

The Simple Life

By CHARLES WAGNER
Translated From the French by Mary Louise Hendes
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CHAPTER I.
OUR COMPLEX LIFE.
At the home of the Blanchards everything is tony tury, and with reason. Think of it! Mlle. Yvonne is to be married Tuesday, and today is Friday! Callers loaded with gifts and tradesmen bending under packages come and go in endless procession. The servants are at the end of their endurance. As for the family and the betrothed, they no longer have a life or a fixed abode. Their mornings are spent with dress-makers, milliners, upholsterers, jewelers, decorators and caterers. After that comes a rush through offices,

where one waits in line, gazing vaguely at busy clerks engulphed in papers. A fortunate thing if there be time when this is over to run home and dress for the series of ceremonial dinners—betrothal dinners, dinners of presentation, the settlement dinner—receptions, balls. About midnight, home again, harassed and weary, to find the latest accumulation of parcels and a deluge of letters—congratulations, felicitations, acceptances and regrets from bridesmaids and ushers, excuses of tony tradesmen. And the contempt of the last minute—a sudden death that disarranges the bridal party, a wretched cold that prevents a favorite cantatrice from singing, and so forth, and so forth. Those poor Blanchards! They will never be ready—and they thought they had foreseen everything!

Such has been their existence for a month. No longer possible to breathe, to rest a half hour, to tranquilize one's thoughts. No, this is not living! Mercifully, there is grandmother's room. Grandmother is verging on eighty. Through many falls and sufferings she has come to meet things with the calm assurance which life brings to men and women of high thinking and large hearts. She sits there in her armchair, enjoying the silence of long meditative hours. So the flood of affairs surging through the house ebbs at her door. At the threshold of this retreat voices are hushed and footsteps softened, and when the young fiancés want to hide away for a moment they flee to grandmother.

"Poor children!" is her greeting. "You are worn out! Rest a little and belong to each other. All these things count for nothing. Don't let them absorb you! It isn't worth while." They know it well, these two young people. How many times in the last weeks has their love had to make way for all sorts of conventions and fulfillments. Fate at this decisive moment of their lives seems bent upon drawing their minds away from the one thing essential, to marry them with a heart of tranquillity, and heartily do they approve the opinion of grandmother when she says, between a smile and a sigh, "Decidedly, my dear, the world is growing too complex, and it does not make people happier—quite the contrary!"

I also am of grandmother's opinion. From the cradle to the grave, in his needs as in his pleasures, in his conception of the world and of himself, the man of modern times struggles through a maze of endless complications. Nothing is simple any longer—neither thought nor action; not pleasure; not even dying. With our own hands we have added to existence a train of hardships and lopped off many a gratification. I believe that thousands of our fellow men, suffering the consequences of a too artificial life, will be grateful if we try to give expression to their discontent and to justify the regret for naturalness which vaguely oppresses them.

Let us first speak of a series of facts that put into relief the truth we wish to show. The complexity of our life appears in the number of our material needs. It is a fact universally conceded that our needs have grown with our resources. This is not an evil in itself, for the birth of certain needs is often the mark of progress. To feel the necessity of bathing, of wearing fresh linen, inhabiting wholesome houses, eating healthful food and cultivating our minds is a sign of superiority. But if certain needs exist by right and are desirable, there are others whose effects are fatal which, like parasites, live at our expense. Numerous and imperious, they engross us completely.

Could our fathers have foreseen that we should some day have at our disposal the means and forces we now use in sustaining and defending our material life, they would have predicted for us an increase of independence, and therefore of happiness, and a decrease in competition for worldly goods. They might even have thought that through the simplification of life thus made possible a higher degree of morality would be attained. None of these things has come to pass; neither happiness nor brotherly love nor power for good has been increased. In the first place, do you think your fellow citizens, taken as a whole, are more contented than their forefathers and less anxious about the future? I do not ask if they should find reason to be so, but if they really are so. To see them live it seems to me that a majority of them are discontented with their lot and, above all, absorbed in material needs and beset with cares for the morrow. Never has the question of food and shelter been sharper or more absorbing than since we are better nourished, better clothed and better housed than ever. He errs greatly who thinks that the query, "What shall we eat and what shall we drink and where shall we be clothed?" presents itself to the poor alone, exposed as they are to the anguish of morrows without bread or a roof. With them the question is natural, and yet it is with them that it presents itself most simply. You must go among those who are beginning to enjoy a little ease to learn how greatly satisfaction in what one has may be disturbed by regret for

what one lacks, and if you would see anxious care for future material good, material good in all its luxurious development, observe people of small fortune and, above all, the rich. It is not the woman with one dress who asks most insistently how she shall be clothed, nor is it those reduced to the strictly necessary who make most question of what they shall eat tomorrow. As an inevitable consequence of the law that needs are increased by their satisfaction, the more goods a man has the more he wants. The more assured he is of the morrow, according to the common acceptance, the more exclusively does he concern himself with how he shall live and provide for his children and his children's children. Impossible to conceive of the fears of a man established in life—his number, their reach and their shades of refinement.

From all this there has arisen throughout the different social orders, modified by conditions and varying in intensity, a common agitation—a very complex mental state, best compared to the petulance of a spoiled child, at once satisfied and discontented. If we have not become happier, neither have we grown more peaceful and fraternal. The more desires and needs a man has the more occasion he finds for conflict with his fellow men, and these conflicts are more bitter in proportion as their causes are less just. It is the law of nature to fight for bread, for the necessities. This law may seem brutal, but there is an excuse in its very harshness, and it is generally limited to elemental necessities. Quite different is the battle for the superfluous—for ambition, privilege, inclination, luxury. Never has hunger driven man to such baseness as have envy, avarice and thirst for pleasure. Egotism grows more malevolent as it becomes more refined.

Do not the very slowness of virtue lie in man's capacity to care for something outside himself? And what place remains for one's neighbor in a life given over to material cares, to artificial needs, to the satisfaction of ambitions, grudges and whims? The man who gives himself up entirely to the service of his appetites makes them grow and multiply so well that they become stronger than he, and once their slave, he loses his moral sense, loses his energy and becomes incapable of discerning and practicing the good. He has surrendered himself to the inner anarchy of desire, which in the end gives birth to outer anarchy. In the moral life we govern ourselves; in the immoral life we are governed by our needs and passions; thus, little by little, the bases of the moral life shift, and the law of judgment deviates.

For the man enslaved to numerous and exacting needs possession is the supreme good and the source of all other good things. It is true that in the fierce struggle for possession we come to hate those who possess and to deny the right of property when this right is in the hands of others and not in our own. But the bitterness of attack against others' possessions is only a new proof of the extraordinary importance we attach to possession itself. In the end people and things come to be estimated at their selling price or according to the profit to be drawn from them. What brings nothing is worth nothing; he who has nothing is nothing. Honest poverty risks passing for shame, and here, however filthy, is not greatly put to it to be accounted for merit.

Some one objects, "Then you make wholesale condemnation of progress and would lead us back to the good old times—to asceticism perhaps?" Not at all. The desire to resurrect the past is the most unfruitful and dangerous of utopian dreams, and the art of good living does not consist in retiring from life. But we are trying to throw light upon one of the errors that drag most heavily upon human progress in order to find a remedy for it—namely, the belief that man becomes happier and better by the increase of outward well being. Nothing is truer than this pretended social axiom; on the contrary, that material prosperity without an offset diminishes the capacity for happiness and debases character is a fact which a thousand examples are at hand to prove. The worth of a civilization is the worth of the man at its center. When this man lacks moral rectitude progress only makes bad worse and further embroils social problems.

This principle may be verified in other domains than that of material well being. We shall speak only of education and liberty. We remember when prophets in good repute announced that to transform this wicked world into an abode fit for the gods all that was needed was the overthrow of tyranny, ignorance and want—those three dread powers so long in league. Today other preachers proclaim the same gospel. We have seen that the unquestionable diminution of want has made man neither better nor happier. Has this desirable result been more nearly attained through the great care bestowed upon instruction? It does not yet appear so, and this failure is the despair of our national educators.

Then shall we stop the people's ears, suppress public instruction, close the schools? By no means. But education, like the mass of our age's inventions, is after all only a tool; everything depends upon the workman who uses it. So it is with liberty. It is fatal or life giving according to the use made of it. Is liberty still when it is the prerogative of criminals or heedless blunders? Liberty is an atmosphere of the higher life, and it is only by a slow and patient inward transformation that one becomes capable of breathing it. All life must have its law, the life of man so much the more than that of inferior beings, in that it is more precious and of nicer adjustment. This law for man is in the first place an

external law, but it may become an internal law. When man has once recognized the inner law and honored before it, through this reverence and voluntary submission he is ripe for liberty. So long as there is no vigorous and sovereign inner law he is incapable of breathing its air, for he will be drunken with it, maddened, morally slain. The man who guides his life by inner law can no more live servile to outward authority than can the full grown bird live imprisoned in the egg-shell. But the man who has not yet attained governing himself can no more live under the law of liberty than can the undeveloped bird live without its protective covering. These things are terribly simple, and the series of demonstrations old and new that prove them increases daily under our eyes. And yet we are as far as ever from understanding even the elements of this most important law. In our degeneracy how many are there, great and small, who know from having personally verified it, lived it and obeyed it, this truth without which a people is incapable of governing itself? Liberty? It is respect, liberty? It is obedience to the inner law, and this law is neither the good pleasure of the mighty nor the caprice of the crowd, but the high and impersonal rule before which those who govern are the first to bow the head. Shall liberty, then, be proscribed? No; but men must be made capable and worthy of it; otherwise public life becomes impossible, and the nation, undisciplined and unrestrained, goes on through license into the intricate tangles of demagoguery.

When one passes in review the individual causes that disturb and complicate our social life, by whatever names they are designated, and their list would be long, they all lead back to one general cause, which is this—the confusion of the secondary with the essential. Moral education, civilization, liberty, the whole of civilization—these things constitute the frame of the picture, but the frame no more makes the picture than the frock the monk or the uniform the soldier. Here the picture is man, and man with his most intimate possessions—namely, his conscience, his character and his will. And while we have been elaborating and garlanding the frame, we have forgotten, neglected, disfigured, the picture. Thus are we loaded with external good, and miserable in spiritual life. We have in abundance that which, if must be, we can go without, and are infinitely poor in the one thing needful. And when the depth of our being is stirred, with its need of loving, aspiring, fulfilling its destiny, it feels the anguish of one buried alive—smothered under the mass of secondary things that weigh it down and deprive it of light and air.

We must search out, set free, release, honor the true life, assign things to their proper places and remember that the center of human progress is moral growth. What is a good lamp? It is not the most elaborate, the finest wrought, that of the most precious metal. A good lamp is a lamp that gives good light. And so also we are men and citizens, not by reason of the number of our goods and the pleasures we procure for ourselves, nor through our intellectual and artistic culture, nor because of the honors and independence we enjoy, but by virtue of the strength of our moral fiber. And this is not a truth of today, but a truth of all times.

At no epoch have the exterior conditions which man has made for himself by his industry or his knowledge been able to exempt him from care for the state of his inner life. The face of the world alters around us, its intellectual and material factors vary, and no one can arrest these changes, whose suddenness is sometimes not short of perils. But the important thing is that at the center of shifting circumstances man should remain man, live his life, make toward his goal; and, whatever be his road, to make toward his goal the traveler must not lose himself in crossways nor hamper his movements with useless burdens. Let him heed well his direction and forces and keep good faith, and that he may the better devote himself to the essential—which is to progress—at whatever sacrifice, let him simplify his baggage.

CHAPTER II.
THE ESSENCE OF SIMPLICITY.
Before entering the question of a practical return to the simplicity of which we dream, it will be necessary to define simplicity in its very essence, for in regard to it people commit the same error that we have just denounced, confounding the secondary with the essential, substituting form. They are tempted to believe that simplicity presents certain external characteristics by which it may be recognized and in which it really consists. Simplicity and lowly station, plain dress, a modest dwelling, slender means, poverty—these things seem to go together. Nevertheless this is not the case. Just now I passed three men on the street, the first in his carriage, the others on foot and one of them shoeless. The shoeless man does not necessarily lead the best complex life of the three. It may be, indeed, that he who rides in his carriage is sincere and unaffected, in spite of his position, and is not at all the slave of his wealth. It may be also that the pedestrian in shoes neither envies him who rides nor despises him who goes unshod; and lastly it is possible that under his rags, his feet in the dust, the third man has a hatred of simplicity, of labor, of sobriety, and dreams only of idleness and pleasure for a more or less simple and straightforward life of men must be reckoned professional beggars, knights of the road, parasites and the whole tribe of the obsequious and servile, whose aspirations are summed up in this—to arrive at seizing a morsel, the biggest possible, of that prey which the fortunate of earth consume.

And to this same category, little matter what their station in life, belong the prodigal, the arrogant, the miserly, the weak, the crafty. Lively counts for nothing; we must see the heart. No class has the prerogative of simplicity; no dress, however humble in appearance, is its unerring badge. Its dwelling need not be a garret, a hut, the cell of the ascetic nor the lowliest fisherman's bark. Under all the forms in which life vests itself, in all social positions, at the top as at the bottom of the ladder, there are people who live simply and others who do not. We do not mean

by this that simplicity betrays itself in no visible signs, has not its own habits, its distinguishing tastes and ways; but this outward show, which may now and then be counterfeited, must not be confounded with its essence and its deep and wholly inward source. Simplicity is a state of mind. It dwells in the main intention of our lives. A man is simple when his chief care is the wish to be what he ought to be—that is, honestly and naturally human. And this is neither so easy nor so impossible as one might think. At bottom it consists in putting our acts and aspirations in accordance with the law of our being, and consequently with the eternal intention which willed that we should be at all. Let a flower be a flower, a swallow a swallow, a rock a rock, and let a man be a man, and not a fox, a hare, a hog or a bird of prey. This is the sum of the whole matter.

Here we are led to formulate the practical ideal of man. Everywhere in life we see certain quantities of matter and energy associated for certain ends. Substances more or less crude are thus transformed and carried to a higher degree of organization. It is not otherwise with the life of man. The human ideal is to transform life into something more excellent than itself. We may compare existence to raw material. What it is matters less than what is made of it, as the value of a work of art lies in the flowering of the workman's skill. We bring into the world with us different gifts. One has received gold, another granite, a third marble, most of us wood or clay. Our task is to fashion these substances. Every one knows that the most precious material may be spoiled, and he knows, too, that out of the least costly an immortal work may be shaped. Art is the realization of a permanent idea in an ephemeral form. True life is the realization of the higher virtues—Justice, love, truth, liberty, moral power—in our daily activities, whatever they may be. And this life is possible in social conditions the most diverse and with natural gifts the most unequal. It is not fortune or personal advantage, but our turning them to account, that constitutes the value of life. Fate adds no more than does length of days. Quality is the thing.

Need we say that one does not rise to this point of view without a struggle? The spirit of simplicity is not an inherited gift, but the result of a laborious conquest. Plain living, like high thinking, is simplification. We know that science is the handful of ultimate principles gathered out of the tuffed mass of facts, but what gropings to discover them! Centuries of research are often condensed into a principle that a single man, by the constant use of life, presents strong analogy with the scientific. It, too, begins in a certain confusion, makes trial of itself, seeks to understand itself, and often mistakes. But by dint of action and exacting from himself strict account of his deeds man arrives at a better knowledge of life. Its law appears to him, and the law is this: Work out your mission. He who applies himself to aught else than the realization of this end loses in living the raison d'être of life. The effort does so, the pleasure seeker, the ambitious; he consumes existence as one eating the full corn in the blade; he prevents it from bearing its fruit; his life is lost. Whoever, on the contrary, makes his life serve a good higher than itself, saves it in giving it. Moral precepts which to a superficial view appear arbitrary and seem made to spoil our zest for life have really but one object—to preserve us from the evil of having lived in vain. This is why they are constantly reminding us back into the same path; that is why they all have the same meaning: Do not waste your life; make it bear fruit; learn how to give it in order that it may not consume itself! Here is summed up the experience of humanity, and this experience, which each man must remake for himself, is more precious in proportion as it costs more dear. Illumined by its light, he makes a moral advance more and more sure. Now he has his means of orientation, his internal norm to which he may lead everthing back, and from the vacillating, confused and complex being that he was he becomes simple. By the ceaseless influence of this same law, which expands within him and is day by day verified in fact, his opinions and habits become transformed. Once captivated by the beauty and sublimity of the true life, by what is sacred and pathetic in this strife of humanity for truth, justice and brotherly love, his heart holds the fascination of it. Gradually everything subordinates itself to this powerful and persistent charm. The necessary hierarchy of powers is organized within him; the essential commands, the secondary obeys, and order is born of simplicity. We may compare this organization of the interior life to that of an army. An army is strong by its discipline, and its discipline consists in the respect of the inferior for the superior and the concentration of all its energies toward a single end. Discipline once relaxed, the army suffers. It will not do to let the corporal command the general. Examine carefully your life and the lives of others. Whenever something halts or jars and complications and disorder follow it is because the corporal has issued orders to the general. Where the natural law rules in the heart disorder vanishes.

I despair of ever describing simplicity in any worthy fashion. All the strength of the world and all its beauty, all true joy, everything that consoles, that feeds hope or throws a ray of light along our dark paths, everything that makes us see across our poor lives a splendid goal, a boundless future, comes to us from people of simplicity, those who have made another object of their desires than the passing satisfaction of selfishness and vanity and have understood that the art of living is to know how to give one's life.

(To be continued.)
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