

FACTORY WORK

As It Is and Might Be

BY
WILLIAM MORRIS

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WILLIAM MORRIS

Factory Work

As It Is and Might Be

A Series of Four Papers

BY

WILLIAM MORRIS

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK LABOR NEWS CO.
45 ROSE ST., NEW YORK, N. Y.
1922

*Settle the economic question and
you settle all other questions. It
is the Aaron's rod which swal-
lows up the rest.*

—WILLIAM MORRIS.

FOREWORD.

William Morris, English poet, artist and avowed Socialist, was born at Walthamstow on the 24th of March 1834, the eldest son of well-to-do people. He had at first intended to join the priesthood but changed his mind later. He decided to become an architect. The world, however, knows him as the poet and artistic craftsman. He became interested in the labor movement in the early eighties, concerning which Walter Crane, famous English artist and Socialist, and a contemporary of William Morris, wrote the following:

"I do not think more than a year or two had passed since Morris and myself had first embraced Socialism. Morris was first, of course, and I recall the period of his earlier lectures and addresses, which show his gradual conversion from his earlier attitude of 'the idle dreamer of an empty day' to an ardent and active Socialist. He naturally approached the question from the art side, and it was the conviction of the hopelessness of any real and permanent or widespread improvement in design and handicraft (which he himself had made such practical efforts to revive and to place upon a vital basis) under the existing economic system and the deplorable effects of modern machine industry, both upon art and the workers under the control of competi-

tive capitalistic commerce, which really drove him into the Socialist camp. He hated the shams and pretences and pretentiousness of modern life and its glaring contrasts of wealth and poverty; he noted the growing ugliness of our cities; he loved simplicity, and, with all his keen artistic sense and instinct for color and inventive pattern, I believe he preferred plainness, and even rudeness, to insincere or corrupt forms of art.

“He was no sentimentalist, however, but went to the root of things in everything he took up, and a study of Karl Marx and other economists only strengthened his Socialist convictions. He saw the evils and dangers which arose from the tendency of excessive wealth to fall into the hands of the few, and the disastrous working of the commercial principle of absolute individual possession of land and of the instruments of production and distribution in its effect upon the condition of the people at large. He saw the world divided into a possessing class, with their hangers-on, and a vast dispossessed class dependent for life itself upon the condition that their employment should be a source of profit to the employers, and he saw the resulting competitive struggle, commercial booms, followed by commercial depression and want of work, and a chronic state for many of what he termed ‘artificial starvation.’”

William Morris was not what Marxists would call a scientific Socialist, though he accepted the fundamen-

tals of Marxism. He was, naturally, an artist and a poet before he was anything else. His poetic-artistic criticisms of capitalism, however, furnish a most interesting and effective indictment of this system, and answers conclusively those who see, or pretend to see, in Socialism a social system wherein everybody and everything are reduced to one gray level. From this viewpoint the following pages should prove interesting and stimulating.

THE PUBLISHERS.

I.

WHAT THE FACTORIES ARE.

At a meeting of the Commons Preservation Society, I heard it assumed by a clever speaker that our great cities, London in particular, were bound to go on increasing without any limit, and those present accepted that assumption complacently, as I think people usually do. Now, under the present capitalist system, it is difficult to see anything which might stop the growth of these horrible brick encampments; its tendency is undoubtedly to depopulate the country and small towns for the advantage of the great commercial and manufacturing centres; but this evil, and it is a monstrous one, will be no longer a necessary evil when we have got rid of land monopoly, manufacturing for the profit of individuals, and the stupid waste of competitive distribution; and it seems probable that the development of electricity as a motive power will make it easier to undo the evils brought upon us by capitalist tyranny, when we regain our senses and determine to live like human beings; but even if it turns out that we must still be dependent on coal and steam for force, much could still be done toward making life pleasant, if universal co-operation in manufacturing and distribution were to take the place of our present competitive anarchy. At

the risk of being considered dreamers, therefore, it is important for us to try to raise our ideals of the pleasure of life; because one of the dangers which the social revolution runs is that the generation which sees the fall of capitalism, educated as it will have been to bear the thousand miseries of our present system, will have far too low a standard of refinement and real pleasure. It is natural that men who are now beaten down by the fear of losing even their present pitiable livelihood, should be able to see nothing further ahead than relief from that terror and the grinding toil under which they are oppressed; but surely it will be a different story when the community is in possession of the machinery, factories, mines, and land, and is administering them for the benefit of the community; and when, as a necessary consequence, men find that the providing of the mere necessities of life will be so far from being a burdensome task for the people that it will not give due scope to their energies. Surely when this takes place, in other words when they are free, they will refuse to allow themselves to be surrounded by ugliness, squalor and disorder, either in their leisure or their working hours.

Let us, therefore, ask and answer a few questions on the conditions of manufacture, so as to put before us one branch of the pleasure of life to be looked forward to by Socialists.

Why are men huddled together in unmanageable crowds in the sweltering hells we call big towns?

For profit's sake; so that a reserve army of labor may always be ready to hand for reduction of wages

*It is erroneous to speak of an "Iron Law of Wages." Marxian, i. e., Socialist economists reject the term as unscientific and false. It was Ferdinand Lassalle who brought the term into prominence. According to Lassalle, high wages would result in an increase of proletarians, which in turn would bring about an "over-stocked" labor market, resulting in low wages; low wages would result in a decrease of proletarians, which would bring about a "shortage" in the labor market, resulting in high wages, and so forth ad libitum. Wages move in no such vicious circle. Lassalle's theory is based upon an incomplete understanding of the nature of value and price, and it ignores essential and vital factors, such as, for example, the constant increase of proletarians through introduction of labor-saving machinery—a process that proceeds apace regardless of wages paid and condition of the labor market, though the said process may be accelerated or retarded by these circumstances. Rarely does the demand for labor exceed the supply. Normally there is a "reserve army" of unemployed that can be, and is drawn upon at the pleasure of the employing class. Instead of moving in a "vicious" and self-compensating circle, the tendency has been, and is, to force the general wage level lower and lower.—*The Publishers.*

under the iron law, * and to supply the sudden demand of the capitalist gamblers, falsely called "organizers of labor."

Why are these crowds of competitors for subsistence wages housed in wretched shanties which would be a disgrace to the Flathead Indians?

For profit's sake; no one surely would build such dog-hutches for their own sake; there is no insuperable difficulty in the way of lodging people in airy rooms decently decorated, in providing their lodgings not only with good public cooking and washing rooms, but also with beautiful halls for the common meal and other purposes, as in the Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, which it would be a pleasure merely to sit in.

Why should any house, or group of lodgings, arranged in flats or otherwise, be without a pleasant and ample garden, and good playground?

Because profit, competition and rents forbid it. Why should one-third of England be so stifled and poisoned with smoke that over the greater part of Yorkshire (for instance) the general idea must be that sheep are naturally black? And why must Yorkshire and Lancashire rivers run mere filth and dye?

Profit will have it so: no one any longer pretends that it would not be easy to prevent such crimes against decent life: but the "organizers of labor," who might better be called "organizers of filth," know that it wouldn't pay; and as they are for the most part of the year safe in their country seats, or shooting—crofters' lives—in the Highlands, or yachting in the Mediterranean, they rather like the look of the smoke country for a change, as something, it is to be supposed, stimulating to their imaginations concerning—well, we must not get theological.

As to the factories themselves: why should there be scarcely room to turn round in them? Why should they be, as in the case of the weaving sheds of oversized cotton factories, hot houses for rheumatism? Why should they be such miserable prisons? Profit-grinding compels it, that is all; there is no other reason why there should not be ample room in them, abundant air, a minimum of noise: nay, they might be beautiful after their kind, and surrounded by trees and gardens; in many cases the very necessities of manufacture might be made use of for beautifying their surroundings; as, for instance, in textile printing works, which require large reservoirs of water.

In such factories labor might be made, not only no

burden, but even most attractive; young men and women, at the time of life when pleasure is most sought after, would go to their work as to a pleasure party: it is most certain that labor may be so arranged that no social relations could be more delightful than communion in hopeful work: love, friendship, family affection, might all be quickened by it; joy increased and grief lightened by it.

Where are the material means to come from for bringing this about? Fellow-workers, from the millions of surplus value wrung out of your labor by the "organizers of filth"; screwed out of you for the use of tools and machines invented by the gathered genius of ages, for the use of your share of Earth, the Common Mother.

It is worth while thinking about, fellow-workers! For while theologians are disputing about the existence of a hell *elsewhere*, we are on the way to realizing it *here*: and if capitalism is to endure, whatever may become of men when they *die*, they will come into hell when they are born. Think of that and devote yourselves to the spread of the Religion of Socialism.

II.

WHAT THE FACTORIES MIGHT BE.

We Socialists are often reproached with giving no details of the state of things which would follow upon the destruction of that system of waste and war which is sometimes dignified by the lying title of the harmonious combination of capital and labor; many worthy people say, "We admit that the present system has produced unsatisfactory results, but at least it is a system; you ought to be able to give us some definite idea of the results of that reconstruction which you call Socialism."

To this Socialists answer, and rightly, that we have not set ourselves to build up a system to please our tastes, nor are we seeking to impose it on the world in a mechanical manner, but rather that we are assisting in bringing about a development of history which would take place without our help, but which nevertheless compels us to help it, and that under these circumstances it would be futile to map out the details of life in a condition of things so different from that in which we have been born and bred. Those details will be taken care of by the men who will be so lucky as to be born into a society relieved of the oppression which crushes us, and who surely will be not less, but more

prudent and reasonable than we are. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the economical changes which are in progress must be accompanied by corresponding developments of men's aspirations; and the knowledge of their progress can not fail to arouse our imaginations in picturing for ourselves that life at once happy and manly, which we know social revolution will put within the reach of all men.

Of course, the pictures so drawn will vary according to the turn of mind of the picturer, but I have already tried to show that healthy and undomineering individuality will be fostered and not crushed out by Socialism. I will, therefore, as an artist and handicraftsman, venture to develop a little on the conditions of pleasant work in the days when we shall work for livelihood and pleasure and not for "profit."

Our factory then, is in a pleasant place; no very difficult matter, when, as I have said before, it is no longer necessary to gather people into miserable sweltering hordes for profit's sake, for all the country is in itself pleasant or is capable of being made pleasant with very little pains and forethought. Next, our factory stands amidst gardens as beautiful (climate apart) as those of Alcinous, since there is no need of stinting it of ground, profit-rents being a thing of the past, and the labor on such gardens is like enough to be purely voluntary, as it is not easy to see the day when seventy-five out of every hundred people will not take delight in the pleasantest and most innocent of all occupations; and our working people will assuredly want open air relaxation from their factory work.

Even now, as I am told, the Nottingham factory hands could give many a hint to professional gardeners in spite of all the drawbacks of a great manufacturing town. One's imagination is inclined fairly to run riot over the picture of beauty and pleasure offered by the thought of skillful co-operative gardening for beauty sake, which beauty would by no means exclude the raising of useful produce for the sake of livelihood.

Impossible! I hear an anti-Socialist say. My friend, please to remember that most factories sustain today large and handsome gardens, and not seldom parks and woods of many acres in extent; with due appurtenances of highly paid Scotch professional gardeners, wood-reeves, bailiffs, gamekeepers, and the like; the whole being managed in the most wasteful way conceivable; only the said gardens, etc., are say, twenty miles away from the factory, out of the smoke, and are kept up for one member of the factory only, the sleeping partner to wit, who may, indeed, double that part by organizing its labor (for his own profit), in which case he receives ridiculously disproportionate pay in addition.

Well, it follows on this garden business that our factory must make no sordid litter, befoul no water, nor poison the air with smoke. I need say nothing more on that point, as "profit" apart, it would be easy enough.

Next, as to the buildings themselves, I must ask leave to say something, because it is usually supposed that they must of necessity be ugly, and truly they are almost always at present mere nightmares; but it is, I

must assert, by no means necessary that they should be ugly; nay, there would be no serious difficulty in making them beautiful, as every building might be, which serves its purpose duly, which is built generously as regards material, and which is built with pleasure by the builders and designers; indeed, as things go, those nightmare buildings aforesaid sufficiently typify the work they are built for, and look what they are: temples of overcrowding and adulteration and overwork, of unrest in a word; so it is not difficult to think of our factory buildings, showing on their outside, what they are for: reasonable and light work, cheered at every step by hope and pleasure. So, in brief, our buildings will be beautiful with their own beauty of simplicity as workshops, not bedizened with tomfoolery as some are now, which do not any the more for that hide their repulsiveness; but, moreover, besides the mere workshops, our factory will have other buildings which may carry ornament further than that; for it will need dining hall, library, school, places for study of various kinds, and other such structures; nor do I see why, if we have a mind for it, we should not emulate the monks and craftsmen of the Middle Ages in our ornamentation of such buildings; why we should be shabby in housing our rest and pleasure and our search for knowledge, as we may well be shabby in housing the shabby life we have to live now.

And again, if it be doubted as to the possibility of getting these beautiful buildings on the score of cost, let me once again remind you that every great factory does today sustain a palace (often more than one),

amidst that costly garden and park aforesaid out of the smoke; but that this palace, stuffed as it is with all sorts of costly things, is for one member of the factory only, the sleeping partner,—useful creature! It is true that the said palace is mostly, with all it contains, beastly ugly; but this ugliness is but a part of the bestial waste of the whole system of profit-mongering, which refuses cultivation and refinement to the workers, and therefore can have no art, not even for all its money.

So we have come to the outside of our Factory of the Future, and seen that it does not injure the beauty of the world, but adds to it rather. On another occasion, if I may, I will try to give a picture of how the work goes on there.

I have a little sketch of him as he stood on a May Day in Hyde Park, in a wagon decked with wild spring flowers, speaking to a crowd of workmen, the red flag waving over his head. This is an appropriate last vision to remember of William Morris, who in all he did was very much alive, and who, though loving the beauty and romance of the past, looked forward with a clear vision to the future, and to the regeneration of society, relieved of the artificial burdens which now oppress mankind.—WALTER CRANE.



William Morris
speaking from
a wagon in Hyde
Park, May 1 1884

III.

HOW THE WORK WILL GO ON.

In a recent article we tried to look through the present into the future and see a factory as it might be, and got as far as the surroundings and outside of it; but those externals of a true palace of industry can be only realized naturally and without affectation by the work which is to be done in them being in all ways reasonable and fit for human beings; I mean no mere whim of some rich and philanthropic manufacturer will make even one factory permanently pleasant and agreeable for the workers in it; he will die or be sold up, his heir will be poorer or more singlehearted in his devotion to profit, and all the beauty and order will vanish from the short-lived dream; even the external beauty in industrial concerns must be the work of society, and not of individuals.

Now as to the work! First of all it will be useful, and therefore honorable and honored, because there will be no temptation to make mere useless toys, since there will be no rich men cudgeling their brains for means for spending superfluous money, and consequently, no "organizers of labor" pandering to degrading follies for the sake of profit, wasting their intelligence and energy in contriving snares for cash in the shape

of trumpery, which they themselves heartily despise. Nor will the work turn out trash; there will be no millions of poor to make a market for wares which no one would choose to use if he were not driven to do so; everyone will be able to afford things good of their kind, and, as will be shown hereafter, will have knowledge of goods enough to reject what is not excellent; coarse and rough wares may be made for rough or temporary purposes, but they will openly proclaim themselves for what they are; adulterations will be unknown.

Furthermore, machines of the most ingenious and best-approved kinds will be used when necessary, but will be used simply to save human labor; nor indeed could they be used for anything else in such well-ordered work as we are thinking about; since, profit being dead, there would be no temptation to pile up wares whose apparent value as articles of use, their conventional value as such, does not rest on the necessities or reasonable desires of men for such things, but on artificial habits forced on the public by the craving of the capitalists for fresh and ever fresh profit. These things have no real value as things to be used, and their conventional (let us say sham) utility value has been bred of their value, as articles of exchange for profit in a society founded on profit mongering.

Well, the manufacture of useless goods, whether harmful luxuries for the rich or disgraceful makeshifts for the poor having come to an end, and we still being in possession of the machines once used for mere profit grinding, but now used only for saving human labor,

it follows that much less labor will be necessary for each workman; all the more, as we are going to get rid of all non-workers, and busy-idle people; so that the working time of each member of our factory will be very short—say to be much within the mark, four hours a day.

Now, next it may be allowable for an artist—that is, one whose ordinary work is pleasant and not slavish—to hope that in no factory will all the work, even that necessary four hours' work, be mere machine tending; and it follows from what was said above about machines being used to save labor, that there would be no work which would turn men into mere machines; therefore, at least some portion of the work—the necessary, and, in fact, compulsory work, I mean—would be pleasant to do. The machine tending ought not to require a very long apprenticeship, therefore in no case should any person be set to run up and down after a machine through all his working hours every day, even so shortened as we have seen. Now, the attractive work of our factory—that which was pleasant in itself to do—would be of the nature of art, therefore all slavery work ceases under such a system, for whatever is burdensome about the factory would be taken turn and turn about, and, so distributed, would cease to be a burden—would be, in fact, a kind of rest from the more exciting or artistic work.

Thus, then, would the sting be taken out of the factory system, in which, as things now are, the co-operation of labor, which ought to have been a blessing to the community, has been turned into a curse by the

appropriation of the products of its labor by individuals, for the purpose of gaining for them the very doubtful advantages of a life of special luxury and often of mere idleness, the result of which to the mass of the workers has been a dire slavery, of which long hours of labor, ever increasing strain of labor during those hours and complete repulsiveness in the work itself have been the greatest evils.

It remains for me in another article to set forth my hopes of the way in which the gathering together of people in such social bodies as properly ordered factories might be, may be utilized for increasing the general pleasure of life and raising its standard, material and intellectual; for creating, in short, that life rich in incident and variety, but free from the strain of mere sordid trouble, the life which the individualist vainly bubbles of, but which the Socialist aims at directly and will one day attain to.

IV.

HOW WORK WILL BE PLEASURABLE.

I have tried to show in former articles that in a 'duly ordered society, in which people would work for a livelihood and not for the profit of another, a factory might not only be pleasant as to its surroundings and beautiful in its architecture, but that even the rough and necessary work done in it might be so arranged as to be neither burdensome in itself nor of long 'duration' for each worker. But furthermore, the organization of such a factory—that is to say, a group of people working in harmonious co-operation towards a useful end—would of itself afford opportunities for increasing the pleasure of life.

To begin with, such a factory will surely be a centre of education. Any children who seem likely to 'develop gifts towards its special industry would gradually and without pain, amidst their book learning, be drawn into technical instruction, which would bring them at last into a thorough apprenticeship for their craft; therefore, the bent of each child having been considered in choosing its instruction and occupation, it is not too much to expect that children so educated will look forward eagerly to the time when they will be allowed to work at turning out real useful wares. A child, whose

manual dexterity has been developed without undue forcing side by side with its mental intelligence, would surely be as eager to handle shuttle, hammer and what not, for the first time as a real workman, and begin making, as a young gentleman now is to get hold of his first gun and begin killing.

This education so begun for the child will continue for the grown man, who will have every opportunity to practice the niceties of his craft, if he be so minded, to carry it to the utmost degree of perfection, not for the purpose of using his extra knowledge and skill to sweat his fellow-workman, but for his own pleasure and honor as a good artist. Similar opportunities will be afforded him to study, as deeply as the subject will bear, the science of which his craft is founded. Besides, a good library and help in studying it will be provided by every productive group (or factory), so that the worker's other voluntary work may be varied by the study of general science or literature.

But further, the factory could supply another educational want by showing the general public how its goods are made. Competition being dead and buried, no new process, no detail of improvements in machinery, would be hidden from the first inquirer. The knowledge which might thus be imparted would foster a general interest in work and in the realities of life, which would surely tend to elevate labor and create a standard of excellence in manufacture, which in its turn would breed a strong motive towards exertion in the workers.

A strange contrast such a state of things would be

to that now existing! For today the public, and especially that part of it which does not follow any manual occupation, is grossly ignorant of crafts and processes, even when they are carried on at its own doors, so that most of the middle class are not only defenseless against the most palpable adulterations, but also, which is far more serious, are of necessity whole worlds removed from any sympathy with the life of the workshop.

So managed, therefore, the factory, by co-operation with other industrial groups, will provide an education for its own workers and contribute its share to the education of citizens outside; but further, it will, as a matter of course, find it easy to provide for mere restful amusements, as it will have ample buildings for library, schoolroom, dining hall and the like; social gatherings, musical or dramatic entertainments will obviously be easy to manage under such conditions.

One pleasure—and that a more serious one—I must mention, a pleasure which is unknown at present to the workers and which even for the classes of ease and leisure only exists in a miserably corrupted and degraded form. I mean the practice of fine arts. People living under the conditions of life above mentioned, having manual skill, technical and general education, and leisure to use these advantages, are quite sure to develop a love of art—that is to say, a sense of beauty and interest in life, which, in the long run, must stimulate them to the desire for artistic creation, the satisfaction of which is of all pleasures the greatest.

I have started by supposing our group of social labor busying itself in the production of bodily neces-

saries; but we have seen that such work will only take a small part of the workers' time, as their leisure, beyond mere bodily rest and recreation, I have supposed, some would employ in perfecting themselves in the niceties of their craft, or in research as to its principles; some would stop there, others would take to studying more general knowledge, but some—and I think most—would find themselves impelled toward the creation of beauty, and would find their opportunities for this under their hands, as they worked out their due quota of necessary work for the common good; these would amuse themselves by ornamenting the wares they made, and would only be limited in the quantity and quality of such work by artistic considerations as to how much or what kind of work really suited the wares; nor, to meet a possible objection, would there be any danger of such ornamental work degenerating into mere amateur twaddle, such as is now inflicted on the world by fine ladies and gentlemen in search for a refuge from boredom; because our workers will be thoroughly educated as workers and will know well what good work and true finish (not trade finish) mean, and because the public, being a body of workers also, everyone in some line or other, will well understand what real work means. Our workers, therefore, will do their artistic work under keen criticism of themselves, their workshop comrades, and a public composed of intelligent workmen.

To add beauty to their necessary daily work will furnish outlet for the artistic aspirations of most men; but, further, our factory, which is externally beautiful,

will not be inside like a clean jail or workhouse; the architecture will come inside in the form of such ornament as may be suitable to the special circumstances. Nor can I see why the highest and most intellectual art, pictures, sculpture, and the like, should not adorn a true palace of industry. People living a manly and reasonable life would have no difficulty in refraining from overdoing both these and other adornments; here, then, would be opportunities for using the special talents of the workers, especially in cases where the day's necessary work afforded scanty scope for artistic work.

Thus our Socialist factory, besides turning out goods useful to the community, will provide for its own workers work light in duration, and not oppressive in kind, education in childhood and youth. Serious occupation, amusing relaxation, and mere rest for the leisure of the workers, and withal that beauty of surroundings, and the power of producing beauty which are sure to be claimed by those who have leisure, education and serious occupation.

No one can say that such things are not desirable for the workers; but we Socialists are striving to make them seem not only desirable, but necessary, well knowing that under the present system of society they are impossible of attainment—and why? Because we can not afford the time, trouble, and thought necessary to obtain them. 'Again, why can not we? Because we are at war, class against class and man against man; all our time is taken up with that; we are forced to busy ourselves, not with the arts of peace, but with the arts of war, which are, briefly, trickery and oppression.

Under such conditions of life labor can but be a terrible burden, degrading to the workers, more degrading to those who live upon their work.

This is the system which we seek to overthrow, and supplant by one in which labor will no longer be a burden.

Franz von Sickingen



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