

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06458-3 - Fifty Years of Work Without Wages: Laborare est Orare

Charles Rowley

Excerpt

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THE HUNGRY FORTIES

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MR. WALTER CRANE'S DESIGN FOR COAT OF ARMS ON HEARING THAT OUR ANCIENT FAMILY HAD A BOAT OF THEIR OWN AT THE FLOOD, HENCE THE PLIMSOLL LOAD LINE TO PREVENT OVERLOADING.

THE HUNGRY FORTIES

MEMORIES of over seventy years in a busy community are not easily sorted. In looking back everything seems important, but whether of interest or not to an outside world is quite another story. Manchester and Lancashire vigour and originality can easily be accounted for. We are a mixed race, much more so than our Yorkshire neighbours, separated from us by the Pennines. In the southern part of our county we are not in the least degree bucolic. We are, as is well known, on the great coal beds, and the climate is humid—which accounts mainly for our supremacy as spinners of the finest kinds of cotton yarns. This again with our racial admixtures is among the causes of our remarkable ingenuity in the invention and development of labour-saving apparatus. There is no workshop like a cotton mill, whether for spinning or weaving, to compare with it in this regard. There are in our cotton mills literally

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thousands of devices with a labour-saving aim. The Waltham watch factory, which I have seen and studied, is a marvel in such things, but even that latest wonder is a baby compared to an up-to-date cotton mill.

Thus have we used practical science to its utmost, and our mechanical engineering workshops are without rivals. Of course we pay a big price for all this. On the coal-beds of Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire we have a population of some seven millions, and no tree—nothing that the Almighty could call a tree, though there are thousands of blackened sticks which console and delight us with a few months of spring leafage. We have to go far afield for pure, unspoiled nature. On the other hand, the materialistic advantage is undoubted, for not only have we bred an army of great capitalists, but the mass of the people are well housed on the whole, and their wages are, as a rule, good and steady. One supposes there is no other industrial community that is uniformly so well off on the bread-and-butter side of existence.

The alertness of mind resulting from all this is very noticeable by those appealing to our audiences, and in contrast with Southern ones the difference is remarkable. Most of the great forward movements of our time have got their

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most potent impetus hereabout, and the day of those things is not yet over.

Of course it has to be admitted that in matters spiritual and æsthetic we lack that spontaneity, that growing natural atmosphere which is essential to the best growth of these higher and nobler flowers of man's effort. How can it be otherwise, seeing that our fight is so obviously with dead matter and the conquest thereof to our usage? It must not be supposed, however, that these finer flowers of man's activity are entirely lost to us, but it is no use denying the fact that everything spiritual and æsthetic (for they are the same) has to be vigorously fought for all the time, in season and out.

When I was a lad things were not so bad. I could leave the bench in my father's workshop, change my clothes, get a snack of tea, and be in a cricket-field all within the half-hour. All that is over these fifty years or more. We have no fields now.

The survivals in all this both of fine men and women were remarkable. We had in previous generations our De Quincey and our Mrs. Gaskell. But the real founders were John Dalton, the father of modern Chemistry, and Joule, whose demonstration of the mechanical equivalent of heat is the basis of modern mechanical

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development. Chantrey's statue of Dalton and Gilbert's nobler one of J. B. Joule flank you as you enter our Town Hall at Manchester. For good or ill they are the founders of the city and district.

Sam Bamford, Edwin Waugh, Ben Brierley express our idiomatic qualities in a rare and racy folk-speech which for the most part is Greek to those not to the manner born. Bamford was a rare specimen of the sturdy Lancastrian. It was his constant pleasure to tell us all about Peterloo and how the fact that his contingent marched from Middleton, five miles off, "in beautiful order," was a salient point at his trial in his condemnation and imprisonment. These men meant business, but they did not desire turmoil. My father was at Peterloo.

Later, in the hungry forties, we had abounding distress with suffering, of course. My mother often told us that only at the consolations ensuing when one of the thirteen of us came did she have tea in the house—"except at a lying-in" was her phrase. Tea was 6s. a pound. We never felt the hunger, it must be admitted, but then we had work-folk parents with a rare genius for management, and for making the best of things by domestic skill and hard work.

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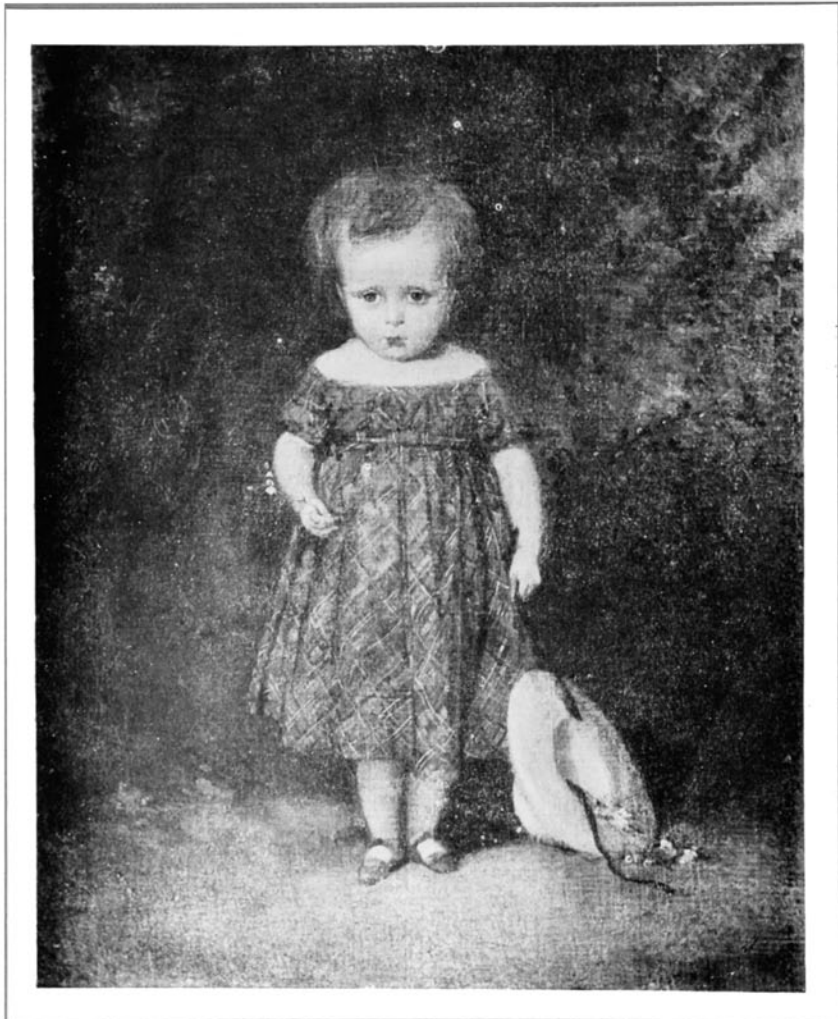
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BY WILLIAM TUKE.



THE AUTHOR.
(Aged three.)

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My father, though in the ordinary acceptance of the term he was not “educated” at all, had a wonderful instinct for fine literature. The publications of Charles Knight, an illustrated Bible, Shakspeare, the Arabian Nights, and other volumes, were the backbone of our library. Another quality besides the choice of fine books was his instinct for good workmanship. For example, he discovered and found work for a gifted portrait painter. Here are reproductions of portraits of my wife and myself, aged three and two years. The originals are about twelve inches by ten and are painted in oils in a truly masterly fashion. In those remote days the price of these little masterpieces was 25s. each. It is not easy to find such excellent examples nowadays at any price. The painter, William Tuke, died young, leaving many larger portraits of equal merit.

Being very delicate in childhood, I never went to school. Reading came by nature somehow, and by choice; a constant browsing on these and other fine books gave me, it is to be hoped, a good turn. Then came the life of the streets of Ancoats in the forties and fifties, working at the bench in a developing workshop; and so went on a process of education more or less valuable.

We were well off enough to go to the Great

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Exhibition in 1851. It is not to be forgotten even now. Memories of that Paxton wonder, of Hyde Park and the crowds, the Thames Tunnel, Madame Tussaud's, and many delectable meals at the "Cheshire Cheese" in Fleet Street, still make the mouth water.

Our family friends by instinct were of a good sort. Among the rest was John Heywood, founder of the great firm of book producers and distributors, along with his brother, Abel Heywood, whose son and grandson of the same name still carry on the great stationery and book business. The first Abel was one of our finest citizens, having endured prison by defying the law with regard to stamped newspapers. John Heywood and my father were directors of the very vigorous Mechanics' Institution in the fifties and sixties. I followed on as Chairman of the School of Art and helper in the finest of Schools of Technology for more than twenty years from 1890.

The grit and public spirit of such men are the unknown factors in a community's growth. Such men are, in their day, overwhelmed for the moment by the excellent talking men, but their value is greater in the long run, for their work lasts on when eloquence is forgotten. It is a fine instinct in the Chinese to worship