down to ‘voi che entrate,’<sup>1</sup> and showed them to him. He read them over very gravely, very slowly. Then his face lighted up. ‘That is fine, fine. You write that, Charley? You are my friend!’ And he shook hands with me eagerly.

I explained at last that he was doing me too much honor, that they were written by a countryman of his own.

‘You are my friend just the same,’ he insisted, ‘my very good friend. *I would do a lot for you.*’

Well, the sad part of all this is that nearly all these men have lost faith in the integrity of the ‘upper classes.’ ‘Give me where I may stand, and I will move the earth.’ But where is this standing-room to be found to-day? The rising tides of violence and lawlessness are lapping it incessantly. If the average man believes our courts are crooked, he will resort to any means to obtain his own ends rather than trust to that in which he has no faith. There can be no permanent progress till that faith is restored and fortified; and if it is not restored, another jurist may have to pronounce the mournful verdict: ‘Why go into details about politics? The whole country is going to rack and ruin.’<sup>2</sup>

Is there not something radically wrong in our educational ideals? We teach men and women trades, we teach them professions; these are all most essential, but they put men into competition with one another, into sharp contrast with one another; for, let de-

<sup>1</sup> The inscription above the door of Hell: ‘Through me you go into the sorrowful city. . . . Ye who enter.’

<sup>2</sup> ‘De re publica quid ego tibi subtiliter? tota periit.’ — CICERO, *Letters to Atticus*, II, 21, 1.

mocracy disguise it as it will, there is a different dignity to different professions and trades, and one calling (no less than one star) differeth from another calling in glory. These are in a sense centrifugal social forces, and we need opposing 'humanities,' which, though they lead to no specific calling perhaps, nevertheless supplied the forces that united all men in love of justice and truth, in respect for law, in the practice of toleration and mercy and charity, which softened the edge of power, gave a grace to weakness, and allotted a place and a portion to poverty and limited capacity. Once more society, upheaved by war, seems to be undergoing a new differentiation, and the real question of the day is: Suppose we do not like our new social differential coefficient when we get it, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to reverse the process? How are we going to perform the integration? For 'integrating is a process of *finding our way back*, as compared with differentiating.'

I do not believe it is possible to anticipate a solution, but I have faith — and that after I have worked a number of years in the camp of capitalist and laborer, respectively — that the conditions for a successful solution are very simple, although history teaches that progress generally comes by a rougher road. There is, first of all, a very pressing need for more honesty, charity, and reverence in the world to-day than ever before. Old values, now discarded, will have to be resumed. Sentiment must take the place of sentimentality. There can be no social life worth the name without mutual trust, and no mutual trust without mutual honesty. There can be no abiding charity, if life is only a game of putting it over on the other man and getting by. If every shopkeeper, every landlord, every corporation, every union, is to emulate Jack

Sheppard indefinitely, there will be a very definite end in due season.

In reality, all labor, whether of head or hand, is simply a service, and it is a dishonest service if you exact more than you give, whether in service returned or money paid; for 'money is only a documentary claim on the labor of others.' After our essential wants are provided for, there is no greater satisfaction in life than reverence, and there is no human faculty that has a wider field in the world around us, in the heaven above us, and in the hearts and arts of our fellow men and women. Teach all men to serve rightly real art, real literature, real science, real labor, and share all these with them, and you need not fear they will tear your tapestries, loot your libraries, or fling sand into the wheels of your machinery, industrial or social, much less, crush human life. Society must stop sending her children to the anarchist for instruction; she must teach them herself. Men have been taught to hate, to kill, to destroy. It is time they were taught to love, to cherish, to construct. Destruction is a closed curve, and only leads back to the ruin it has wrought. Construction is an infinite spiral that attains heaven at last and vanishes among the stars.

Many men (and women), who are trustees of the higher values in life, are already acting in this faith. They may be bankers, they may be judges, they may be editors, they may be scholars, they may be mechanics — their faith has not been formulated, its articles have not been codified; and so it is ever pliable and advances with the times; but it binds together in moral harmony the two opposite poles of human life, the individual and the state. Each of these exists for and presupposes the other. They are like the reverse and obverse of the same coin, and when both are sound, the coin rings true

and will be acceptable at par in heaven.

Some years ago I was building a retaining form for an Italian mason to fill with concrete. He was over eighty years old, but his soul was still young. One noon hour he told me of his life in Sicily and its sulphur mines, and the shuddering memory he still had of it,

and I would like to close my letter with the old man's final words. 'The sun seems to rise and to set,' he said, 'but it really does not. Some day it will really rise for everybody, and when it does it will never set again.'

Yours sincerely,  
CAROL WIGHT.

## ON A BALCONY

BY WILLIAM McFEE

### I.

THERE are some men whom a staggering emotional shock, so far from making them mental invalids for life, seems, on the other hand, to awaken, to galvanize, to arouse into an almost incredible activity of soul. They are somewhat in the same case as the elderly expressman who emerged from a subway smash untouched, save that he began to write free verse. Those who do not read free verse may consider the comparison too flippant. But the point must be insisted on, that there is far too much talk of love and grief benumbing the faculties, turning the hair gray, and destroying a man's interest in his work. Grief has made many a man look younger.

Or, one may compare the emotions with wine. The faculties of some men become quiescent with wine. Others are like Sheridan writing *The School for Scandal* right on through the night, with a decanter of port at his elbow getting emptier as the pages (and Sheridan) got full; or like Mozart, drinking wine to stimulate his brain to work, and employing his wife to keep him awake at the same time.

There was a singular disparity be-

tween the above trivial reflections and the scene upon which they were staged. I was seated on the balcony outside my room on the third floor of the Grand Hotel Splendid Palace at Smyrna. I was to leave that afternoon for Constantinople, having been relieved, and I had been watching with some attention the arrival of the destroyer upon whose deck, as a passenger, I was to travel.

I was distracted from this pastime by the growing excitement in the street below. Greek troops, headed by extremely warlike bands, were marching along the quay, gradually extending themselves into a thin yellowish-green line with sparkling bayonets, and congesting the populace into the fronts of the cafés. A fantastic notion assailed me that my departure was to be carried out with military honors. There is an obscure memorandum extant in some dusty office-file, in which I am referred to as 'embarrassing His Majesty's Government' — the nearest I have ever got to what is known as public life. The intoxication engendered proved conclusively that public life was not my *métier*.