



The Simple Life

By CHARLES WAGNER

Translated From the French by Mary Louise Hender

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You are a ruined man, or you are stricken by a great bereavement, or again, you see the fruit of toilsome years perish before your eyes. You cannot rebuild your fortune, raise the dead, recover your lost toll, and in the face of the inevitable your arms drop. Then you neglect to care for your person, to keep your house, to guide your children. All this is pardonable, and how easy to understand! But it is exceedingly dangerous. To fold one's hands and let things take their course is to transform one evil into worse. Who you think that you have nothing left to lose will by that very thought lose what you have. Gather up the fragments that remain to you and keep them with scrupulous care. In good time this little that is yours will be your consolation. The effort made will come to your relief, as the effort made will turn against you, if nothing but a branch is left for you to cling to, cling to that branch, and if you stand alone in defense of a losing cause do not throw down your arms to join the rout. After the deluge a few survivors repeopled the earth. The future sometimes rests in a single life as truly as life sometimes hangs by a thread. For strength go to history and nature. From the long travail of both you will learn that failure and fortune alike may come from the slightest cause, that it is not wise to neglect detail and above all, that we must know how to wait and to begin again.

In speaking of simple duty I cannot help thinking of military life and the examples it offers to combatants in this great struggle. He would little understand his soldier's duty who, the army once beaten, should cease to brush his garments, polish his rifle and observe discipline. "But what would be the use?" perhaps you ask. Are there not various fashions of being vanquished? Is it an indifferent matter to add to defeat discouragement, disorder and demoralization? No; it should never be forgotten that the least display of energy in these terrible moments is a sign of life and hope. At once every body feels that all is not lost.

During the disastrous retreat of 1813-14, in the heart of the winter, when it had become almost impossible to present any sort of appearance, a general, I know not who, one morning presented himself to Napoleon in full dress and freshly shaved. Seeing him thus, in the midst of the general demoralization, elaborately attired as if for parade, the emperor said, "My general, you are a brave man!"

Again, the plain duty is the nearest duty. A very common weakness keeps many people from finding what is near them interesting; they see that only on its paltry side. The distant, on the contrary, draws and fascinates them. In this way a fabulous amount of good will is wasted. People burn with ardor for the public good, for righting distant wrongs; they walk through life, their eyes fixed on marvelous sights along the horizon, treading meanwhile on the feet of passers-by or jostling them without being aware of their existence.

Straight infirmity, that keeps us from seeing our fellow at our very doors! People widely read and far traveled are often not acquainted with their fellow citizens, great or small. Their lives depend upon the co-operation of a multitude of beings whose lot remains to them quite indifferent. Not those to whom they owe their knowledge and culture, nor their rulers nor those who serve them and supply their needs, have ever attracted their attention. That there is ingratitude or indifference in not knowing one's workmen, one's servants—all those, in short, with whom one has indispensable social relations—this has never come into their minds. Others go much further.

To certain wives their husbands are strangers, and conversely. There are parents who do not know their children; their development, their thoughts, the dangers they run, the hopes they cherish, are to them a closed book.

Many children do not know their parents, have no suspicion of their difficulties and struggles, no conception of their aims. And I am not speaking of those pitifully disordered homes where all the relations are false, but of honorable families. Only all these people are greatly preoccupied; each has his outside interest that fills all his time. The distant duty—very attractive, I don't deny—claims them entirely, and they are not conscious of the duty near at hand. I fear they will have their trouble for their pains. Each person's base of operations is the field of his immediate duty. Neglect this field, and all you undertake at a distance is compromised. First, then, be of your own country, your own city, your own home, your own church, your own workshop; then, if you can, set out from that to go beyond it. That is the plain and natural order, and a man must fortify himself with very bad reasons to arrive at reversing it. At all events, the result of so strange a confusion of duties is that many people employ their time in all sorts of affairs except those in which we have a right to demand it. Each is occupied with something else than what concerns him, is absent from his post, ignores his trade. This is what complicates life. And it would be so simple for each one to be about his own matter.

Another form of simple duty. When damage is done who should repair it? He who did it. This is just, but it is only theory, and the consequence of following the theory would be the evil in force until the malefactors were found and had offset it. But suppose they are not found, or suppose they cannot or will not make amends?

The rain falls on your head through a hole in the roof or the wind blows in at a broken window. Will you wait to find the man who caused the mischief? You would certainly think that absurd. And yet such is often the practice. Children indignantly protest, "I didn't put it there, and I shall not take it away!" And most men reason after

the same fashion. It is logic. But it is not the kind of logic that makes the world move forward.

On the contrary, what we must learn and what life repeats to us daily is that the injury done by one must be repaired by another. One tears down, another builds up; one defaces, another restores; one stirs up quarrels, another appeases them; one makes tears to flow, another wipes them away; one lives for evil doing, another dies for the right. And in the workings of this grievous law lies salvation. This also is logic, but a logic of facts which makes the logic of theories pale. The conclusion of the matter is not doubtful. A single hearted man draws it thus: Given the evil, the great thing is to make it good and to set about it on the spot. Well indeed if Memes, the Malefactor, will contribute to the reparation, but experience warns us not to count too much on their aid.

But, however simple duty may be, there is still need of strength to do it. In what does this strength consist or where is it found? One could scarcely tire of asking. Duty is for man an enemy and an intruder so long as it appears as an appeal from without. When it comes in through the door he leaves by the window; when it blocks up the windows he escapes by the roof. The more plainly we see it coming the more surely we flee. It is like those police, representatives of public order and official justice, whom an adroit thief succeeds in evading. Alas, the officer, though he finally, collar the thief, can only conduct him to the station, not along the right road. Before man is able to accomplish his duty, he must fall into the hands of another power than that which says, "Do this, do that; shun this, shun that, or else beware!"

This is an interior power; it is love. When a man hates his work or goes about it with indifference all the forces of earth cannot make him follow it with enthusiasm, but he who loves his office moves of himself; not only is it needless to compel him, but it would be impossible to turn him aside. And this is true of everybody. The great thing is to have felt the sanctity and immortal beauty in our obscure destiny; to have been led by a series of experiences to love this life for its griefs and its hopes; to love men for their weakness and their greatness and to belong to humanity through the heart, the intelligence and the soul. Then an unknown power takes possession of us, as the wind of the sails of a ship, and bears us toward pity and justice, and yielding to its irresistible impulse, we say, "I cannot help it; something is there stronger than I." In so saying the men of all times and places have designated a power that is above humanity, but which may dwell in men's hearts. And everything truly lofty within us appears to us as a manifestation of this mystery beyond. Noble feelings, like great thoughts and deeds, are things of inspiration. When the tree buds and bear fruit it is because it draws vital forces from the soil and receives light and warmth from the sun. If a man, in his humble sphere, in the midst of the ignorance and faults that are his inevitably, consecrates himself sincerely to his task, it is because he is in contact with the eternal source of goodness. This central force manifests itself under a thousand forms. Sometimes it is inimitable energy; sometimes winning tenderness; sometimes the militant spirit that grasps and uproots the evil; sometimes maternal solicitude, gathering to its arms from the wayside where it was perishing, some bruised and forgotten life; sometimes the humble patience of long research. All that it touches bears its seal, and the men it inspires know that through it we live and have our being. To serve it is their pleasure and reward. They are satisfied to be its instruments, and they no longer look at the outward glory of the flesh well knowing that nothing is great, nothing small, but that our life and our deeds are only of worth because of the spirit which breathes through them.

CHAPTER VI. SIMPLE NEEDS.

WHEN we buy a bird of the fancies, the good man tells us briefly what is necessary for our new pensioner, and the whole thing—hygiene, food and the rest—is comprehended in a dozen words. Likewise, to sum up the necessities of most men, a few concise lines would answer. Their regime is general of supreme simplicity, and so long as they follow it all is well with them, as with every obedient child of Mother Nature. Let them depart from it, complications arise, health fails, gaiety vanishes. Only simple and natural living can keep a body in full vigor. Instead of remembering this basic principle, the flesh and muscle fester, and a man must fortify himself with very bad reasons to arrive at reversing it. At all events, the result of so strange a confusion of duties is that many people employ their time in all sorts of affairs except those in which we have a right to demand it. Each is occupied with something else than what concerns him, is absent from his post, ignores his trade. This is what complicates life. And it would be so simple for each one to be about his own matter.

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geols ladder people reply to the question, What is necessary to live? by figures varying with the degree of their ambition or education, and by education is oftenest understood the outward customs of life, the style of house, dress, table—an education precisely skin deep. Upward from a certain income, fee or salary life becomes possible; below that it is impossible. We have seen men commit suicide because their means had fallen under a certain minimum. They preferred to disappear rather than retreat. Observe that this minimum, the cause of their despair, would have been sufficient for others of less exacting needs and enviable to men whose tastes are modest.

On lofty mountains vegetation changes with the altitude. There is the region of ordinary flora, that of the forests, that of pastures, that of bare rocks and glaciers. Above a certain zone wheat is no longer found, but the vine still prospers. The oak ceases in the low regions; the pine flourishes at considerable heights. Human life, with its needs, reminds one of these phenomena of vegetation.

At a certain altitude of fortune the financier thrives, the clubman, the society woman—all those, in short, for whom the strictly necessary includes a certain number of domestics and equipages as well as several town and country houses. Further on flourishes the rich upper middle class, with its own standards and life. In other regions we find men of ample, moderate or small means and very unlike fortunes. Then come the people, artisans, day laborers, peasants—in short, the masses—who live dense and scatter like the thick, sturdy growths on the summits of the mountains, where the larger vegetation can no longer find nourishment. In all these different regions of society men live, and no matter in which particular regions they flourish, all are alike human beings, bearing the same mark. How strange that among fellows there should be such a prodigious difference in requirements! And here the analogies of our companion fail. Plants and animals of the same families have identical wants. In human life we observe quite the contrary. What conclusion shall we draw from this if not that with us there is a considerable elasticity in the nature and number of needs?

It is well, is it favorable to the development of the individual and his happiness and to the development and happiness of society, that man should have a multitude of needs and bend his energies to their satisfaction? Let us return for a moment to our companion with inferior beings. Provided that their essential wants are satisfied, they are content. Is this true of men? Not in all classes of society we find discontent.

I leave completely out of the question those who lack the necessities of life. One cannot with justice count in the number of malcontents those from whom hunger, cold and misery wring complaints. I am considering now that multitude of people who live under conditions at least supportable. Whence comes their heartburning? Why is it found not only among those of modest though sufficient means, but also under shades of ever increasing refinement, all along the ascending scale, even to opulence and the summits of social place? They talk of them? People who, judging from without, think that as soon as one begins to enjoy ease he ought to be satisfied. But the middle classes—themselves—do they consider themselves satisfied? Not the least in the world. If there are people once rich and content, be assured that they are content because they know how to be so, not because they are rich. An animal is satisfied when it has eaten; it lies down and sleeps. A man also can lie down and sleep for a time, but it never lasts. When he becomes accustomed to this contentment he tires of it and demands a greater. Man's appetite is not appeased by food; it increases with eating. This may seem absurd, but it is strictly true.

And the fact that those who make the most outcry are almost always those who should find the best reasons for contentment proves unquestionably that happiness is not allied to the number of our needs and the zeal we put into their cultivation. It is for every one's interest to let this truth sink deep into his mind. If it does not, if he does not by decisive action succeed in limiting his needs, he risks a descent, insensible and beyond retreat, along the deadly drift of desire.

He who lives to eat, drink, sleep, dress, take his walk—in short, pamper himself all that he can—be it the courtier basking in the sun, the drunken laborer, the commoner serving his belly, the woman absorbed in her toilettes, the profigate of low estate or high, or simply the ordinary pleasure lover, a "good fellow," but too obedient to material needs—that man or woman is on the downward way of desire, and the descent is fatal. Those who follow it obey the same laws as a body on an inclined plane. Dunes of illusion forever repeated, they think, "Just a few steps more, this last, toward the thing down there that we covet; then we will halt." But the velocity they gain sweeps them on, and the farther they go the less able they are to resist it.

Here is the secret of the unrest, the madness, of many of our contemporaries. Having condemned their will to the service of their appetites, they suffer the penalty. They are delivered up to violent passions which devour their flesh, crush their bones, suck their blood and cannot be sated. This is not a lofty moral denunciation. I have been listening to what life says, and have recorded as I heard them some of the truths that resound in every square.

Has drunkenness, inventive as it is of new drinks, round the means of quenching thirst? Not at all. It is rather to be called the art of making thirst inequitable. Frank Hibernage, do it deaden the sting of the senses? No; it envenoms it, converts natural desire into a morbid obsession and makes it the dominant passion. Let your needs rule you, pamper them, you will see them multiply like insects in the sun. The more you give them the more they demand. He is senseless who seeks for happiness in material prosperity alone. As well undertake to fill the cask of the Danubian. To those who have millions, millions are wanting; to those who have thousands, thousands. Others lack a twen-

tys

franc piece or a hundred sous. When they have a chicken in the pot they ask for a goose; when they have the goods they wish it were a turkey, and so on. We shall never learn how fatal this tendency is. There are too many humble people who wish to imitate the great, too many poor workingmen who ape the well to do middle classes, too many shopgirls who play at being ladies, too many clerks who act the clubman or sportsman, and among those in easy circumstances and the rich are too many people who forget that what they possess could serve a better purpose than procuring pleasure for themselves, only to find in the end that one never has enough. Our needs, in place of the servants that they should be, have become a turbulent and seditions crowd, a legion of tyrants in miniature. A man enslaved to his needs may best be compared to a bear with a ring in its nose, that is led about and made to dance at will. The likeness is not disturbing, but you will grant that it is true. It is in the train of their own needs that so many of those men are dragged along who rant for liberty, progress and I don't know what else. They cannot take a step without asking themselves if it might not irritate their masters. How many men and women have gone on and on, even to dishonesty, for the sole reason that they had too many needs and could not resign themselves to simple living! There are many guests in the chambers of Mazas who could give us much light on the subject of too exigent needs.

Let me tell you the story of an ex-captive man whom I knew. He deeply loved his wife and children, and they all lived together, in France, in comfort and plenty, but with little of the luxury the wife coveted. Always short of money, though with a little management he might have been at ease, he ended by exiling himself to a distant colony, leaving his wife and children in the mother country. I don't know how the poor man can feel off there, but his family has a finer apartment, more beautiful toilets and what passes for an equipage. At present they are perfectly contented, but soon they will be used to this luxury—rudimentary after all. Then madam will find her furniture common and her equipage mean. If this man loves his wife, and that cannot be doubted, he will migrate to the moon if there is hope of a larger stipend. In other cases the roles are reversed and the wife and children are sacrificed to the ravenous needs of the head of the family, whom an irregular life, play and countless other costly follies have robbed of all dignity. Between his appetites and his role of father he has decided for the former, and he slowly drifts toward the most abject egotism.

This forgetfulness of all responsibility, this gradual numbing of noble feeling, is not alone to be found among pleasure seekers of the upper classes; the people also are infected. I know more than one little household which ought to be happy, where the mother has only pain and heartache day and night, the children are barefoot, and there is great want for bread. Why? Because too much money is needed by the father. To speak only of the expenditure for alcohol, everybody knows the proportion that has reached in the last twenty years. The sums swallowed up in this gulf are fabulous—twice the indemnity of the war of 1870. How many legitimate needs could have been satisfied with that which has been thrown away on these artificial ones!

Is it well, is it favorable to the development of the individual and his happiness and to the development and happiness of society, that man should have a multitude of needs and bend his energies to their satisfaction? Let us return for a moment to our companion with inferior beings. Provided that their essential wants are satisfied, they are content. Is this true of men? Not in all classes of society we find discontent.

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