

Hard Working Philander Peppers

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

Several men stood about the door way of a big stone building, an iron foundry, talking in a desultory fashion; it was nearly 1 o'clock and the whistle would soon blow, so they were lingering there to be on hand in time, though not one of them would waste a moment in his place of work ahead of time. A man had been found dead on the railroad track that morning, and they were discussing the matter. The paper had said: "Nothing on the person of the deceased indicated his name or residence. It was decided that he was a workingman by his poor clothing."

"Now, why is it," asked a thoughtful looking workingman, "I'd like to know, that a 'poor workingman' is always to be distinguished by his poor clothing and general poverty? Workingmen create all the wealth that exists, 'cept that which God creates, yet he is always known by his 'poor clothes and rough ways.' Why don't some of the wealth he makes stick to him?"

"Oh, that's gettin' to be cant with you fellows," said another. "You think nobody ever works unless he swings a hammer or a kettle of white hot iron. The capitalist works harder and longer and does more than any of us and deserves more."

"It depends on the kind of work he does. If it is work needed by society or individual members of society, that's all right. But he works for himself; he plans day and night how to get more work out of his men and more money for his goods, and how best he can beat his competitors. No human being besides himself is benefited by his 'labor.'" Just then the whistle blew and the men went into the building.

The proprietor and superintendent came hastening up behind them. He was a little past middle age, and possessed a worn, anxious appearance and a nervous, hurried manner. He gave a quick, comprehensive glance over the great apartment, saw that the men were in their proper places ready for work, and then he passed swiftly into his office. A pile of newly-arrived letters lay on his desk; scarce taking time to recover his normal breath, he attacked the pile, read and assorted them, made copious notes, and sent for his stenographer. He dictated for an hour or so, and was called out to look at something which required his attention. He spent some time in investigation and study over the work, and ended with a careful tour of the shop, noting everything with keen judgment. It was near closing time. In a few moments the whistle blew, the men hurried on with their coats, and dived past him to the doors. He was the last one to leave beside the keeper.

At 7 o'clock, Philander Pepper was back in his office, and soon pouring over books and papers with a keen zest while the silence and darkness reigned all about. He could compose himself and work better at that time than in the daylight. Eleven o'clock rang out before he lifted his head

with a weary sigh as he closed his books. He turned out the lights and passed into the almost deserted streets with a dizzy feeling and a sense of surprise at the real world as it presented itself to him after his many hours of work. Who deserved success if not this man?

The next day a delegation from the men came to him and deferentially asked for a slight modification of some of the rules and an increase—a very little increase in wages in some of the departments; he was reminded that their work was very hard and dangerous and that they barely lived and raised their families at it. Philander heard them through with a firm grip over himself to curb all expression of the impatience and haste which racked him.

“Boys,” he said when they were through, “go back to your work like men! All work is hard—all men who ever amount to anything, work hard. Do I idle any time away? I work more hours and my work is more burdensome, heavier with anxiety and responsibility. I worked until 11 o’clock last night, till 10 the night before and for many nights before while you men were resting or asleep. What would become of your jobs, I’d like to know if I didn’t work like that? Yet, I’m not kicking and grumbling—I don’t cease to keep the business going because there’s a little hard work in it. You get enough in return for your labor to keep yourselves and your families in good working and growing condition. What more can you want? Now, come, boys, my time is valuable, go back to work, and we’ll say no more about it.”

The men looked down at the floor, hesitated, and then silently bowed themselves out. The thoughtful man seemed to want to say something and lingered behind; but the superintendent had turned to his papers eagerly as though there were no grumbling wage-workers in the world, and already seemed engrossed in his work. It appeared to be so presumptuous, so inappropriate to break in upon him again, that he hardly had the assurance to do so. He, too, silently went away.

Men, women and children do work day after day to the limit of their strength, and are not conscious of being so very miserable. The vigor and vitality of their beings are expended daily beyond the power of nature to restore them, but the wasting process is so slow, so gradual, that it is at least endurable, and they are even unconscious that the strength and life are going, going as sure as time, until some day a sudden break down occurs, and they realize all at once that they are literally “worn out.” So worked Philander Peppers and his hands for several years. Occasionally a poor manual laborer dropped his tools and fell beside his work. When this happened, his income ceased; nothing was left him but to be carted away to the poor house, there to be half slave, half prisoner until death came to release him from his sorrows; or to the pitiful home of some poor relative himself a pitifully paid toiler, who can give him but meagre care and support. Even worse off is the worn out worker than the worn out horse.

Philander Peppers seemed to think himself indestructible, infallible, impervious to outside influences. He prided himself on his virtuous industry, and whenever the hard lot of the worker was broached, he pointed to himself as a sample of what man ought to do and be. The man who failed never aroused a spark of sympathy or interest in his breast; it was simply the man’s fault. He himself had redeemed every fault, every failing, every sin, by his indefatigable industry; and, indeed, it seemed he had convinced every one else of the same. No one dared complain of hard work and small pay to him—he was too stupendous an illustration of what zeal and hard work could accomplish. And he toiled on, getting richer and richer in money but poorer in spirit and vigor as the years passed by. It was seldom that Peppers ever stopped to think that his life might end; but if he ever did so, it was with a feeling of satisfaction that he had done a great deal of good in the world, he had been so very busy. Capitalist though he was, he had worked hard as

any common wage-earner ever could, and the most extreme labor agitator could not complain that he had not righteously earned his wealth, surely!

But one morning, he found that he could not rise as usual. He made a desperate effort at last and managed to get on his feet, but the world whirled around and away from him and he began to fall— down, down, to most terrible depths in a horrible darkness, and finally into insensibility. He came to a vague consciousness, ages later it seemed to him, and found he was lying in his room with doctors and nurses about him, a still, sickish atmosphere around, and a strange, unfamiliar sense of unreality within him. He seemed to be face to face with his own soul and to be afraid of it. His life began to unroll itself before him as though it were some other man's. "What does this mean?" he thought. "Is this death? Were his labors done forever in this world?"

It was borne in upon him that this was true. It seemed incredible, from his point of view, but he was compelled to accept the fact. He tried to find comfort in reviewing his past virtuous and industrious life.

"How I have worked! I have had no vices, I have never dissipated, never indulged in an idle and luxurious existence, never shirked any duty. Human kind may well thank me for having lived!"

But his soul, or his subconsciousness or something which seemed for the time to be a thing apart from his usual thinking self, seemed to be arraigned against him. It asked him:

"For whom have you worked?" and it appeared he could not refrain from answering, "For self." An echo came back, "For self."

"But all this sacrifice of comfort and enjoyment I might have had, does that count for nothing?"

"The least you could do for a world out of which you have taken so much was to be happy in it." This thought startled him, and he questioned no more for some minutes. Then he queried:

"But my great efforts, my many hours of toil, certainly they have been an adequate return to the world for all that I have gained?"

"But your toil was not directed toward benefiting the world. All your careful and intense study of commerce and of economic conditions was simply that you might the faster undermine your competitors; your investigations into the best division of labor, into the saving of labor, into facilitating labor was to get the most results in the least possible time, have resulted in your being able to reap a greater profit out of the exertions of your employees. They were not benefited by your labors along that time."

"But I have carried on a great business; I have brought certain productions with the reach of all who needed them. I have aided in the progress of civilization by so much as I have facilitated the production of necessary articles needed by mankind."

"Yes, necessary superintendence and any invention 'by which production can be made easier, are legitimate labors and deserve natural returns. You deserve pay for these things."

"But I have studied, schemed and planned, I have poured over statistics, I have made myself familiar with the laws of trade, I have watched the financial market, in fact, I have built up a business that some one else may carry on with ease. That is something."

"By your own showing, your hard work, has but enabled you to ruin several competing business houses which did not possess your advantages, and to rob your working men a little more systematically and readily than other employes have done. Is the world or society any better off for your having done this?"

“By my good business management I have enabled hundreds of workingmen to earn their living. Is not this something?”

“Without monopolization and men like you, the work of the world could be done by the combining of workingmen into groups or associations, which could exchange productions with each other and no man could have any excuse for robbing them of four-fifths of what they produce. You gave no privilege to the workingmen,—he would have had all you gave him if he had not first have been robbed. But each one of them gave you a privilege, a chance to reap great profits from his efforts. Your hard work is no more credit to you than the work of Jesse James or any bold burglar. They ran great risks, they studied hard to master all the details of their calling; as they are perfect in it, they are enabled to rob more people. So you have worked to gain property for self—and now you must go away and leave it. Your employes have built into your wealth their vitality, their lives, their happiness, and these you cannot restore to them. Even if you endow colleges, and present libraries, you cannot make just retribution for the wronged ones are beyond your power to aid.”

The hard-working Philander thus communed with his inner self, that part of one's self which never loses its divinity, long and earnestly, but could extract little comfort from it. He had worked himself to death, and had believed his life would commend him to all classes of people, and would gloss over and excuse all other possible faults. But he had come to a place where he would have given all his wealth to remember some deed of spontaneous kindness, some outburst of real sympathy, some loving deed that had made some one truly happy. But he could not. All his hard righteousness, his implacable adherence to duty as he saw it had blessed no man, made no person's life sweeter. Finally he remembered an evening when he had given up working, to keep company with a homesick young man whom he had known in his younger days; and he had applied himself to amusing and cheering him as earnestly as he had at other times toiled the whole evening. So this one little incident when he had “evaded duty,” brought a greater calm to his soul than all his hours of faithful work.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lizzie M. Holmes
Hard Working Philander Peppers
1902

Retrieved on 29th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *The Tailor* 12 no. 10 (May 1902): 7–9.

theanarchistlibrary.org