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Two Types of Wasted Lives

Lizzie M. Holmes

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An exquisite young creature, the son of a millionaire father, lolls on the luxurious divan of a room in his favorite club house, enduring an attack of twentieth century ennui. George Meredith is a fair product of the best modern culture. All that generations have accumulated of knowledge, taste, elegance have been given him; nothing has been wanting. Whatever could add to the rich development of a human being, whatever the world held that could minister to the perfection of a precious creation has been obtained for this young man. There enters another man, much like himself except that his effort to keep up the pace is a desperate struggle.

“That you, Clifton?” Meredith drawls. “Sit down, or whatever else you like. Then tell me, in a word, what we are good for?”

Clifton sprawls himself over a rich pile of upholstery and answers carelessly:

“In whose eyes, for instance?”

“Anybody’s.”

“The tradesmen would miss us—so would our valets, until they secured other positions.”

“But society, the world—”

“We ornament them, no doubt.”

“Dubious. Chollie Warrington with his lisp and his cane and his empty purse is prettier than you at your best.”

“Complimentary. What’s the matter with you?”

“I don’t know, and I want you to tell me. I’m sick of myself. What shall I do?”

“You might go to work.”

“To jostle some one else who can do the work much better than I can, out of his place. And then—business is so beastly vulgar.”

“You might go in for charity—doing good, and that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I subscribe to all the charities—no satisfaction in it—like trying to bale out a leaky ship with a tin cup.”

“I mean the regular thing—go down among the poor and learn all about them—sympathy, and all that, you know.”

“Couldn’t do it, on my life. Poverty may be picturesque in the Old World, but here—it looks badly and smells worse. I couldn’t give a common starving man a meal if I had to stay and watch him eat it. Besides, they’re impudent. They won’t understand us.”

“They’re not as obsequious as where they’ve made a business of it for several centuries, that is true. Why don’t you take up some science,

or art—follow it up and get ahead of the rest?”

“What’s the use? Specialists do it better, and they can tell me all about it when I want to hear them. There’s no need of my exerting myself at anything. I can hire people to do all that needs doing.”

“Plunge into some preposterous extravagances.”

“I’ve exhausted them all—and still I’ve never succeeded in getting hard up.”

“Ah me!” sighed the other. “I’m a past graduate at that. Since getting rid of your money is so difficult, did it ever occur to you to inquire how you get it? It must cost somebody a pretty expenditure of muscle, brain and skill. Why not check the supply?”

“Too complicated. Too much trouble. Somebody must like to create my wealth or they would not do it.”

He met his death very recently at a machine that was not sufficiently protected. With the little money he had laid up they sent him home to his parents to be buried. Some one said kindly, "Well, he was always a good, quiet fellow," but another clod took his place and soon he will be forgotten. He was only another miserable one at the other extreme of the social and industrial scale.

"Why don't you marry and set up as a solid citizen and the head of a family?"

Something like a pang of pain flitted across the young man's face before he answered.

"I've made love a toy, a game, a diabolical means for searching out new sensations, and I can not consider it seriously now in view of a life-long arrangement. I've exhausted all there is in it long ago. I could not make a mockery of a dead and worn-out thing."

Clifton turned his head away from the speaker with a strange, new look that was partly repugnance.

"You might find some new device of wickedness—there are those who could invent them for you," he said.

"Too disagreeable. As to drunkenness, I know all the stages—hideous, all of them. Gambling! Endless days and nights of it—horrible to look back upon—what is there in it? Women? I can remember only a delirium and a sorrow, and a haunting, white, cold, girl's face. I've made up my mind that all that sort of thing is bad form. I'm out of it."

"Well, Meredith, we're all in a bad way. We are the worst of sinners more because we have nothing to do and no incentive to do any one thing more than anything else. What is it the world expects of us? Nothing, it seems, in these days.

"Every preceding age has had some good use for its rich men. Once, the 'noble men,' those exempt from hard labor, were the defenders of their homes, soldiers, knights—all the glory, honor, reward for brave deeds and heroic lives were theirs—to win! The mightiness of achievement were theirs, and that is denied us. In more peaceful days, freedom from common toil meant proud honors won in other fields—in science, philosophy, art, literature, poetry. The noble striving after these things was once the excuse for a wealthy and idle class. What possible apology have we today for existing?"

“I doubt if we are not more of an injury to society after all than the poor wretches we are always picking up and punishing. Let’s get out of it all, Meredith.”

Meredith looks at his friend, in his strange mood pacing up and down the floor, and a vague, trembling light comes into the sullen eyes for a moment. But it dies away, and with a shrug he only questions: “What’s the use?” The most lavish endowment of wealth has given only weariness and misery to its idle possessor.

One sees the other extreme much more frequently. There is little need of drawing the picture.

A country lad—a son of poor parents who, owning no land of their own, did farm work for their neighbors and lived in a little rented cabin with their four children. He went to school as much as he could be spared while a child. At fourteen he attended his last term. He loved books and showed a talent for letters. Reading, composition and grammar were his delights.

But after school days were over there was little time for books, and no means of obtaining them. Frank Kirby was only a bashful, serious boy, not a persistent or an energetic one, who would get books and time to read them though the heavens fell. He needed encouragement, suggestions, advice and a little opportunity, but was no less deserving for that. He worked on the neighboring farms until he was eighteen, and his tall figure was already bent with hard work and his mind clouded with weariness and disuse.

Then, there being no real chance for him to do a man’s work for a man’s pay in the crude little neighborhood, he set out for a large town some fifty miles away. After various vicissitudes he at last found work in a factory for small pay; but it was regular and he made his wants small.

In the course of time he made the acquaintance of a few working boys and girls who had formed a club for mental improvement and sociability and was invited to join. He gladly did so and found the large, pleasant hall with its books, pictures and magazines, and the smiling faces around it a very haven of delight.

It revived all his old powers and ambitions; he was called upon for addresses, essays, readings in a small way and found that he could easily equal any of them. He was for a little while as happy as a boy could be; one of the young girls was a good friend of his, and it became his aim in life to be worthy of her.

But this could not last. The factory was shut down for an indefinite time. He could not afford to remain idle and so, sadly and reluctantly, he bade goodbye to his young friends and set out once more to hunt work. He endured many hardships and humiliations before he again found a master, often going hungry and sleeping under the stars at night. At last he found work in a machine shop, doing at first only the most menial labor, running of errands, etc. The place was very hard. The young man was a slave to everybody; had few friends and seldom heard a kind and sympathetic word.

It was in a large city and every one seemed full of his own occupations and sorrows. No one cared to notice the shy, awkward boy who seldom resented anything. He was a mere nobody in the great human hive; and this sort of neglect, with poverty and hard work, killed the beauty of character and real ability that at first existed in his nature.

He loved books; he cherished dreams even in his dull and weary life of great things that he would write some day. He loved music passionately, and never missed an opportunity to follow a band or even a hand organ. Beautiful, fleeting strains of music used to float through his brain while at work and he put many a little verse to a graceful melody and sang it softly to himself.

But as the months and years dragged by and there was no change in his life, these dreams and fancies died away and he became nearly what he looked—a mere clod. There was no joy, no beauty, no incentive in his life. He became a mere machine to create what went to makeup the magnificent wealth of the country, while he never obtained what might have furnished the world a great writer or musician.