

The Simple Life

By CHARLES WAGNER

Translated from the French by Mary Louise Hendee

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I should like to speak next, apropos of the inglorious good, of a class that today it is thought quite fitting to treat with the utmost of sidedness. I mean the rich. Some people think the last word is said when they have stigmatized that infamy, capital. For them, all who possess great fortunes are monsters gorged with the blood of the miserable. Others, not so declamatory, persist, however, in confounding riches with egotism and insensibility. Justice should be visited on these errors, be they involuntary or calculated. No doubt there are rich men who concern themselves with nobody else, and others who do good only with ostentation. Indeed, we know it too well. But does their inhumanity or hypocrisy take away the value of the good that others do and that they often hide with a modesty so perfect?

I knew a man to whom every misfortune had come which can strike us in our affections. He had lost a beloved wife, had seen all his children buried one after another. But he had a great fortune, the result of his own labor. Living in the utmost simplicity, almost without personal wants, he spent his time in searching for opportunities to do good and profiting by them. How many people are surprised in flagrant poverty, what means he combined for relieving distress and lighting up dark lives, with what kindly thoughtfulness he took his friends unawares, no one can imagine. He liked to do good to others and enjoy their surprise when they did not know whence the relief came. It pleased him to repair the injustices of fortune, to bring tears of happiness in families pursued by mischance. He was continually plotting, contriving, scheming in the dark, with a child-like fear of being caught with his hand in the bag. The greater part of these fine deeds were not known till after his death; the whole of them we shall never know.

He was a socialist of the right sort, for there are two kinds of them. Those who aspire to appropriate to themselves a part of the goods of others are numerous and commonplace. To belong to their order it suffices to have a big appetite. Those who are hungering to divide their own goods with men who have none are rare and precious, for to enter this choice company there is need of a brave and noble heart free from selfishness and sensitive to both the happiness and unhappiness of its fellows. Fortunately the race of these socialists is not extinct, and I feel an unalloyed satisfaction in offering them a tribute they never claim.

I must be pardoned for dwelling upon this. It does one good to offset the bitterness of so many infamies, so many calumnies, so much christianism, by resting the eyes upon something more beautiful, breathing the perfume of these stray corners where simple goodness flowers.

A lady, a foreigner, doubtless little used to Parisian life, just now told me with what horror the things she sees here inspire her—these vile posters, these "yellow" journals, these women with bleached hair, their crowd rushing to the races, to dance halls, to roulette tables, to corruption—the whole flood of superficial and mundane life. She did not speak the word Babylon, but doubtless it was out of pity for one of the inhabitants of this city of perdition.

"Alas, yes, madam; these things are sad, but you have not seen all."

"Heaven preserve me from that!"

"On the contrary, I wish you could see everything, for, if the dark side is very ugly, there is so much to atone for it. And, believe me, madam, you have simply to change your quarter or observe it at another hour. For instance, take the Paris of early morning. It will offer much to correct your impressions of the Paris of the night. Go see, among so many other working people, the street sweepers, who come out at the hour when the revelers and malefactors go in. Observe beneath these rags those carnal bodies, those austere faces! How serious they are at their work of sweeping away the refuse of the night's revelry! One might liken them to the prophets at Abasuerus' gates. There are women among them, many old people. When the air is cold they stop to blow their fingers and then go at it again. So it is every day. And they, too, are inhabitants of Paris."

"Go next to the faubourgs, to the factories, especially the smaller ones, where the children or the employers labor with the men. Watch the army of workers marching to their tasks. How ready and willing these young girls seem as they come gayly down from their distant quarters to the shops and stores and offices of the city! Then visit the homes from which they come. See the woman of the people at her work. Her husband's wages are modest, their dwelling is cramped; the children are many, the father is often harsh. Make a collection of the biographies of lovely people, budgets of modest family life; look at them attentively and long."

"After that go see the students. Those who have scandalized you in the streets are numerous, but those who labor hard are legion; only they stay at home and are not talked about. If you knew the toil and dig of the Latin quarter! You find the papers full of the rumpus made by a certain set of youths who call themselves students. The papers say enough of those who break windows, but why do they make no mention of those who spend their nights toiling over problems? Because it wouldn't interest the public. Yes, when now and then one of them, a medical student perhaps, dies a victim to professional duty the matter has two lines in the dailies. A drunken brawl gets half a column, with every detail elaborated. Nothing is lacking but the portraits of the heroes, and not always that."

"I should never end were I to try to point out to you all that you must

go to see if you would see all. You would needs make the tour of society at large, rich and poor, wise and ignorant. And certainly you would not judge so severely then. Paris is a world, and here, as in the world in general, the good hides away while the evil flaunts itself. Observing only the surface, you sometimes ask how there can possibly be so much virtue. When, on the contrary, you look into the depths you are astonished that in this troublous, obscure and sometimes frightful life there can be so much virtue."

But why linger over these things? Am I not blowing trumpets for those who hold trumpet blowing in horror? Do not understand me so. My aim is this: To make men think about unostentatious goodness—above all, to make them love it and practice it. The man who finds his satisfaction in things which glitter and hold his eyes as well before as else, then because he gets accustomed to the sight of only such good as seeks for notice, and therefore easily succumbs to the temptation to live himself for appearances. Not only must one be resigned to obscurity; he must love it if he does not wish to slip insensibly into the ranks of figurants, who preserve their parts only while under the eyes of the spectators and put off in the wings the restraints imposed on the stage.

Here we are in the presence of one of the essential elements of the moral life. And this which we say is true not only for those who are called humble and whose lot it is to pass unmarked; it is just as true, and more so, for the chief actors. If you would not be a brilliant luminary, a man of gold lace and plumes, but empty inside, you must play the star role in the simple spirit of the most obscure of your collaborators. He who is nothing worth except on hours of parade is worth less than nothing. Have we the perilous honor of being always in view, of marching in the front ranks? Let us take so much the greater care of the sanctuary of silent good within us; let us give to the structure whose facade is seen of our fellow men a wide foundation of simplicity, of humble fidelity, and then, out of sympathy, out of gratitude, let us stay near our brothers who are unknown to fame. We owe everything to them, do we not? I call to witness every one who has found in life this encouraging experience—that stones hidden in the soil hold up the whole edifice. All those who arrive at having a public and recognized value owe it to some humble spiritual ancestors, to some forgotten inspirers. A small number of the good, among them simple women, peasants, vanquished heroes, parents as modest as they are revered, personally for us beautiful and noble living; their example inspires us and gives us strength. The remembrance of them is forever inseparable from that conscience before which we arraign ourselves. In our hours of trial we think of them, courageous and serene, and our burdens lighten. In clouds they compass us about, these witnesses invisible beloved who keep us from stumbling and our feet from falling in the battle, and day by day do they prove to us that the treasure of humanity is its hidden goodness.

CHAPTER X.
THE WORLD AND THE LIFE OF THE HOME.
IN the time of the second empire, in one of our pleasantest subprefectures of the provinces, a little way from some baths frequented by the emperor, there was a mayor, a very worthy man and intelligent, too, whose head was suddenly turned by the thought that his sovereign might one day descend upon his home. Up to this time he had lived in the house of his fathers, a son respectful of the slightest family traditions. But when once the all absorbing idea of receiving the emperor had taken possession of his brain he became another man. In this new light what had before seemed sufficient for his needs, even enjoyable, all this simplicity that his ancestors had loved, appeared poor, ugly, ridiculous. Out of the question to ask an emperor to climb this wooden staircase, sit in these old armchairs, walk over such superannuated carpets. So the mayor called architect and masons; pickaxes attacked walls and demolished partitions, and a drawing room was made out of all proportion to the rest of the house in size and splendor. He and his family retired into close quarters, where people and furniture incumbered each other generally. Then, having emptied his purse and upset his household by this stroke of genius, he awaited the royal guest. Alas, he soon saw the end of the empire arrive, but the emperor never.

The folly of this poor man is not so rare. As mad as he are all those who sacrifice their home life to the demands of the world. And the danger in such a sacrifice is most menacing in times of unrest. Our contemporaries are constantly exposed to it and constantly succumbing. How many family treasures have they literally thrown away to satisfy worldly ambitions and conventions, but the happiness upon which they thought to come through these impious immolations always eludes them.

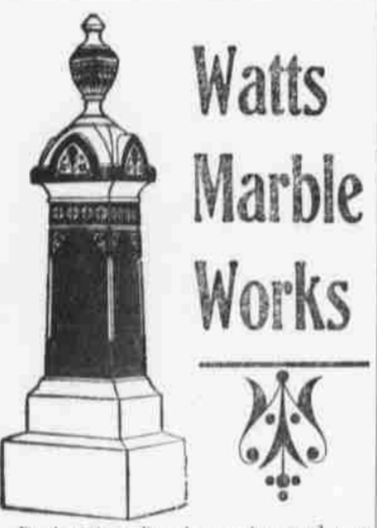
To give up the ancestral hearth, to let the family traditions fall into desuetude, to abandon the simple domestic customs, for whatever return is to make a fool's bargain, and such is the place in society of family life that if this be impoverished the trouble is felt throughout the whole social organism. To enjoy a normal development this organism has need of well tried individuals, each having his own value, his own hall mark. Otherwise society becomes a flock, and sometimes a flock without a shepherd. But whence does the individual draw his originality, this unique something which, joined to the distinctive qualities of others, constitutes the wealth and strength of a

community? He can draw it only from his own family. Destroy the assemblage of memories and practices whence equities for each home an atmosphere of miniature, and you dry up the sources of character, sap the strength of public spirit.

It concerns the country that each home be a world, profound, respected, communicating to its members an ineffaceable moral imprint. But before pursuing the subject further let us rid ourselves of a misunderstanding. Family feeling like all beautiful things, has its caricature, which is family egotism. Some families are like barred and bolted citadels, their members organized for the exploitation of the whole world. Everything that does not directly concern them is indifferent to them. They live like colonies—I had almost said intruders—in the society around them. Their particularism is pushed to such an excess that they make enemies of the whole human race. In their small way they resemble those powerful societies formed from time to time through the ages which possess themselves of universal rule and for which no one outside their own community counts. This is the spirit that has sometimes made the family seem a retreat of egotism which it was necessary to destroy for the public safety. But as patriotism and jingoism are as far apart as the east from the west, so are family feeling and clanishness.

(To be continued.)

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