Industrialism: Progress or Decline?

In 1833 the French statesman and author Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of Manchester, "From this foul drain, the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutal, here civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned almost into a savage." De Tocqueville's graphic sense of the wealth and the wretchedness that the Industrial Revolution had created epitomized contemporary responses to the way in which manufacturing had transformed eighteenth-century England. Victorians debated whether the machine age was a blessing or a curse, whether the economic system was making humanity happier or more miserable. Did the Industrial Revolution represent progress, and how, in fact, was progress to be defined?

The Industrial Revolution was the result of a complex set of causes, none of which, by itself, could have given rise to the phenomenon: the crucial technological innovations would have meant little without notable population growth, an increase in agricultural efficiency that released much of the workforce from field labor, and key economic changes, such as greater mobility of capital. Transformations in the production of textiles led to the first and most dramatic break with age-old practices. First powered by hand, or sometimes by water, machinery to speed up spinning and weaving processes was developed in England in the eighteenth century; by the 1780s manufacturers were installing steam engines, newly improved by James Watt, in large buildings called mills or factories. Mill towns, producing cotton or woollen cloth for the world's markets, grew quickly in northern England; the population of the city of Manchester, for example, increased tenfold in the years between 1760 and 1830. The development of the railways in the 1830s initiated a new phase in the industrial age, marked by an enormous expansion in the production of iron and coal. By the beginning of the Victorian period, the Industrial Revolution had already created profound economic and social changes. By the 1830s and 1840s, the conditions for working conditions in mines and factories that led to the beginning of government regulation and inspection, particularly of the working conditions of women and children. Other eyewitness accounts created a growing consciousness of the plight of the workers. In the Condition of the Working Class (1845), Friedrich Engels described the conditions he drew in the twenty months he spent observing industrial conditions in Manchester. In a series of interviews written for the Morning Chronicle (1849–52), later published as London Labour and the London Poor (1861–62), the journalist Henry Mayhew created a portrait of working London by collecting scores of interviews with workers. Novels portraying the painful consequences of industrialization, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855) and Charles Dickens's Hard Times (1854), began to appear.

The terrible living and working conditions of industrial laborers led a number of writers to see the Industrial Revolution as an appalling retrogression. Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin both lamented the changed conditions of labor, the loss of craftsmanship and individual creativity, and the disappearance of what Karl Marx called the "feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations" between employer and employee that they believed had existed in earlier economies. They criticized industrial manufacture not only for the misery of the conditions it created but also for its regimentation of minds and hearts as well as bodies and resources. In works such as Past and Present (1843) and Unto This Last (1860), Carlyle and Ruskin advocated a nostalgic and conservative ideal, in which employers and workers returned to a medieval relationship to craft and to authority and responsibility. Other writers drew more radical conclusions. William Morris's perception of the workers' plight led him to socialism, though a socialism with a medieval ideal; and Marx, in collaboration with Engels, based the Communist Manifesto of 1848 in part on Engels's observation of Manchester in The Condition of the Working Class. The outrage expressed by these authors is very different from the satisfaction evident in the writings of the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, who congratulated England on the progress that industrialism had enabled.

It is instructive to compare the selections in this section with Carlyle's chapter "Captains of Industry" from Past and Present; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem about child labor, "The Cry of the Children" (1843); Ruskin's arguments about manufacture in The Stones of Venice (1851–53); and William Morris's explanation in "How I Became a Socialist" (1894).

For additional texts concerning industrialism, see "Industrialism: Progress or Decline?" at Norton Literature Online.

Thomas Babington Macaulay

In a book titled Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society (1829), the poet Robert Southey (1774–1843) had sought to expose the evils of industrialism and to assert the superiority of the traditional feudal and agricultural way of life of England's past. His romantic conservatism provoked Macaulay (1800–1859) to review the book in a long and characteristic essay, published in the Edinburgh Review (1830). As in his popular History of England (1849–61), Macaulay seeks here to demolish his opponent with a bombardment of facts and figures, demonstrating that industrialism and middle-class government have resulted in progress and increased comforts for humankind.

From A Review of Southey's Colloquies

[evidence of progress]

Perhaps we could not select a better instance of the spirit which pervades the whole book than the passages in which Mr. Southey gives his opinion of the manufacturing system. There is nothing which he hates so bitterly. It is, according to him, a system more tyrannical than that of the feudal ages, a system of actual servitude, a system which destroys the bodies and degrades the minds of those who are engaged in it. He expresses a hope that the competition of other nations may drive us out of the field; that our foreign trade may decline; and that we may thus enjoy a restoration of national sanity and strength. But he seems to think that the extermination of the whole manufacturing population would be a blessing, if the evil could be removed in no other way.

Mr. Southey does not bring forward a single fact in support of these views; and, as it seems to us, there are facts which lead to a very different conclusion.
In the first place, the poor rate

1. is very decidedly lower in the manufacturing than in the agricultural districts. If Mr. Southey will look over the Parliamentary returns on this subject, he will find that the amount of parochial relief required by the laborers in the different counties of England is almost exactly in inverse proportion to the degree in which the manufacturing system has been introduced into those counties. The returns for the years ending in March, 1825, and in March, 1828, are now before us. In the former year we find the poor rate highest in Sussex, 2 about twenty shillings to every inhabitant. Then come Buckinghamshire, Essex, Suffolk, Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Kent, and Norfolk. In all the last the rate is above fifteen shillings a head. We will not go through the whole. Even in Westmoreland and the North Riding of Yorkshire, the rate is at more than eight shillings. In Cumberland and Monmouthshire, the most fortunate of all the agricultural districts, it is at six shillings. But in the West Riding of Yorkshire, 3 it is as low as five shillings: and when we come to Lancashire, we find it at four shillings, one-fifth of what it is in Sussex. The returns of the year ending in March, 1828, are a little, and but a little, more unfavourable to the manufacturing districts. Lancashire, even in that season of distress, required a smaller poor rate than any other district, and little more than one-fourth of the poor rate raised in Sussex. Cumberland alone, of the agricultural districts, was as well off as the West Riding of Yorkshire. These facts seem to indicate that the manufacturers 4 are both in a more comfortable and in a less dependent situation than the agricultural laborer.

As to the effect of the manufacturing system on the bodily health, we must beg leave to estimate it by a standard far too low and vulgar for a mind so imaginative as that of Mr. Southey, the proportion of births and deaths. We know that, during the growth of this atrocious system, this new misery, to use the phrases of Mr. Southey, this new enormity, this birth of a portentous age, this pest which no man can approve whose heart is not seared or whose understanding has not been darkened, there has been a great diminution of mortality, and that this diminution has been greater in the manufacturing towns than anywhere else. The mortality still is, as it always was, greater in towns than in the country. But the difference has diminished in an extraordinary degree. There is the best reason to believe that the annual mortality of Manchester, about the middle of the last century, was one in twenty-eight. It is now reckoned at one in forty-five. In Glasgow and Leeds a similar improvement has taken place. Nay, the rate of mortality in those three great capitals of the manufacturing districts is now considerably less than it was, fifty years ago, over England and Wales, taken together, open country and all. We might with some plausibility maintain that the people live longer because they are better fed, better lodged, better clothed, and better attended in sickness, and that these improvements are owing to that increase of national wealth which the manufacturing system has produced.

Much more might be said on this subject. But to what end? It is not from bills of mortality and statistical tables that Mr. Southey has learned his political creed. He cannot stoop to study the history of the system which he abuses, to strike the balance between the good and evil which it has produced, to compare districts with districts, or generation with generation. We will give his own reason for his opinion, the only reason which he gives for it, in his own words:

We remained a while in silence looking upon the assemblage of dwellings below. Here, and in the adjoining hamlet of Millbeck, the effects of manufacturer and of agriculture may be seen and compared. The old cottages are such as the poet and the painter equally delight in beholding. Substantially built of the native stone without mortar, dittyed with no white lime, and their long low roofs covered with slate, if they had been raised by the magic of some indigenous Amphiom's music, the materials could not have adjusted themselves more beautifully in accord with the surrounding scene; and time has still further harmonized them with weather stains, lichens, and moss, short grasses, and short fern, and stoneplants of various kinds. The ornamented chimneys, round or square, less adorned than those which, like little turrets, crest the houses of the Portuguese peasantry, and yet not less happily suited to their place; the hedge of clipped box beneath the windows, the rose bushes beside the door, the little patch of flower ground, with its tall hollyhocks in front; the garden beside, the beehives, and the orchard with its bank of daffodils and snowdrops, the earliest and the profusest in these parts, indicate in the owners some portion of ease and leisure, some regard to neatness and comfort, some sense of natural, and innocent, and healthful enjoyment.

The new cottages of the manufacturers are upon the manufacturing pattern—naked, and in a row.

"How is it," said I, "that everything which is connected with manufactories presents such features of unqualified deformity? From the largest of Mammon's temples down to the poorest hovel in which his helotry are staid, these edifices have all one character. Time will not mellow them; nature will neither clothe nor conceal them; and they will remain always as offensive to the eye as to the mind."

Here is wisdom. Here are the principles on which nations are to be governed. Rosebushes and poor rates, rather than steam engines and independence. Mortality and cottages with weather stains, rather than health and long life with edifices which time cannot mellow. We are told that our age has invented atrocities beyond the imagination of our fathers; that society has been brought into a state compared with which extermination would be a blessing; and all because the dwellings of cotton-spinners are naked and rectangular. Mr. Southey has found out a way, he tells us, in which the effects of manufactures and agriculture may be compared. And what is this way? To stand on a hill, to look at a cottage and a factory, and to see which is the prettier. Does Mr. Southey think that the body of the English peasantry live, or ever lived, in substantial or ornamented cottages, with boxhedges, flower gardens, bee-hives, and orchards? If not, what is his parallel worth? We despise those mock philosophers, who think that they serve the cause of science by depreciating

5. According to Greek mythology, Amphiom's

6. i.e., slaves (helots were a class of serfs in ancient Sparta). Mammon: the devil of covetousness.

7. Presumably such Utilitarian philosophers as

Jeremy Bentham, who had equated poetry with pushpin, an idle pastime. It should be noted, however, that although Macaulay often attacked the Utilitarians for their narrow preoccupation with theory, his own position had much in common with theirs.
literature and the fine arts. But if anything could excuse their narrowness of mind, it would be such a book as this. It is not strange that, when one enthusiast makes the picturesque the test of political good, another should feel inclined to proscribe altogether the pleasures of taste and imagination.

It is not strange that, differing so widely from Mr. Southey as to the past progress of society, we should differ from him as also as to its probable destiny. He thinks, that to all outward appearance, the country is hastening to destruction; but he relies firmly on the goodness of God. We do not see either the piety or the rationality of thus confidently expecting that the Supreme Being will interfere to disturb the common succession of causes and effects. We, too, rely on his goodness, on his goodness as manifested, not in extraordinary interpositions, but in those general laws which it has pleased him to establish in the physical and in the moral world. We rely on the natural tendency of the human intellect to truth, and on the natural tendency of society to improvement. We know no well-authenticated instance of a people which has decidedly retrograded in civilization and prosperity, except from the influence of violent and terrible calamities, such as those which laid the Roman Empire in ruins, or those which, about the beginning of the sixteenth century, desolated Italy. We know of no country which, at the end of fifty years of peace and tolerably good government, has been less prosperous than at the beginning of that period. The political importance of a state may decline, as the balance of power is disturbed by the introduction of new forces. Thus the influence of Holland and of Spain is much diminished. But are Holland and Spain poorer than formerly? We doubt it. Other countries have outrun them. But we suspect that they have been positively, though not relatively, advancing. We suspect that Holland is richer than when she sent her navies up the Thames, that Spain is richer than when a French king was brought captive to the footstool of Charles the Fifth.

History is full of the signs of this natural progress of society. We see in almost every part of the annals of mankind how the industry of individuals, struggling up against wars, taxes, famines, confiscations, mischievous prohibitions, and more mischievous protections, creates faster than governments can squander, and repairs whatever invaders can destroy. We see the wealth of nations increasing, and all the arts of life approaching nearer and nearer to perfection, in spite of the grossest corruption and the wildest profusion on the part of rulers.

The present moment is one of great distress. But how small will that distress appear when we think over the history of the last forty years; a war, compared with which all other wars sink into insignificance; taxation, such as the most heavily taxed people of former times could not have conceived; a debt larger than all the public debts that ever existed in the world added together; the food of the people stupidly rendered dear; the currency imprudently debased, and imprudently restored. Yet is the country poorer than in 1790? We firmly believe that, in spite of all the misgovernment of her rulers, she has been almost constantly becoming richer and richer. Now and then there has been a stoppage, now and then a short retrogression; but as to the general tendency there can be no doubt. A single breaker may recede; but the tide is evidently coming in.

If we were to prophesy that in the year 1930 a population of fifty millions, better fed, clad, and lodged than the English of our time, will cover these islands, that Sussex and Huntingdonshire will be wealthier than the wealthiest parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire now are, that cultivation, rich as that of a flower garden, will be carried up to the very tops of Ben Nevis and Helvellyn, that machines constructed on principles yet undiscovered will be in every house, that there will be no highways but railroads, no traveling but by steam, that our debt, vast as it seems to us, will appear to our great-grandchildren a trifling encumbrance, which might easily be paid off in a year or two, many people would think us insane. We prophesy nothing; but this we say: If any person had told the Parliament which met in perplexity and terror after the crash in 1720 that in 1830 the wealth of England would surpass all their wildest dreams, that the annual revenue would equal the principal of that debt which they considered as an intolerable burden, that for one man of ten thousand pounds then living there would be five men of fifty thousand pounds, that London would be twice as large and twice as populous, and that nevertheless the rate of mortality would have diminished to one-half of what it then was, that the post office would bring more into the exchequer than the excise and customs had brought in together under Charles the Second, that stage coaches would run from London to York in twenty-four hours, that men would be in the habit of sailing without wind, and would be beginning to ride without horses, our ancestors would have given as much credit to the prediction as they gave to Gulliver's Travels. Yet the prediction would have been true; and they would have perceived that it was not altogether absurd, if they had considered that the country was then raising every year a sum which would have purchased the fee-simple of the revenue of the Plantagenets, ten times what supported the Government of Elizabeth, three times what, in the time of Cromwell, had been thought intolerably oppressive. To almost all men the state of things under which they have been used to live seems to be the necessary state of things. We have heard it said that five per cent is the natural interest of money, that twelve is the natural number of a jury, that forty shillings is the natural qualification of a county voter. Hence it is that, though in every age everybody knows that up to his own time progressive improvement has been taking place, nobody seems to reckon on any improvement during the next generation. We cannot absolutely prove that those are in error who tell us that society has reached a turning point, that we have seen our best days. But so said all who came before us, and with just as much apparent reason. "A million a year will beggar us," said the patriots of 1640. "Two millions a year will grind the country to powder," was the cry in 1660. "Six millions a year, and a debt of fifty millions!" exclaimed Swift, "the high allies have been

8. These "calamities" were invasions by outside powers: in 1109 the Visigoths sacked Rossie, and the French and Spanish fought for control of the Italian states in the early 16th century.
9. In 1667 a Dutch fleet displayed its power by sailing up the river Thames without being challenged by the English navy.
1. Charles V, Holy Roman emperor (and king of Spain as Charles I), captured the king of France, Francis I, in the battle of Pavia (1525).
2. The wars against France and Napoleon, extending, with some interruptions, from 1792 to 1815. During the war years England lost one in six men of fighting age and had to endure the pressure of Napoleon's trade boycotts; the historian Derek Beales claims that the resulting economic disruption was similar to that experienced in World War I.
3. Expensive.
4. Mountains in Scotland and in the English Lake District, respectively.
5. The first great stock market crash, commonly known as the South Sea Bubble.
7. The Plantagenet family provided the monarchs of England from 1145 to 1216. "Fee-simple": absolute ownership of their estates.
8. Oliver Cromwell effectively ruled England from the beheading of Charles I in 1649 until his own death in 1658. Elizabeth I reigned from 1558 to 1603.
the ruin of us. "A hundred and forty millions of debt!" said Junius; "well may we say that we owe Lord Chatham more than we shall ever pay, if we owe him such a load as this." "Two hundred and forty millions of debt!" cried all the statesmen of 1783 in chorus; what abilities, or what economy on the part of a minister, can save a country so burdened? We know that if, since 1783, no fresh debt had been incurred, the increased resources of the country would have enabled us to defray that debt at which Pitt, Fox, and Burke stood aghast, nay, to defray it over and over again, and that with much lighter taxation than what we have actually borne. On what principle is it that, when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?

It is not by the intermeddling of Mr. Southey's idol, the omniscient and omnipotent State, but by the prudence and energy of the people, that England has hitherto been carried forward in civilization; and it is to the same prudence and the same energy that we now look with comfort and good hope. Our rulers will best promote the improvement of the nation by strictly confining themselves to their own legitimate duties, by leaving capital to find its most lucrative course, commodities their fair price, industry and intelligence their natural reward, idleness and folly their natural punishment, by maintaining peace, by defending property, by diminishing the price of law, and by observing strict economy in every department of the State. Let the Government do this: the People will assuredly do the rest.

1830

9. Pseudonym of a political commentator whose letters (1769–12) usually printed William Pitt, earl of Chatham (1708–1778). Pitt, as leader of the war against France, which gained Canada for England, could have been blamed for running his country into debt.


waggon: these weighed between two hundred and five hundred pounds and were attached to the hurrier by a chain. The passageways in the mine (or pit) were sometimes only sixteen inches high. The second illustration presents a thruster, who pushed a corve. The child on the left is a trapper: the youngest workers of all, these five- or six-year-olds sat alone in darkness to open and close the doors that controlled the mine's ventilation system. The extract comes from the evidence collected by Commissioner S. S. Scriven, who visited the mines in the West Riding of Yorkshire in the company of a local doctor and lawyer, and interviewed the child laborers there.

From First Report of the Commissioners, Mines

[CHILD MINE-WORKER IN YORKSHIRE]

Margaret Comley, living at Lindley Moor, aged 9. May 7:

They call me Peggy for my nick-name down here, but my right name is Margaret; I am about nine years, or going nine; I have been at work in the pit thrusting corves above a year; come in the morning sometimes at seven o'clock, sometimes half-past seven, and I go sometimes home at six o'clock, sometimes at seven when I do over-work. I get my breakfast of porridge before I come, and bring a piece of muffin, which I eat on coming to pit; I get my dinner at 12 o'clock, which is a dry muffin, and sometimes butter on, but have no time allowed to stop to eat it, I eat it while I am thrusting the load; I get no tea, but get some supper when I get home, and then go to bed when I have washed me; and am very tired. I worked in pit last winter; I don't know at what hour I went down, as we have no clock, but it was day-light; it was six o'clock when we came up, but not always. They flog us down in the pit, sometimes with their hand upon my bottom, which hurts me very much; Thomas Copeland flogs me more than once in a day, which makes me cry. There are two other girls working with me, and there was four, but one left because she had the bellyache; I am poorly myself sometimes with bellyache, and sometimes headache. I had rather lake than go into the pit; I get 5d. a-day, but I had rather set cards¹ for 5d. a-day than go into the pit. The men often swear at me; many times they say Damn thee, and other times God damn thee (and such like), Peggy.

[Commissioner Scriven's commentary]

I descended this pit accompanied by one of the banksmen,² and, on alighting at the bottom, found the entrance to the mainway 2 feet 10 inches, and, which extended 500 yards. The bottom was deep in mine, and, as I had no corves low enough to convey me to the workings, waited some time under the dripping shaft the arrival of the hurriers, as I had reason to suspect there were some very young children labouring there. At length three girls arrived, with as many boys. It was impossible in the dark to distinguish the sexes. They were all naked excepting their shifts or shirts. Having placed one into the corve, I gave the signal, and ascended. On alighting on the pit's bank I discovered that it was a girl. I could not have believed that I should have found human nature so

1. I.e., work in a textile factory, where workers programmed looms to weave patterns with a series of punched cards. "Lake": play truant, or hokey (Yorkshire dialect). "5d.": five pence (d. abbreviates denarius, "penny" in Latin).
2. Colliery supervisors who worked above ground.
An illustration of a "hurrier" in a Yorkshire coalmine, taken from the 1842-43 Children's Employment Commission report.

An illustration of a "trapper" and a "thruster" in a Lancashire coalmine, taken from the 1842-43 Children's Employment Commission report.

degraded. There is nothing that I can conceive amidst all the misery and wretchedness in the worst of factories equal to this. Mr. Holroyd, solicitor, and Mr. Brook, surgeon, practising in Stainton, were present, who confessed that, although living within a few miles, they could not have believed that such a system of unchristian cruelty could have existed.

1842-43

FRIEDRICH ENGELS

These eyewitness accounts from The Condition of the Working Class (1845) describe conditions of 1844, when Engels (1820–1895), the son of a successful German industrialist, had been living in England, chiefly in Manchester. The book was first translated from the German into English in 1892; this translation is by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (1958). The first two paragraphs are the conclusion of chapter 2, The Industrial Proletariat; the balance is from chapter 3.

From The Great Towns

Industry and commerce attain their highest stage of development in the big towns, so that it is here that the effects of industrialization on the wage earners can be most clearly seen. It is in these big towns that the concentration of property has reached its highest point. Here the manners and customs of the good old days have been most effectively destroyed. Here the very name of "Merry England" has long since been forgotten, because the inhabitants of the great manufacturing centers have never even heard from their grandparents what life was like in those days. In these towns there are only rich and poor, because the lower middle classes are fast disappearing. At one time this section of the middle classes was the most stable social group, but now it has become the least stable. It is represented in the big factory towns today partly by a few survivors from a bygone age and partly by a group of people who are anxious to get rich as quickly as possible. Of these shoddy speculators and dubious traders one becomes rich while ninety-nine go bankrupt. Indeed, for more than half of those who have failed, bankruptcy has become a habit.

The vast majority of the inhabitants of these towns are the workers. We propose to discuss their condition and to discover how they have been influenced by life and work in the great factory towns.

* * *

London is unique, because it is a city in which one can roam for hours without leaving the built-up area and without seeing the slightest sign of the approach of open country. This enormous agglomeration of population on a single spot has multiplied a hundred-fold the economic strength of the two and a half million inhabitants concentrated there. This great population has made London the commercial capital of the world and has created the gigantic docks in which are assembled the thousands of ships which always cover the River Thames. I know nothing more imposing than the view one obtains of the river when sailing from the sea up to London Bridge. Especially above Woolwich the houses and docks are packed tightly together on both banks of the river. The further one goes up the river the thicker becomes the concentration of ships lying at anchor, so that eventually only a narrow shipping lane is left free in midstream. Here hundreds of steamships dart rapidly to and fro. All this is so magnificent and impressive that one is lost in admiration. The traveler has good reason to marvel at England's greatness even before he steps on English soil.

It is only later that the traveler appreciates the human suffering which has made all this possible. He can only realize the price that has been paid for all this magnificence after he has tramped the pavements of the main streets of London for some days and has tired himself out by jostling his way through the crowds and dodging the endless stream of coaches and carts which fills the streets. It is only when he has visited the slums of this great city that it dawns upon him that the inhabitants of modern London have had to sacrifice so much that is best in human nature in order to create those wonders of
civilization with which their city teems. The vast majority of Londoners have
to want so many of their potential creative faculties lie dormant, stunted
and unused in order that a small, closely-knit group of their fellow citizens
could develop to the full the qualities with which nature has endowed them.
The restless and noisy activity of the crowded streets is highly distasteful, and
it is surely abhorrent to human nature itself. Hundreds of thousands of men
and women drawn from all classes and ranks of society pack the streets of
London. Are they not all human beings with the same innate characteristics
and potentialities? Are they not equally interested in the pursuit of hap-
iness? And do they not all aim at happiness by following similar methods? Yet
they rush past each other as if they had nothing in common. They are tacitly
agreed on one thing only—that everyone should keep to the right of the pave-
ment so as not to collide with the stream of people moving in the opposite
direction. No one even thinks of sparing a glance for his neighbor in the
streets. The more that Londoners are packed into a tiny space, the more repul-
sive and disgraceful becomes the brutal indifference with which they ignore
their neighbors and selfishly concentrate upon their private affairs. We know
well enough that this isolation of the individual—this narrow-minded ego-
tism—is everywhere the fundamental principle of modern society. But
nowhere is this selfish egoism so blantly evident as in the frantic bustle of
the great city. The disintegration of society into individuals, each guided by
his private principles and each pursuing his own aims has been pushed to its
furthest limits in London. Here indeed human society has been split into its
component atoms.

From this it follows that the social conflict—the war of all against all—is
fought in the open.  
  Here men regard their fellows not as human beings, but as pawns in the struggle for existence. Everyone exploits his neighbor with
the result that the stronger tramples the weaker under foot. The strongest of
all, a tiny group of capitalists, monopolize everything, while the weakest, who
are in the vast majority, succumb to the most abject poverty.

What is true of London is true also of all the great towns, such as Man-
chester, Birmingham, and Leeds. Everywhere one finds on the one hand the
most barbarous indifference and selfish egoism and on the other the most
distressing scenes of misery and poverty. Signs of social conflict are to be found
everywhere. Everyone turns his house into a fortress to defend himself—under
the protection of the law—from the depredations of his neighbors. Class war-
fare is so open and shameless that it has to be seen to be believed. The observer
of such an appalling state of affairs must shudder at the consequences of such
feverish activity and can only marvel that so crazy a social and economic
structure should survive at all.

Every great town has one or more slum areas into which the working classes
are packed. Sometimes, of course, poverty is to be found hidden away in alleys
close to the stately homes of the wealthy. Generally, however, the workers are
segregated in separate districts where they struggle through life as best they
can out of sight of the more fortunate classes of society. The slums of the
English towns have much in common—the worst houses in a town being
found in the worst districts. They are generally unplanned wildernesses of one-
or two-storied terrace houses1 built of brick. Wherever possible these have

1. Row houses.

England: The Great Towns

If we cross Blackstone Edge on foot or take the train we reach Manchester,
the regional capital of South Lancashire, and enter the classic home of English
industry. This is the masterpiece of the Industrial Revolution and at the same
time the mainspring of all the workers' movements. Once more we are in a
beautiful hilly countryside. The land slopes gently down toward the Irish Sea,
intersected by the charming green valleys of the Ribble, the Irwell, the Mersey,
and their tributaries. A hundred years ago this region was to a great extent
thickly populated marshland. Now it is covered with towns and villages and is
the most densely populated part of England. In Lancashire—particularly in
Manchester—is to be found not only the origin but the heart of the industry of
the United Kingdom. Manchester Exchange is the thermometer which
records all the fluctuations of industrial and commercial activity. The evolution
of the modern system of manufacture has reached its climax in Manchester.
It was in the South Lancashire cotton industry that water and steam power
first replaced hand machines. It was here that such machines as the power-
loom and the self-acting mule2 replaced the old hand-loom and spinning
wheel. It is here that the division of labor has been pushed to its furthest
limits. These three factors are the essence of modern industry. In all three of
them the cotton industry was the pioneer and remains ahead in all branches
of industry. In the circumstances it is to be expected that it is in this region
that the inevitable consequences of industrialization in so far as they affect
the working classes are most strikingly evident. Nowhere else can the life and
conditions of the industrial proletariat be studied in all their aspects as in
South Lancashire. Here can be seen most clearly the degradation into which
the worker sinks owing to the introduction of steam power, machinery, and
the division of labor. Here, too, can be seen most the strenuous efforts of the
proletariat to raise themselves from their degraded situation. I propose to
examine conditions in Manchester in greater detail for two reasons. In the
first place, Manchester is the classic type of modern industrial town. Secondly,
I know Manchester as well as I know my native town and I know more about
it than most of its inhabitants.

Owing to the curious lay-out of the town it is quite possible for some-
one to live for years in Manchester and to travel daily to and from his work

2. A machine that automatically winds spun yarn directly onto spindles.
without ever seeing a working-class quarter or coming into contact with an artisan. He who visits Manchester simply on business or for pleasure need never see the slums, mainly because the working-class districts and the middle-class districts are quite distinct. This division is due partly to deliberate policy and partly to instinctive and tacit agreement between the two social groups. In those areas where the two social groups happen to come into contact with each other the middle classes sanctimoniously ignore the existence of their less fortunate neighbors. In the center of Manchester there is a fairly large commercial district, which is about half a mile long and half a mile broad. This district is almost entirely given over to offices and warehouses. Nearly the whole of this district has no permanent residents and is deserted at night, when only policemen patrol its dark, narrow thoroughfares with their bull's-eye lanterns. This district is intersected by certain main streets which carry an enormous volume of traffic. The lower floors of the buildings are occupied by shops of dazzling splendor. A few of the upper stories on these premises are used as dwellings and the streets present a relatively busy appearance until late in the evening. Around this commercial quarter there is a belt of built-up areas on the average one and a half miles in width, which is occupied entirely by working-class dwellings. This area of workers' houses includes all Manchester proper, except the center, all Salford and Hulme, an important part of Pendleton and Chorlton, two-thirds of Ardwick, and certain small areas of Cheetham Hill and Broughton. Beyond this belt of working-class houses or dwellings lie the districts inhabited by the middle classes and the upper classes. The former are to be found in regularly laid out streets near the working-class districts—in Chorlton and in the remoter parts of Cheetham Hill. The villas of the upper classes are surrounded by gardens and lie in the higher and remoter parts of Ardwick and Cheetham Hill, Broughton, and Pendleton. The upper class enjoy healthy country air and live in luxurious and comfortable dwellings which are in the center of Manchester by omnibuses which run every fifteen or thirty minutes. To such an extent has the convenience of the rich been considered in the planning of Manchester that these plutocrats can travel from their houses to their places of business in the center of the town by the shortest routes, which run entirely through working-class districts, without even realizing how close they are to the misery and filth which lie on both sides of the road.

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* * *

I will now give a description of the working-class districts of Manchester. The first of them is the Old Town, which lies between the northern limit of the commercial quarter and the River Irk. Here even the better streets, such Todd Street, Long Millgate, Withy Grove, and Shudehill are narrow and tortuous. The houses are dirty, old, and tumble-down. The sidestreets have been built in a disgraceful fashion. If one enters the district near the "Old Church" and goes down Long Millgate, one sees immediately on the right hand side a row of antiquated houses where not a single front wall is standing upright. This is a remnant of the old Manchester of the days before the town became industrialized. The original inhabitants and their children have left for better houses in other districts, while the houses in Long Millgate, which no longer satisfied them, were left to a tribe of workers containing a strong Irish element. Here one is really and truly in a district which is quite obviously given over entirely to the working classes, because even the shopkeepers and the publicans of Long Millgate make no effort to give their establishments a semblance of cleanliness. The condition of this street may be deplorable, but it is by no means as bad as the alleys and courts which lie behind it, and which can be approached only by covered passages so narrow that two people cannot pass. Anyone who has never visited these courts and alleys can have no idea of the fantastical way in which the houses have been packed together in disorderly confusion in impudent defiance of all reasonable principles of town planning. And the fault lies not merely in the survival of old property from earlier periods in Manchester's history. Only in quite modern times has the policy of cramming as many houses as possible on to such space as was not utilized in earlier periods reached its climax. The result is that today not an inch of space remains between the houses and any further building is now physically impossible. To prove my point I reproduce a small section of a plan of Manchester. It is by no means the worst slum in Manchester and it does not cover one-tenth of the area of Manchester.

This sketch will be sufficient to illustrate the crazy layout of the whole district lying near the River Irk. There is a very sharp drop of some 15 to 30 feet down to the south bank of the Irk at this point. As many as three rows of houses have generally been squeezed onto this precipitous slope. The lowest row of houses stands directly on the bank of the river while the front walls of the highest row stand on the crest of the ridge in Long Millgate. Moreover, factory buildings are also to be found on the banks of the river. In short the layout of the upper part of Long Millgate at the top of the rise is just as disorderly and congested as the lower part of the street. To the right and left a number of covered passages from Long Millgate give access to several courts. On reaching them one meets with a degree of dirt and revolting filth the like of which is not to be found elsewhere. The worst courts are those leading down to the Irk, which contain unquestionably the most dreary dwellings I have ever seen. In one of these courts, just at the entrance where the covered passage ends, there is a privy without a door. This privy is so dirty that the inhabitants of the court can only enter or leave the court if they are prepared to wade through puddles of stale urine and excrement. Anyone who wishes to confirm this description should go to the first court on the bank of the Irk above Ducie Bridge. Several tanneries are situated on the bank of the river and they fill the neighborhood with the stench of animal putrefaction. The only way of getting to the courts below Ducie Bridge is by going down flights of narrow dirty steps and one can only reach the houses by treading over heaps of dirt and filth. The first court below Ducie Bridge is called Allen's Court. At the time of the cholera [1832] this court was in such a disgraceful state that the sanitary inspectors [of the local Board of Health] evacuated the inhabitants. The court was then swept and fumigated with chlorine. In his pamphlet [6] Dr. Kay gives a horrifying description of conditions in this court at that time. Since Kay wrote this pamphlet, this court appears to have been at any rate partly demolished and rebuilt. If one looks down the river from Ducie Bridge one does at least see several ruined walls and high piles of rubble, side by side.

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3. Lanterns that have a hemispherical lens.

4. Confused, haphazard.
5. Not reprinted here.
with some recently built houses. The view from this bridge, which is mercifully concealed by a high parapet from all but the tallest mortals, is quite characteristic of the whole district. At the bottom the Irk flows, or rather, stagnates. It is a narrow, coal-black, stinking river full of filth and rubbish which it deposits on the mere low-lying bank. In dry weather this bank presents the spectacle of a series of the most revolting blackish-green puddles of slime from the depths of which bubbles of miasmatic gases constantly rise and create a stench which is unbearable even to those standing on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the level of the water. Moreover, the flow of the river is continually interrupted by numerous high weirs, behind which large quantities of slime and refuse collect and putrefy. Above Ducie Bridge there are some tall tannery buildings, and further up there are dye-works, bone mills, and gasworks. All the filth, both liquid and solid, discharged by these works finds its way into the River Irk, which also receives the contents of the adjacent sewers and privies. The nature of the filth deposited by this river may well be imagined.

If one looks at the heaps of garbage below Ducie Bridge one can gauge the extent to which accumulated dirt, filth, and decay permeate the courts on the steep left bank of the river. The houses are packed very closely together and since the bank of the river is very steep it is possible to see a part of every house. All of them have been blackened by soot, all of them are crumbling with age and all have broken window panes and window frames. In the background there are old factory buildings which look like barracks. On the opposite, low-lying bank of the river, one sees a long row of houses and factories. The second house is a roofless ruin, filled with refuse, and the third is built in such a low situation that the ground floor is uninhabitable and has neither doors nor windows. In the background one sees the paupers' cemetery, and the stations of the railways to Liverpool and Leeds. Behind these buildings is situated the workhouse, Manchester’s “Poor Law Bastille.” The workhouse is built on a hill and from behind its high walls and battlements seems to threaten the whole adjacent working-class quarter like a fortress.

Above Ducie Bridge the left bank of the Irk becomes flatter and the right bank of the Irk becomes steeper and so the condition of the houses on both sides of the river becomes worse rather than better. Turning left from the main street which is still Long Millgate, the visitor can easily lose his way. He wanders aimlessly from one court to another. He turns one corner after another through innumerable narrow dirty alleys and passages, and in only a few minutes he has lost all sense of direction and does not know which way to turn. The area is full of ruined or half-ruined buildings. Some of them are actually uninhabited and that means a great deal in this quarter of the town.

In the houses one seldom sees a wooden or a stone floor, while the doors and windows are nearly always broken and badly fitting. And as for the dirt! Everywhere one sees heaps of refuse, garbage, and filth. There are stagnant pools instead of gutters and the stench alone is so overpowering that no human being, even partially civilized, would find it bearable to live in such a district.⁴

The recently constructed extension of the Leeds railway which crosses the Irk at this point has swept away some of these courts and alleys, but it has thrown open to public gaze some of the others. So it comes about that there is to be found immediately under the railway bridge a court which is even filthier and more revolting than all the others. This is simply because it was formerly so hidden and secluded that it could only be reached with considerable difficulty, but now exposed to the human eye. I thought I knew this district well, but even I would never have found it had the railway viaduct made a breach in the slums at this point. One walks along a very rough path on the river bank, between clothes-posts and washing lines to reach a chaotic group of little, one-storied, one-roomed cabins. Most of them have earth floors, and working, living, and sleeping all take place in the one room. In such a hole, barely six feet long and five feet wide, I saw two beds—and what beds and bedding—which filled the room, except for the fireplace and the doorstep. Several of these huts, as far as I could see, were completely empty, although the door was open and the inhabitants were leaning against the door post. In front of the doors filth and garbage abounded. I could not see the pavement, but from time to time, I felt it was there because my feet scraped it. This whole collection of cattle sheds for human beings was surrounded on two sides by houses and a factory and on a third side by the river. [It was possible to get to this slum by only two routes]. One was the narrow path along the river bank, while the other was a narrow gateway which led to another human rabbit Warren which was nearly as badly built and was nearly in such a bad condition as the one I have just described.

Enough of this! All along the Irk slums of this type abound. There is an unplanned and chaotic conglomeration of houses, most of which are more or less uninhabitable. The dirtiness of the interiors of these premises is fully in keeping with the filth that surrounds them. How can people dwelling in such places keep clean? There are not even adequate facilities for satisfying the most natural daily needs. There are so few privies that they are either filled up everyday or are too far away for those who need to use them. How can these people wash when all that is available is the dirty water of the Irk? Pumps and piped water are to be found only in the better-class districts of the town. Indeed no one can blame these Helots⁸ of modern civilization if their homes are no cleaner than the occasional pigsties which are a feature of these slums. There are actually some property owners who are not ashamed to let¹ dwellings such as those which are to be found below Scotland Bridge. Here on the quayside a mere six feet from the water's edge is to be found a row of six or seven cellars, the bottoms of which are at least two feet beneath the low-water level of the Irk. [What can one say of the owner of] the corner house—situated on the opposite bank of the river above Scotland Bridge—who actually lets the upper floor although the premises downstairs are quite uninhabitable and no attempt has been made to board up the gaps left by the

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7. The workhouses established by the Poor Laws of the 1830s, because of the strict regimes enforced on inmates, were commonly likened to prisons such as the Bastille in Paris.
8. Cf. another account of Manchester slums of the same decade in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel Mary Barton (1848), chap. 6.
9. i.e., slaves (Helots were a class of serfs in ancient Sparta).
10. Rent.
disappearance of doors and windows? This sort of thing is by no means uncommon in this part of Manchester, where, owing to the lack of conveniences, such deserted ground floors are often used by the whole neighborhood as privies.

CHARLES KINGSLEY

The following selection is from chapter 8 of Alton Locke, a novel by Kingsley (1819–1875). Under the influence of Thomas Carlyle’s writings and also as a result of his own observations, Kingsley, a clergyman, became deeply concerned with the sufferings of the working classes. The speaker here, a young tailor, is accompanied by an elderly Scottish bookseller, Sandy Mackaye.

From Alton Locke

[ALondon SLUM]

It was a foul, chilly, foggy Saturday night. From the butchers’ and greengrocers’ shops the gaslights flared and flickered, wild and ghastly, over haggard groups of slipshod dirty women, bargaining for scraps of stale meat and frostbitten vegetables, wrangling about short weight and bad quality. Fish stalls and fruit stalls lined the edge of the greasy pavement, sending up odors as foul as the language of sellers and buyers. Blood and sewer water crawled from under doors and out of spouts, and reeked down the gutters among offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of putrefaction. Foul vapours rose from cow sheds and slaughterhouses, and the doorways of undrained alleys, where the inhabitants carried the filth out on their shoes from the backyard into the court, and from the court up into the main street; while above, hanging like cliffs over the streets—those narrow, brawling torrents of filth, and poverty, and sin—the houses with their teeming load of life were piled up into the dingy, choking night. A ghastly, deafening, sickening sight it was. Go, scented Belgravia! and see what London is! and then go to the library which God has given thee—one often fears in vain—and see what science says this London might be!

...∗∗∗...

We went on through a back street or two, and then into a huge, miserable house, which, a hundred years ago, perhaps, had witnessed the luxury, and rung to the laughter of some one great fashionable family, alone there in their glory. Now every room of it held its family, or its group of families—a phalanstery of all the fiends—its grand staircase, with the carved balustrades rotting and crumbling away piecemeal, converted into a common sewer for all its inmates. Up stair after stair we went, while wails of children, and curses of men, steamed out upon the hot stifling rush of air from every doorway, till, at the topmost story, we knocked at a garret door. We entered. Bare it was of furniture, comfortless, and freezing cold; but, with the exception of the plaster dropping from the roof, and the broken windows, patched with rags and paper, there was a scrupulous neatness about the whole, which contrasted strangely with the filth and slovenliness outside. There was no bed in the room—no table. On a broken chair by the chimney sat a miserable old woman, fancying that she was warming her hands over embers which had long been cold, shaking her head, and muttering to herself, with palsied lips, about the guardians and the workhouse; while upon a few rags on the floor lay a girl, ugly, smallpox-marked, hollow-eyed, emaciated, her only bedclothes the skirt of a large handsome new riding habit, at which two other girls, wan and tawdry, were stitching busily, as they sat right and left of her on the floor. The old woman took no notice of us as we entered; but one of the girls looked up, and, with a pleased gesture of recognition, put her finger up to her lips, and whispered, "Ellen’s asleep."

"I’m not asleep, dears," answered a faint unearthly voice; "I was only praying. Is that Mr. Mackaye?"

"Aye, my lasses; but ha’ ye gotten na fire the night?"

"No," said one of them, bitterly, "we’ve earned no fire tonight, by fair trade or foul either."

1850

3. Members of the local Board of Guardians, the body that supervised the workhouse.

CHARLES DICKENS

The following selection is from chapter 5 of Hard Times, a novel by Dickens (1812–1870). The picture of Coketown was based on his impressions of the raw industrial towns of central and northern England such as Manchester and, in particular, Preston, a cotton-manufacturing center in Lancashire.

From Hard Times

[COKETOWN]

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattle and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the
same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained; against them were to be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary, and they were these.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there—as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done—they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple over the door terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M’Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital¹ and the cemetery, and what you couldn’t state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and salable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

1854

1. Maternity hospital.

ANONYMOUS

In 1965 A. L. Lloyd, a collector of British folk songs, heard “Poverty Knock” from a weaver who had learned it sixty years earlier. The song dates from before that.

Poverty Knock¹

REFRAIN²

Poverty, poverty knock!
Me loom is a-sayin’ all day.
Poverty, poverty knock!
Gaffer’s² too skinny² to pay.

the foreman’s stings

1. The sound of a 19th-century loom.
2. Repeated after each stanza.

Poverty, poverty knock!
Keepin’ one eye on the clock.
Ah know ah can guttle³
When ah hear me shuttle
Go: Poverty, poverty knock!

Up every mornin’ at five.
Ah wonder that we keep alive.
Tired an’ yawlin’ on the cold mornin’
It’s back to the dreary old drive.

5 Oh dear, we’re goin’ to be late.
Gaffer is stood at the gate.
We’re out o’ pocket, our wages they’re docked⁶
We’ll a’ to buy grub on the slate.³

10 An’ when our wages they’ll bring,
We’re often short of a string.⁴
While we are fratchin’ wi’ gaffer for snatchin’,⁵
We know to his brass he will cling.

15 We’ve got to wet our own yarn
By dippin’ it into the tarn.⁷
It’s wet an’ soggy an’ makes us feel groggy,
An’ there’s mice in that dirty old barn.

20 Oh dear, me poor ‘ead it sings.
Ah should have woven three strings,
But threads are breakin’ and my back is achin’.

Sometimes a shuttle flies out,
Gives some poor woman a clout.
Ther she lies bleedin’, but nobody’s ’eedin’.
Whose goin’ t’carry her out?

25 Tuner⁸ should tackle me loom.
’E’d rather sit on his bum.
’E’s far too busy a-courtin’ our Lizzie,
An’ ah kannat get ’im to come.

Lizzie is so easy led.

30 Ah think that ‘e tek her to bed.
She allus was skinny, now look at her pinny.⁹
It’s just about time they was wed.

1967

3. On credit, as recorded on a piece of slate.
4. Not paid for at all work. “String”: a piece of cloth.
6. The man who maintains the loom.
HENRY MAYHEW

In 1849 Mayhew (1812–1887) was asked by the Morning Chronicle to be the metropolitan correspondent for its series "Labour and the Poor." His interviews of workers and of street folk, later published as a book, convey a vivid sense of the lives of London’s poor.

From London Labour and the London Poor

[BOY INMATE OF THE CASUAL WARDS]¹

I am now seventeen. My father was a cotton-spinner in Manchester, but has been dead ten years; and soon after that my mother went into the workhouse, leaving me with an aunt; and I had to work in a cotton factory. As young as I was, I earned 2s. 2d.² a-week at first. I can read well, and write a little. I worked at the factory two years, and was then earning 7s. a-week. I then ran away, for I had always a roving mind; but I should have stayed if my master hadn’t knocked me about so. I thought I should make my fortune in London—I’d heard it was such a grand place. I had read in novels and romances,—halfpenny and penny books,—about such things, but I’ve met with nothing of the kind. I started without money, and begged my way from Manchester to London, saying I was going up to look for work. I wanted to see the place more than anything else. I suffered very much on the road, having to be out all night often; and the nights were cold, though it was summer. When I got to London all my hopes were blighted. I could get no further. I never tried for work in London, for I believe there are no cotton factories in it; besides, I wanted to see life. I begged, and slept in the unions.³ I got acquainted with plenty of boys like myself. We met at the casual wards, both in London and the country. I had now been five years at this life. We were merry enough in the wards, we boys, singing and telling stories.

* * *

I live a roving life, at first, being my own master. I was fond of going to plays, and such-like, when I got money; but now I’m getting tired of it, and wish for something else. I have tried for work at cotton factories in Lancashire and Yorkshire, but never could get any. I’m sure I could settle now. I couldn’t have done that two years ago, the roving spirit was so strong upon me and the company I kept got a strong hold on me. Two winters back, there was a regular gang of us boys in London. After sleeping at a union, we would fix where to meet at night to get into another union to sleep. There were thirty of us that way, all boys; besides forty young men, and thirty young women. Sometimes we walked the streets all night. We didn’t rob, at least I never saw any robbing. We had pleasure in chaffing⁴ the policemen, and some of us got taken up. I always escaped. We got broken up in time,—some’s dead, some’s gone to sea, some into the country, some home, and some lagged.⁵ Among them were many parishioners.

1. Short-term poor shelters.
2. Two shillings, two pence (s. for solidus and d. for denarius, Latin for “shilling” and “penny,” respectively).
3. Shelters for the poor maintained by two or more parishes.
5. Were transported to one of Britain’s penal colonies or were arrested (slang).

ANNIE BESANT

In 1873 Besant (1847–1933) left the Church and her marriage to an Anglican clergyman to become active in feminist and socialist causes. When she heard about the high dividends and low wages at the match factory of Bryant and May, she wrote a series of articles, including this one published in the magazine Link, that led to a public boycott and a strike of fourteen hundred match workers.

The “White Slavery” of London Match Workers

Bryant and May, now a limited liability company, paid last year a dividend of 23 per cent to its shareholders; two years ago it paid a dividend of 25 per cent, and the original £5 shares were then quoted for sale at £18 7s. 6d.¹ The highest dividend paid has been 38 per cent.

Let us see how the money is made with which these monstrous dividends are paid.² * * *

The hour for commencing work is 6.30 in summer and 8 in winter; work concludes at 6 p.m. Half-an-hour is allowed for breakfast and an hour for dinner. This long day of work is performed by young girls, who have to stand the whole of the time. A typical case is that of a girl of 16, a piece-worker; she earns 4s. a week, and lives with a sister, employed by the same firm, who “earns good money, as much as 8s. or 9s. per week.”² Out of the earnings 2s. is paid for the rent of one room; the child lives on only bread-and-butter and tea, alike for breakfast and dinner, but related with dancing eyes that once a month she went to a meal where “you get coffee, and bread and butter, and jam, and marmalade, and lots of it.” . . . The splendid salary of 4s. is subject to deduc-

1. Eighteen pounds, seven shillings, six pence (s. for solidus and d. for denarius, Latin for “shilling” and “penny,” respectively).
would have had a definite money value which would have served as a protection. But who cares for the fate of these white wage slaves? Born in slums, driven to work while still children, undersized because underfed, oppressed because helpless, flung aside as soon as worked out, who cares if they die or go on the streets, provided only that the Bryant and May shareholders get their 23 per cent, and Mr. Theodore Bryant can erect statues and buy parks? Oh if we had but a people's Dante, to make a special circle in the Inferno for those who live on this misery, and such wealth out of the starvation of helpless girls.

Failing a poet to hold up their conduct to the execution of posterity, enshrined in deathless verse, let us strive to touch their consciences, i.e. their pockets, and let us at least avoid being "partakers of their sins," by abstaining from using their commodities.

1888

4. In his Inferno the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) describes hell as divided into different levels, or circles, for different kinds of sinners, with each sin carrying its own specific punishments.

ADA NIELD CHEW

Born on a farm in North Staffordshire, Chew (1870–1945) left school at the age of eleven to help her mother with taking care of house and family. In her early twenties she worked as a tailor in a factory in Crewe. She wrote a series of letters to the Crewe Chronicle about working conditions in the factory. When her identity was discovered, an uproar ensued, and she was fired. She became active in politics and continued to write for political causes.

A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe, 5 May 1894

Sir,

Will you grant me space in your sensible and widely read paper to complain of a great grievance of the class—that of tailoresses in some of the Crewe factories—to which I belong? I have hoped against hope that some influential man (or woman) would take up our cause and put us in the right way to remedy—for of course there is a remedy—for the evils we are suffering from. But although one cannot open a newspaper without seeing what all sorts and conditions of men are constantly agitating for and slowly but surely obtaining—as in the miners' eight hour bill—only very vague mention is ever made of the under-paid, over-worked "Factory Girl." And I have come to the conclusion, sir, that as long as we are silent ourselves and apparently content with our lot, so long shall we be left in the enjoyment (?) of that lot.

The rates paid for the work done by us are so fearfully low as to be totally

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2. William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898), leader of the Liberal Party from 1868 to 1875 and from 1880 to 1894 and prime minister four times.

3. Bill limiting miners' work shifts to eight hours.
inadequate to—I had almost said keep body and soul together. Well, sir, it is a fact which I could prove, if necessary, that we are compelled, not by our employers, but by stern necessity, in order to keep ourselves in independence, which self-respecting girls even in our class of life like to do, to work so many hours—I would rather not say how many—that life loses its savour, and our toil, which in moderation and at a fair rate of remuneration would be pleasurable, becomes drudgery of the most wearisome kind.

To take what may be considered a good week’s wage the work has to be so close and unremitting that we cannot be said to “live”—we merely exist. We eat, we sleep, we work, endlessly, ceaselessly work, from Monday morning till Saturday night, without remission. Cultivation of the mind? How is it possible? Reading? Those of us who are determined to live like human beings and require food for mind as well as body are obliged to take time which is necessary for sleep to gratify this desire. As for recreation and enjoying the beauties of nature, the seasons come and go, and we have barely time to notice whether it is spring or summer.

Certainly we have Sundays: but Sunday is to many of us, after a week of slavery, a day of exhaustion. It has frequently been so in my case, and I am not delicate. This, you will understand, sir, is when work is plentiful. Of course we have slack times, of which the present is one (otherwise I should not have time to write to you). It may be said that we should utilise these slack times for recruiting our bodies and cultivating our minds. Many of us do so, as far as is possible in the anxious state we are necessarily in, knowing that we are not earning our “keep,” for it is not possible, absolutely not possible, for the average ordinary “hand” to earn enough in busy seasons, even with the overtime I have mentioned, to make up for slack ones.

“A living wage!” Ours is a lingering, dying wage. Who reaps the benefit of our toil? I read sometimes of a different state of things in other factories, and if in others, why not those in Crewe? I have just read the report of the Royal Commission on Labour. Very good, but while Royal Commissions are enquiring and reporting and making suggestions, some of the workers are being hurried to their graves.

I am afraid I am trespassing a great deal on your space, sir, but my subject has such serious interest for me—I sometimes wax very warm as I sit stitching and thinking over our wrongs—that they, and the knowledge that your columns are always open to the needy, however humble, must be my excuse.

I am, sir, yours sincerely,
A CREWE FACTORY GIRL
Crewe, 1 May 1894

*Editor's note: Our correspondent writes a most intelligent letter; and if she is a specimen of the factory girl, then Crewe factory proprietors should be proud of their "hands." We shall be glad to hear further from our correspondent as to the wages paid, the numbers of hours worked, and the conditions of their employment. Crewe Chronicle, 5 May 1894*