

Supplement to "The Commonweal."

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UNATTRACTIVE LABOUR.

FOR our purpose of considering the relations of labour to industrial art, the wares made at the present day, the articles made for the market that is, may be divided into two classes—those that have some pretensions to be considered ornamental, and those that have not. The latter, I suppose, is much the larger class; but at any rate the important thing to remember is that there is this difference. Now it seems to me necessary to understand that everything made by man must be either ugly or beautiful. Neutrality is impossible in man's handiwork. But in times past, before the commercial age, it did not follow that a piece of handiwork was ugly because it did not aim at being ornamental; it had a certain use, which it fulfilled, and at the same time, without apparent effort of the maker, it was beautiful. *It grew so*, one may say, exactly as a piece of Nature does. That is far from being the case now. In the wares which are made for utility only, it is rare that you find any beauty of form; they have a natural tendency to grow ugly, like a London starveling has. Even in the commonest things, such as fences in fields and other simple agricultural appliances, except for a few survivals, matters which have accidentally clung to old traditions, ugliness is the rule. An ordinary house, or piece of furniture or of attire, is not only not beautiful, it is aggressively and actively ugly, and we assume as a matter of course that it must be so. And if we have a mind for any beauty (or pretence of it), we must make a definite effort; we must give our orders for an ornamental article to be made for us. And I may say, in passing, that, order as we please, we cannot always get our order executed. The sense of beauty and power of expressing it, under the present circumstances, is one of the rarest of gifts, so that the ordinary public have to put up with such pretence to beauty as the so-called ornamental class of wares can furnish to them. Therefore, while the rich man, by spending much money, can gather about him a certain amount of beauty, and while the man of moderate means may be able to attain the same end by taking an infinitude of trouble, the working man, who has no time to take trouble and no money to enable him to dispense with it, must put up with the lack of beauty altogether. Here, then, is a strange thing, that whereas in the pre-commercial ages we had beauty without paying for it, it has now become an article of the market, and, like most other market articles, is so shamefully adulterated that we can scarcely buy it even for our money.

I know that to many people this will seem a small matter, because only those (and how few they are!) who can make their surroundings decent can understand the full horror, the dulness and poverty of life which it involves. For my part, having regard to the general happiness of the race, I say without shrinking that the bloodiest of violent revolutions would be a light price to pay for the righting of this wrong.

For this is not a matter of accident, but springs from the the form which the slavery of the many has taken in our days. It is but one of the consequences of wage-slavery. Until that wage-slavery was completed and crowned by the revolution of the great machine industries, there was some attractiveness in the work of the artisan. There is now none, or next to none; and the reason why the ornamental wares above-mentioned are so adulterated is because the very ornament itself is but a part of the machine labour, made to sell, and not for use, whether it be done by human machines or non-human ones. It is no exaggeration to say that our civilisation has destroyed the attractiveness of labour, and that by more means than one: by lengthening the hours of labour: by intensifying the labour during its continuance; by the forcing of the workmen into noisy, dirty, crowded factories; by the aggregation of the population into cities and manufacturing districts, and the consequent destruction of all beauty and decency of surroundings; by the levelling all intelligence and excellence of workmanship by means of machinery, and the consequent gradual extinction of the skilled craftsman. All this is the exact contrary of the conditions under which the spontaneous art of past ages was produced. Our forefathers of the Middle Ages worked shorter hours than we do (even since the passing of the Factory Acts) and had more holidays. They worked deliberately and thoughtfully as all artists do; they worked in their own homes and had plenty of elbow room; the unspoiled country came up

to their very doors and, except in their dreams of hell—if even there—they could have had no conception of the glories of the Black Country or South Lancashire, which I heard a famous demagogue the other night enumerating among the blessings of peace, such peace as he could conceive of. Finally, all their work depended on their own skill of hand and invention, and never failed to show signs of that in its beauty and fitness; it was even thought wrong to cheat people by adulteration of goods, so that (strange to say) good work was creditable to the worker.

Thus the development of the commercial system crowned by the revolution of the great machine industries has deprived us of the attractiveness of labour, and as far as it could of the beauty of the earth. What, then, has it left us? The hope of revolution, of the transformation of civilisation, now become on the face of it a mere corruption and curse to the world, into Socialism, which will set free the hands and minds of men for the production and safe-guarding of the beauty of life.

I have said that our mediæval forefathers worked shorter hours than we do; but yet they worked far too long, and of course suffered from their special form of slavery, that is serfdom, and other arbitrary violence of the privileged classes, and their chances of successful rebellion were pretty much *nil*. It was necessary that they should struggle upwards till they formed a middle-class and created commerce with its proletariat doomed to ceaseless unattractive dull labour, in place of the old yeoman and craftsguildsman with his pleasant easy-going work. Nevertheless, it is that proletariat only that can make good the claim of workmen to their share of art, without which no art can live long.

It is no real paradox to say that the unattractiveness of labour which is now the curse of the world will become the hope of the world. As long as the workman could sit at home, working easily and quietly, his long hours of labour mattered little to him, and other evils could be borne. Those evils, too, were visible and palpable to everyone and external to their lives; and the remedies were not far to seek. Peace instead of violence, equal rights before the law, these were things which people might hope their very masters would try to win for them.

But now that labour has become a mere burden, the disease of a class, that class will, by all means, try to throw it off, to lessen its weight, and in their efforts to do so they must of necessity destroy society, which is founded on the patient bearing of that burden. For there is no longer, as in the days of feudal violence, any means of relieving them of the burden while our present society exists. True, their masters, taught prudence by fear, will try, are trying, various means to make the workers bear their burden; but one after the other they will be found out and discredited. Philanthropy has had its day and is gone; thrift and self-help are going; participation in *profits*, parliamentarism and universal suffrage, State Socialism will have to go the same road, and the workers will be face to face at last with the fact that modern civilisation with its elaborate hierarchy and iron drill is founded on their intolerable burden, and then no shortening of the day's work which would leave profit to the employer will make their labour hours short enough. They will see that modern society can only exist as long as they bear their burden with some degree of patience, their patience will be worn out, and to pieces will modern society go.

And I repeat, that to my mind the unattractiveness of labour, which has been the necessary outcome of commercial industry, will have played a great part in this revolution; the price which commercialism will have to pay for depriving the worker of his share of art will be its own death.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

THE SOLIDARITY OF LABOUR.

BY A TRADES UNIONIST.

IN an article in last month's *Commonweal* I endeavoured to show that our Trades Unions were now little else than "buffers" between Labour and Capital; that they were wasting their efforts in miserable makeshifts and paltry political expedients instead of recognising the solidarity of Labour and organising for its emancipation from the slavery of Capitalism. I shall now call the attention of my fellow-workmen to one or two points which seriously hinder our progress. In the first place, unfortunately, our efforts and