

A PLEA FOR LIVING IN THE COUNTRY

In our overcrowded cities the laboring classes are to a great extent living an unnatural and artificial life, deprived as they are of the requisites which nature demands for right living, such as sunlight, fresh air, proper exercise, wholesome food, and that soothing contact with the exquisite beauty and variety of nature which invigorates one's soul and quickens and stimulates all one's faculties. Deprived then of the physical advantages which a life in the country furnishes and ignorant of the great lessons which a communion with nature in its various moods teaches, they see life from a wrong angle, their intellectual development is one-sided and their spiritual growth is hampered. They are not enjoying life in its fullest, and under ordinary conditions, cannot rise to the greatest heights of which human nature is capable.

At the outset, we wish to confess a certain prejudice for the country, the old oaken bucket, and the little red schoolhouse, since they are intimately associated with the happiest recollections of our boyhood days—a prejudice which has not only not been removed, but has been accentuated by the knowledge of the artificiality of city life.

Considering the effects of the present industrial and social systems upon the life of the workingman, what strikes us especially is that his labor is unintelligent. Most of it is piece-work. He does not see the connection between the various parts, but is interested only in that with which he is immediately concerned. Neither knowing nor caring about what is going on in the next room or on the floor above, his work becomes uninteresting and mechanical. He is little more than another shuttle in the great machine of production. Nor are his surroundings such as are calculated to elevate or ennoble his mind. The real, material and practical face him on every side. The atmosphere is frequently stuffy and unwholesome; all floor and aisle spaces are overcrowded; the air is rent by the din of unpleasant noises, such as the clang of hammers, the whirr of wheels, the shouts of overseers, and the shrieks of whistles. And as a result he is constantly in a state of feverish excitement. Scarcely is he allowed sufficient time to eat his scanty dinner, and as a consequence he is forced to content himself with a cold and hurried

meal, so as to be back at work in time to prevent a reduction in his day's wages. When in need of recreation he visits the saloon, dance hall, or spends the evening in the fetid atmosphere of the movies, after which he is off to bed for a troubled rest in preparation for a repetition on the following day of the same nervous strain.

Frequently the consequences of this manner of living are not merely personal. If the laborer happens to be a married man, he communicates the spirit of restlessness and uneasiness to the members of the household. The difficulty of making both ends meet, to say nothing of providing for periods of unemployment or sickness, is indeed a serious one—and one in the solution of which these small families display an ingenuity which would do credit to the genius of some of our great financiers.

Add to meagre wages the uncertainty of employment and the laborer's condition becomes not only pitiable but even tragic. Industrial depression, accidents, the introduction of new and cheaper methods of productions, are every day depriving the honest workingman of the means of livelihood. For him to change occupation is very difficult. In the great factory where he has worked the greater part of his life he has been assigned to one—or perhaps two or three—of the many processes required in the production of the finished article. It is true that some special skill may be necessary for his part in the operation, so that he receives a fairly respectable salary. But an invention can and very frequently does make his work unnecessary, and in consequence his services are dispensed with. Instead, then, of receiving a skilled workman's salary he is compelled to go down into the ranks of unskilled labor and to accommodate himself to conditions which a diminution of his salary has made imperative. He may be obliged to serve several years as a sort of apprentice before he can rise again to the position which will enable him to live in tolerable comfort. Many, however, on account of old age or wrecked constitutions find it impossible to obtain a new position, and in consequence become a burden either to their own families or to the communities of which they are members.

On the farm conditions are very different. The "son of nature" is not dependent upon weekly salary for the necessities of life, for he can, if emergencies arise, produce on his own farm nearly everything which is required for his subsistence. He labors

under the blue canopy of heaven and breathes the invigorating air of the country. His daily intercourse with nature has a disciplinary and educational value which can scarcely be overestimated. He sees the principles of cause and effect exemplified in his various occupations and pursuits, and is made acquainted with the great mysteries of life, birth, growth and death; he hears the music of the birds, and the message of the purling streams. In short, he is living under an influence which our higher culture exerts but imperfectly.

His domestic life is passed in the midst of surroundings which inspire confidence and good cheer. Instead of a few dingy rooms in a crowded tenement house, or a small flat on some out-of-the-way street, his home will be a cottage nestled among the hills and trees. In place of the coldness and selfishness of the city boarding-house, the ardor of mutual cooperation and sweet charity pervades the atmosphere of his home. His humble dwelling is not a mere convenience for eating and sleeping, but it is in the truest sense a home, where the family lives, moves, and has its being, where confidences are exchanged, ambitions stirred and consolations enjoyed.

Brought thus in touch with the realities of life, and depending upon the immediate workings of Divine Providence as well as upon his own efforts for the success of his enterprises, he cannot fail to realize that there are mysteries in nature which human reason cannot solve, that there is a Superior Being who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the fields. He is naturally religious and disposed to see the sacramental aspect of nature. The necessity of rain and sunshine for the crops induces him to prayer, thanksgiving and resignation. In his work he becomes conscious of individual responsibility, for unlike the factory hand, he sees and tests the results of his labors. He develops initiative and resourcefulness in order to get the greatest possible results from his operations and is thereby led to study the soil and to observe the elements and the various phenomena of animal and vegetable life. It is not to be wondered at then that under such influences as these the son of nature has a different view of life than his city brother.

One of the happy results of this war may be, that it will force the excessive population of our cities back to the land, where nature and God intended it should live. Many may find the high cost of living, together with the war tax, beyond their

resources—especially since salaries and wages are not being increased in proportion to the advancement of living expenses—and hence will realize the necessity of tilling the soil for a living.

Many, also, who have joined "Uncle Sam's" Commissary Department through patriotic motives, while they are enjoying the pure fresh air and sunlight of the country, and contrasting its wonders and delights with the dark, gloomy workshop or store where they have been confined to monotonous mechanical labor, will decide to take farming for the future. And while nature gradually unfolds itself before them, they will become more and more enraptured by its power and grandeur. There will be awakened within their breasts a true sympathy with nature and with nature's God.

And realizing for the first time in their lives that the earth and all living things were created especially for man, they will exclaim from the fulness of their hearts: "What is man, O Lord, that Thou art mindful of him? Thou hast set him over the works of Thy hands. Thou hast subjected all things under his feet all sheep and oxen; moreover, the beasts of the field; the birds of the air and the fishes of the sea."

—Andrew Pope, O. P.

