

England's Ideal

Edward Carpenter

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The feeling, indeed, seems to be spreading that England stands already on the verge of a dangerous precipice ; at any moment the door may open for her on a crisis more serious than any in her whole history. Rotten to the core, penetrated with falsehood from head to foot, her aristocracy emasculated of all manly life, her capitalist classes wrapped in selfishness, luxury, and self-satisfied philanthropy, her Government offices — army, navy, and the rest — utterly effete, plethoric, gorged (in snake-like coma) with red tape, her Church sleeping profoundly — snoring aloud — her trading classes steeped in deception and money greed, her laborers stupefied with overwork and beer, her poorest stupefied with despair, there is not a point which will bear examination, not a wheel in the whole machine which will not give way under pressure. The slightest disturbance now, and the wheels will actually cease to go round : the first serious strain — European or Eastern war — and who knows but that the governing classes of England will succumb disgracefully. And then — with an exhausting war upon us, our foreign supplies largely cut off, our own country (which might grow ample food for its present population) systematically laid waste and depopulated by landlords, with hopeless commercial depression, stagnation of trade, poverty, and growing furious anarchy — our position will be easier imagined than described.

India — with its "forty millions always on the verge of starvation" — the playground of the sons of English capitalists — must go. Ireland, that has nobly struck the note of better things to all Europe, but who in her long and glorious battle for freedom has received no encouragement from the English people, will desert us. We shall call to her for help, but there shall be no answer — but derision. Egypt will curse the nation of Bondholders.

In the face then of these considerations let us go straight to the heart of the matter. Let us, let all who care or hold ourselves in any way responsible for the fate of a great nation, redeem our lives, redeem the life of England, from this curse of dishonesty. The difficulty is that to many people — and to whole classes — mere honesty seems such a small matter. If it were only some great Benevolent Institution to recommend! But this is like Naaman's case in the Bible : to merely bathe in the Jordan and make yourself clean — is really too undignified!

But the disease from which the nation is suffering is dishonesty ; the more you look into it the clearer you will perceive that this is so. Let us confess it. What we have all been trying to do is to live at the expense of other people's labor, without giving an equivalent of our own labor in return. Some succeed, others only try ; but it comes to much the same thing.

Let a man pause just for once in this horrid scramble of modern life, and ask himself what he really consumes day by day of other people's labor — what in the way of food, of clothing, of washing, scrubbing, and the attentions of domestics, or even of his own wife and children — ^what money he spends in drink, dress, books, pictures, at the theatre, in travel. Let him sternly, and as well as he may, reckon up the sum total by which he has thus made himself indebted to his fellows, and then let him consider what he creates for their benefit in return. Let him -strike the balance. Is he a benefactor of society? — is it quits between him and his countrymen and women? — or is he a dependent upon them, a vacuum and a minus quantity? — a, beggar, alms-receiver, or thief?

And not only What is he? but What is he trying to be? For on the Ideal hangs the whole question. Here at last we come back to the root of national life. What the ideal cherished by the people at large is, that the nation will soon become. Each individual man is not always sure to realise the state of life that he has in his mind, but in the nation it is soon realised ; and if the current idea of individuals is to get as much and give as little as they can, to be debtors of society and alms-receivers of the labor of others, then you have the spectacle of a nation, as England to-day, rushing on to bankruptcy and ruin, saddled with a huge national debt, and converted into one gigantic workhouse and idle shareholders' asylum. (Imagine a lot of people on an island — all endeavoring to eat other people's dinners, but taking precious care not to provide any of their own — and you will have a picture of what the " well-to-do " on this island succeed in doing, and a lot of people not well- to-do are trying to arrive at.)

For there is no question that this is the Ideal of England to-day — to live dependent on others, consuming much and creating next to nothing — to occupy a spacious house, have servants ministering to you, dividends converging from various parts of the world towards you, workmen handing you the best part of their labor as profits, tenants obsequiously bowing as they disgorge their rent, and a good balance at the bank ; to be a kind of human sink into which much flows but out of which nothing ever comes — except an occasional putrid whiff of Charity and Patronage — this, is it not the thing which we have before us? which if we have not been fortunate enough to attain to, we are doing our best to reach.

Sad that the words "lady" and "gentleman" — once nought but honorable — should now have become so soiled by all ignoble use. But I fear that nothing can save them. The modern Ideal of Gentility is hopelessly corrupt, and it must be our avowed object to destroy it.

Of course, among its falsities, the point which I have already alluded to is the most important. It is absolutely useless for the well-to-do of this country to talk of Charity while they are abstracting the vast sums they do from the laboring classes, or to pretend to alleviate by philanthropic nostrums the frightful poverty which they are creating whole- sale by their mode of life. All the money given by the Church, by charity organisations, by societies or individuals? or out of the rates, and all the value of the gratuitous work done by country gentlemen, philanthropists, and others, is a mere drop in the ocean compared with the sums which these same people and their relatives abstract from the poor, under the various legal pretences of interest, dividends, rent, profits, and state-payments of many kinds. " They clean the outside of the cup and platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

If for every man who consumes more than he creates there must of necessity be another man who has to consume less than he creates, what must be the state of affairs in that nation where a vast class— and ever vaster becoming — is living in the height of unproductive wastefulness? (Obvious!) another vast class — and ever vaster becoming — must be sinking down into the abyss

of toil, penury, and degradation. Look at Brighton and Scarborough and Hastings and the huge West End of London, and the poHte villa residences which like unwholesome toadstools dot and disfigure the whole of this great land. On what are these " noble " mansions of organised idleness built except upon the bent back of poverty and lifelong hopeless unremitting toil! Think! you who live in them, what your life is, and upon what it is founded.

As far as the palaces of the rich stretch through Mayfair and Belgravia and South Kensington, so far (and farther) must the hovels of the poor inevitably stretch in the opposite direction. There is no escape. It is useless to talk about better housing of these unfortunates unless you strike at the root of their poverty ; and if you want to see the origin and explanation of an East London rookery, you must open the door and walk in upon some fashionable dinner party at the West End, where elegance, wealth, ease, good gram- mar, politeness, and literary and sentimental conversation only serve to cover up and conceal a heartless mockery — the lie that it is a fine thing to live upon the labor of others. You may abolish the rookery, but if you do not abolish the other thing, the poor will only find some other place to die in ; and one room in a sanitary and respectable neighborhood will serve a family for that purpose as well as a whole house in a dirtier locality. If this state of affairs were to go on long (which it won't do) England would be converted, as I have said, into one vast workhouse and pauper asylum, in which rows of polite paupers, surrounded by luxuries and daintily fed, would be entirely served and supported by another class — of paupers unable to get bread enough to eat!

But the whole Gentry business is corrupt throughout and will not bear looking into for a moment. It is incom- patible with Christianity (at least as Christ appears to have taught it) ; it gives a constant lie to the doctrine of human brotherhood.

The wretched man who has got into its toils must surren- der that most precious of all things — the human relation to the mass of mankind. He feels a sentimental sympathy certainly for his " poorer brethren ; ** but he finds that he lives in a house into which it would be simply an insult to ask one of them ; he wears clothes in which it is impossible for him to do any work of ordinary usefulness. If he sees an old woman borne down by her burden in the street, he can run to the charity organisation perhaps and get an officer to enquire into her case — but he cannot go straight up to her like a man, and take it from her on to his own shoulders ; for he is a gentleman, and might soil his clothes! It is doubtful even whether— clothes or no clothes, old wo- man or no old woman — he could face the streets where he is known with a bundle on his shoulders ; his dress is a barrier to all human relation with simple people, and his words of sympathy with the poor and suffering are wasted on the wide air while the flash of his jewellery is in their eyes.

He finds himself among people wh6se constipated man. ners and frozen speech are a continual denial of all natural affection — and a continual warning against offence ; where to say 'onesty is passable, but to say 'ouse causes a positive congestion ; where human dignity is at such a low ebb that to have an obvious patch upon your coat would be con- sidered fatal to it ; where manners have reached (I think) the very lowest pitch of littleness and niaiserie\ where human wants and the sacred facts, sexual and other, on which human life is founded, are systematically ignored ; where to converse with a domestic at the dinner table would be an unpardonable breach of etiquette ; where it is assumed as a matter of course that you do nothing for yourself — to lighten the burden which your presence in the world neces- sarily casts upon others ; where to be discovered washing your own linen, or cooking your own dinner, or up to the elbows in dough on baking day, or helping to get the coals in, or scrubbing your own floor, or cleaning out your own privy, would pass a sentence of lifelong banishment on you ; where all dirty work, or at least

such work as is considered dirty by the "educated" people in a household, is thrust upon young and ignorant girls ; where children are brought up to feel far more shame at any little breach of social decorum — at an "h" dropped,* or a knife used in the wrong place at dinner, or a wrong appellation given to a visitor — than at glaring acts of selfishness and uncharitableness.

In short, the unfortunate man finds himself in a net of falsehoods ; the whole system of life around him is founded on falsehood. The pure beautiful relation of humanity, the most sacred thing in all this world, is betrayed at every step ; and Christianity with its message of human love, Democracy with its magnificent conception of inward and sacramental human equality, can only be cherished by him in the hidden interior of his being ; they can have no real abiding place in his outward life.

And when he turns to the sources from which his living is gained, he only flounders from the quagmire into the bog. The curse of dishonesty is upon him ; he can find no bottom anywhere.

The interest of his money comes to him he knows not whence ; it is wrung from the labour of someone — he knows not whom. His capital is in the hands of railway companies, and his dividends are gained in due season — but how? He dares not enquire. What have companies, what have directors and secretaries and managers to do with the question whether justice is done to the workmen? and when did a shareholder ever rise up and contend that dividends ought to be less and wages more? (I met with a case once in a report : but he was hissed down.)

His rents come to him from land and houses. Shall he go round and collect them himself? No, that is impossible. This farmer would show him such a desperate balance-sheet, that widow would plead such a piteous tale, this house might be in too disgraceful a state, and entail untold repairs. No, it is impossible. He must employ an agent or steward, and go and live at Paris or Brighton, out of sight and hearing of those whose misfortunes might disturb his peace of mind ; — or put his money affairs entirely in the hands of a solicitor. That is a good way to stifle conscience.

Money entails duties. How shall we get the money and forget the duties? Voila the great problem! . . . But we cannot forget the duties. They cark unseen.

He has lent out his money on mortgage. Horrid word that " mortgage! " — " foreclosure," too! — sounds like clutching somebody by the throat! Best not go and see the party who is mortgaged; — might be some sad tale come out. Do it through a solicitor, too, and it will be all right.

Thus the unfortunate man of whom I have spoken finds that, turn where he may, the whole of his life — his external life — rests on falsehood. And I would ask you, reader, especially well-to-do and dividend-drawing reader, is this — this picture of the ordinary life of English" gentility — your Ideal of life? or is it not? For if it is do not be ashamed of it, but please look it straight in the face and understand exactly what it means : but if it is not, then come out of it! It may take you years to get out ; certainly you will not shake yourself free in a week, or a month, or many months, but still — Come out!

And surely the whole state of society which is founded on this Ideal, however wholesome or fruitful it may have once been, has in these latter days (whether we see it or not) become quite decayed and barren and corrupt. It is no good disguising the fact; surely much better is it that it should be exposed and acknowledged. Of those who are involved in this state of society we need think no evil. They are our brothers and sisters, as well as the rest ; and oftentimes, consciously or unconsciously, are suffering, caught in its toils.

Why to-day are there thousands and thousands throughout these classes who are weary, depressed, miserable, who discern no object to live for ; who keep wondering whether life is worth

living, and writing weary dreary articles in magazines on that subject? Who keep wandering from the smoking-room of the club into Piccadilly and the park, and from the park into picture galleries and theatres ; who go and " stay " with friends in order to get away from their own surroundings, and seek " change of air," if by any means that may bring with it a change of interest of life? Why, indeed? Except because the human heart (to its eternal glory) cannot subsist on lies ; because — whether they know it or not — the deepest truest instincts of their nature are belied, falsified at every turn of their actual lives : and therefore they are miserable, therefore they seek something else, they know not clearly what.

If, looking on England, I have thought that it is time this Thing should come to an end, because of the poverty- stricken despairing multitudes who are yearly sacrificed for the maintenance of it, and (as many a workman has said to me) are put to a slow death that it may be kept going, I have at other times thought that, even more for the sake of those who ride in the Juggernaut car itself, to terminate the hydra-headed and manifold misery which lurks deep down behind their decorous exteriors and well-appointed surroundings, should it be finally abolished.

Anyhow, it must go. The hour of its condemnation has struck. And not only the false thing, I speak to you, working men and women of England, that you should no longer look to the ideal which creates this Thing — that you should no longer look forward to a day when you shall turn your back on your brothers and sisters, and smooth back white and faultless wrist-bands — living on their labor! but that you shall look to the new Ideal, the ideal of social brotherhood, and of honesty, which, as surely as the sun rises in the morning, shall shortly rise on our suffering and sorrowing country.

But I think I hear some civilisee say, " Your theories are all very well, and all about honesty and that sort of thing, but it is all quite impracticable. Why, if I were only to consume an equal value to that which I create, I should never get on at all. Let alone cigars and horses and the like, but how about my wife and family? I don't see how I could possibly keep up appearances and if I were to let my position go, all my usefulness (details not given) would go with it. Besides, I really don't see how a man can create enough for all his daily wants. Of course, as you say, there must be thousands and millions who are obliged to do so, and more (in order to support us\ but how the deuce they live I cannot imagine — and they must have to work awfully hard. But I suppose it is their business to support us, and I don't see how civilisation would get on without them, and in return of course we keep them in order, you know, and give them lots of good advice! "

To all which I reply, " Doubtless there is something very appalling in the prospect of actually maintaining one- self — but I sincerely believe that it is possible. Besides, would not you yourself think it very interesting just to try ; if only to see what you would dispense with if you had to do the labor connected with it — or its equivalent? If you had to cook your own dinner, for instance? "

" By Jove! I believe one would do without a lot of sauces and side dishes! "

" Or if you had to do a week's hard work merely to get a new coat "

" Of course I should make the old one do— only it would become so beastly unfashionable."

That is about it. There are such a lot of things which we could do without — which we really don't want — only, and but ... !

And rather than sacrifice these beloved ones and buts, rather than snip off a few wants, or cut a sorry figure before friends, we rush on with the great crowd which jams and jostles through the gateway of Greed over the bodies of those who have fallen in the struggle. And we enjoy no rest, and our hours of Idleness, when they come, are not delightful as they should be. For they

are not free and tuneful like the Idleness of a ploughboy or a lark, but they are clouded with the spectral undefined remembrance of those at the price of whose blood they have been bought. As to the difficulty of maintaining oneself, listen to this, please ; and read it slowly : ” For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands ; and I found that by working about six weeks in a year I could meet all the expenses of living.” Who was it wrote these extraordinary words? It has for some time been one of the serious problems of Political Economy to know how much labor is really required to furnish a man with ordinary necessaries. The proportion between labor and its reward has been lost sight of amid the complexities of modern life ; and we only know for certain that the ordinary wages of manual labor represent very much less than the value actually created.

Fortunately for us, however, about forty years ago a man thoroughly tired of wading through the bogs of modern social life had the pluck to land himself on the dry ground of actual necessity. He squatted on a small piece of land in New England, built himself a little hut, produced the main articles of his own food, hired himself out now and then for a little ready money, and has recorded for us, as above, the results of his experience. Moreover, to leave no doubt as to his meaning, he adds, ”The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.” (He was an author and naturalist.)

The name of this man was Henry Thoreau. His book ”Walden” (and anyone can obtain it now) gives the details of the experiment by which he proved that a man can actually maintain himself and have abundant leisure besides! And this, too, under circumstances of considerable disadvantage ; for Thoreau isolated himself to a great extent from the co-operation of his fellows, and had to contend single-handed with Nature in the midst of the woods, where his crops were sadly at the mercy of wild creatures. It is true, as I have said, that he had built himself a hut, and had two or three acres of land to start with ; but what a margin does his six weeks in a year leave for critical subtractions!

If anyone, however, doubts the truth of the general statement contained in the last paragraph, his doubt must surely be removed by a study of the conditions of life in England in the fifteenth century. At that time, between the fall of the feudal barons and the rise of the capitalists and landlords, there was an interval during which the workers actually got something like their due, and were not robbed to any great extent by the classes above them. Thorold Rogers, in his ” Work and Wages,” gives the wages of an unskilled town laborer at 6d. a day in the 15th century, while the price of a sheep at that time was 2s. Now the proportions are 3s. to 50s. Four centuries ago the laborer could have bought the sheep with four days’ work ; now he requires the toil of sixteen or seventeen days. Similarly with the price of an ox, which was then 20s. Even bread he could earn with less work than now. Why is this? Surely our country is not at present so overgrazed and cultivated as to increase the difficulty of raising beasts and crops (on the contrary, it is half-deserted and under-cultivated) ; nor, certainly, did the laborer in the fifteenth century receive more than he might be said to have created by his labor. Why then does the laborer to-day not get anything like that reward? The reason is obvious. His labor is as fruitful as ever, but the greater part of its produce — its reward — is taken from him.

As fruitful as ever? — far more fruitful than ever ; for we have taken no account of the vast evolutions of machinery. What that reward would be, under our greatly-increased powers of production — if it were only righteously distributed — we may leave to be imagined.

As to Thoreau, the real truth about him is that he was a thorough economist. He reduced life to its simplest terms, and having, so to speak, labor in his right hand and its reward in his left,

he had no difficulty in seeing what was worth laboring for and what was not, and no hesitation in discarding things that he did not think worth the time or trouble of production.

And I believe myself that the reason why he could so easily bring himself to do without these things, and thus became free — "presented with the freedom" of nature and of life — was that he was a thoroughly educated man in the true sense of the word.

It seems to be an accepted idea nowadays that the better educated anyone is the more he must require. "A plough-man can do on so much a year, but an educated man — O quite impossible!"

Allow me to say that I regard this idea as entirely false. First of all, if it were true, what a dismal prospect it would open out to us! The more educated we became the more we should require for our support, the worse bondage we should be in to material things. We should have to work continually harder and harder to keep pace with our wants, or else to trench more and more on the labor of others; at each step the more complicated would the problem of existence become.

But it is entirely untrue. Education does not turn a man into a creature of blind wants, a prey to ever fresh thirsts and desires — it brings him into relation with the world around him. It enables a man to derive pleasure and to draw sustenance from a thousand common things, which bring neither joy nor nourishment to his more enclosed and imprisoned brother. The one can beguile an hour anywhere. In the field, in the street, in the workshop, he sees a thousand things of interest. The other is bored, he must have a toy — a glass of beer or a box at the opera — but these things cost money.

Besides, the educated man, if truly educated, has surely more resources of skilful labor to fall back upon — he need not fear about the future. The other may do well to accumulate a little fund against a rainy day.

It is only to education commonly so-called — the false education — that these libels apply. I admit that to the current education of the well-to-do they do apply, but that it is only or mainly a cheap-jack education, an education in glib phrases, grammar, and the art of keeping up appearances, and has little to do with bringing anyone into relation with the real world around him — the real world of humanity, of honest daily life, of the majesty of Nature, and the wonderful questions and answers of the soul, which out of these are whispered on everyone who fairly faces them.

Let us then have courage. There is an ideal before us, an ideal of Honest Life — which is attainable, not very difficult of attainment, and which true education will help us to attain to, not lead us astray from.

A man may if he likes try the experiment of Thoreau, and restrict himself to the merest necessities of life — so as to see how much labor it really requires to live. Starting from that zero point, he may add to his luxuries and to his labors as he thinks fit. How far he travels along that double line will of course depend upon temperament. Thoreau, as I have said, made a specialty of economy. One day he picked up a curiosity and kept it on his shelf for a time; but soon finding that it required dusting he threw it out of the window! It did not pay for its keep. Thoreau preferred leisure to ornaments; other people may prefer ornaments to leisure. There is of course no prejudice — all characters, temperaments, and idiosyncrasies are welcome and thrice welcome. The only condition is that you must not expect to have the ornaments and the idleness both. If you choose to live in a room full of ornaments no one can make the slightest possible objection; but you must not expect Society (in the form of your maidservant) to dust them for you, unless you do something useful for Society in return. (I need not at this time of day say that giving

Money is not equivalent to "doing something useful" — unless you have fairly earned the money ; then it is.)

Let us have courage. There is ample room within this ideal of Honest Life for all human talent, ingenuity, diver- gency of thought and temperament. It is not a narrow- cramped ideal. How can it be? — for it alone contains in it the possibility of human brotherhood. But I warn you : it is not compatible with that other ideal of Worldly Gen- tility. I do not say this lightly. I know what it is for any- one to have to abandon the forms in which he has been brought up ;^ nor do I wish to throw discredit on any one class, for I know that this ideal permeates more or less the greater part of the nation to-day. But the hour demands absolute fidelity. There is no time now for temporising. England stands on the brink of a crisis in which no wealth, no armaments, no diplomacy will save her — only an awaken- ing of the National Conscience. If this comes she will live — if it comes not . . . ?

The canker of effete gentility has eaten into the heart of this nation. Its noble men and women are turned into toy ladies and gentlemen ; the eternal dignity of (voluntary) Poverty and Simplicity has been forgotten in an unworthy scramble for easy chairs. Justice and Honesty have got themselves melted away into a miowling and watery philan- thropy; the rule of honor between master and servant, and servant and master, between debtor and creditor, and buyer and seller, has been turned into a rule of dishonor, concealment, insincere patronage, and sharp bargains ; and England lies done to death by her children who should have loved her.

As for you, working men and working women of England — in whom now, if anywhere, the hope of England lies — I appeal to you at any rate to cease from this ideal, I appeal to you to cease your part in this gentility business — to cease respecting people because they wear fine clothes and ornaments, and because they live in grand houses. You know you do these things, or pretend to do them, and to do either is foolish. We have had ducking and forelock- pulling enough. It is time for you to assert the dignity of human labor. I do not object to a man saying " sir " to his equal, or to an elder, but I do object to his saying " sir " to broadcloth or to a balance at the bank. Why don't you say " yes " and have done with it? Remember that you, too, have to learn the lesson of honesty. You know that in your heart of hearts you despise this nonsense ; you know that when the " gentleman's " back is turned you take off his fancy airs, and mimic his incapable importances, or launch out into bitter abuse of one who you think has wronged you. Would it not be worthier, if you have these differences, not to conceal them, but for the sake of your own self-respect to face them out firmly and candidly?

The re-birth of England cannot come without sacrifices from you, too. On the contrary, what- ever is done, you will have to do the greater part of it. You will often have to incur the charge of disrespect ; you will have to risk, and to lose, situations ; you will have to bear ridicule, and — perhaps — arms ; Anarchists, Socialists, Communists, you will hear yourselves called. But what would you have? It is no good preaching Democracy with your mouths, if you are going to stand all the while and prop with your shoulders the rotten timbers of Feudahsm — of which, riddled as they have been during three centuries by the maggots of Usury, we need say no worse than that it is time they should fall.

I say from this day you must set to work yourselves in word thought and deed to root out this genteel dummy — this hairdresser's Ideal of Humanity — and to establish your- selves (where you stand) upon the broad and sacred ground of human labor. As long as you continue to send men to Parliament because they ride in carriages or cannot have a meeting without asking a "squire," whom you secretly make fun of, to take the chair, or must have clergymen and baronets

patrons of your benefit clubs — so long are you false to your natural instincts, and to your own great destinies.

Be arrogant rather than humble, rash rather than stupidly contented ; but, best of all, be firm, helpful towards each other, forgetful of differences, scrupulously honest in yourselves, and charitable even to your enemies, but determined that nothing shall move you from the purpose you have set before you — the righteous distribution in society of the fruits of your own and other men's labor, the return to Honesty as the sole possible basis of national life and national safety, and the redemption of England from the curse which rests upon her.

Commentary text from the initial author of this entry:

The little book containing 'England's Ideal and other Papers on Social Subjects,' by Edward Carpenter (price 1s., .. cloth edition 2s. 6d, Swan Sonnenschein and Co.) should be read by every one. It is impossible for man or woman to do so without self-application of a wholesome kind. To those who are of the writer's way of thinking, his vigorous sentences will be so many trumpet notes of encouragement, To those halting between two opinions the record of his personal experiences will give the necessary impetus to join the ranks of Socialism, for the way is marked out too plainly to be mistaken. While to the adversaries of the new development, if any such should have the good luck to come across the book, tee laying bare in all its ugliness the canker of their respectability may be a help to point them to a method of cauterization if they be not already past cure.

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