



Fabian Tract No. 118.

# THE SECRET OF RURAL DEPOPULATION.

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## The Secret of Rural Depopulation.

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THE question "Why do I stay where I am?" is one that interests all of us. Its answers range between that of Sterne's starling with the simple "I can't get out" and that of the happy few who can say "It is well for us to be here." But most people who are what in the country we call "fixters" have to confess that they are the prisoners of habit. The more regular our life the harder it is to break away from its rule.

Now of all occupations that of the tiller of the soil is perhaps the most regular. He is hitched on to the zodiac. Every action of his working life is as recurrent as the seasons themselves. Ploughing is a step towards ploughing, sowing is a step towards sowing again. And so it goes round. The son of a field laborer, in the ordinary course of things, goes to field work as soon as the school will let him. By the time he is getting "man's money" he has little volition left. Habit has taken its place. The odds would seem to be long in favor of his remaining a field laborer for the term of his natural life.

But there is something more than habit to fasten him to the land. By the time he is sixteen he is specialized for field work. That is the only skilled labor for which he will ever be fit. Off the land he is only so much horse-power. He can dig—under direction—in a drain, or he can carry bales at the docks. He is past learning another craft. He is moored head and stern to the land by two hawsers, habit and hopelessness.

And yet his breaking away from the land is becoming so common as to constitute a national danger. Why is this? We must go back, I think, to a period before rustic unrest began distinctly to take the form of escape.

### The Fauna of the Country.

Up to some thirty odd years ago agricultural laborers were regarded as a quite permanent factor in the sum of English life. They were part of the *fauna* of the country—like pheasants and partridges; only there is no getting a good head of game without preserving, and there was no need to preserve country laborers. Sergeant Kite was almost the only poacher to be feared, and the toll he took was trifling. Now and then typhus or an emigration agent would descend upon a village, and a cottage would be empty for a month or so. But that was only a momentary inconvenience to an individual employer. The real difficulty was not how to breed laborers, like pheasants, but how to keep down their numbers, like rabbits. No more cottages were allowed upon an estate than would just supply roofage to the laborers it employed. Increase was not

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allowed for. Infant mortality was high. Overcrowding and sanitary neglect did their work. Semi-starvation helped. Still, however, the supply of labor exceeded the demand. Those were the days in which a great farmer is said to have offered a friend a guinea if he could find a weed in his wheat-field. With men's wages at six or seven shillings a week, women glad to take what they could get for field work, and corn at 50s. a quarter, the land could be well "done," as they say. The employer could be well "done," too. A great agriculturist's recollections of about this period were published a few years ago. They were a record of good living, *menus* of dinners, reminiscences of hunting breakfasts, conversations with admiring noblemen. "Hey, the green holly. This life is most jolly," ought to have been the motto of the book. The world went very well then—with squires and farmers.

I do not think the idea of what we call a "rural exodus" occurred seriously to anyone before the early seventies. There was the land, and that there should be men to till it seemed a law of nature.

That the men might possibly one day turn their backs on the land in sufficiently large numbers to seriously inconvenience squires and farmers generally—this idea never entered the head of the average employer. Where were they to go? The land of Egypt, the house of bondage, was pretty secure in the deserts and seas that surrounded it. The prison was hard to break.

Looking at the wages and the housing of the laborer in those days, it really seems as though physical laws were all that prevented the process of degradation and deprivation of which he was the victim from being continued indefinitely. Men cannot work unless they eat—something. The proverbial straw a day had very nearly been reached. Out of English countrymen, the descendants of the men who rose in arms with Wat Tyler and Jack Cade, had been evolved by the sheer greed and selfishness of squires and farmers, a race so reduced by long continued starvation and oppression that they seemed, generally, as incapable of resistance as their tyrants were, generally, incapable of ruth. "Hunger will tame a lion," says Robinson Crusoe. The British farmer put the maxim to proof.

Froissart called the English common people of his day the haughtiest and most overweening that the world could show. That was in the fourteenth century. This is what Joseph Arch said at the end of the nineteenth: "I had seen my brother laborers stand and tremble like an aspen leaf at the dark look of the employer simply because they had not the pluck of men." You may see the same thing to-day. Nothing is sadder than the abjectness of the laborer before the scowl of his master.

The laborer who was to be hanged the other day and who said "Thank ye, sir," to Jack Ketch on his adjusting the rope is a fair instance of the attitude of his class to any Jack-in-office or authority. They are descended from generations of half-starved parents, and they show "the mettle of their pasture."

The farmer seemed to have done his work thoroughly. He had produced what he wanted, a submissive drudge who cost little, did his work and gave no trouble whatever. The laborer's hand had not yet lost its cunning.

### In the Days of the Corn Laws.

The work was done and done well. The farmers ate, drank and enjoyed themselves. That the laboring population had any "rights" as against the "masters" was a notion dismissed with contempt as part of the professional agitator's stock-in-trade. "The country" meant the landlord and the farmer. When we think of Athens in the days of Pericles, we hardly give a thought to the slave population. They are below the notice of history. And so it practically was with our rural laborers until the days of the Agricultural Laborers' Union. The Church knew them as "the poor." To the employers they were "the men." Charles Kingsley, in *Alton Locke*, gives a vivid description of an agricultural riot, its aimless despair, its impotent violence. I have here a reprinted report of a more peaceful demonstration in 1846. It is sad reading. But there is nothing in it to frighten anybody. The word "rising" cannot be applied to these pitiful wriggings of the great invertebrate earth-worm upon which the classes then recognized as England were so light-heartedly treading. Its head was never reared to strike. Its demonstrations demonstrated nothing but its own feebleness. The repeal of the Corn Laws left the laborer morally much where he was. Bread was cheaper, but the hand of the employer was perhaps heavier than before. From 1855 to the days of Joseph Arch was perhaps as black a time as any the laborers had to pass. The price of wheat was high, the squires raised their rents, the farmers recouped themselves by cutting down wages. The prosperity of squires and farmers was thus squeezed out of the already abject poverty of the poor. Any appearance of discontent was sternly repressed. To quote the words of a great agricultural authority, "It was a state of things disgraceful to all concerned." *Except to laborers, I think.* But it created no commotion. The Church, represented in every country parish, raised no protest. The parson had long ceased to be the "persona" of his flock. He thought more of the hurdles than of the sheep, as they say. The souls of squires and farmers *rotted* in the cradle of an easy conscience. They were good Churchmen to a man. Then, all at once, a bolt from the blue, came

### The Agricultural Laborers' Union.

I need not dwell upon the history of that great movement. Opposed though it was by the landed interest in every form, denounced by too many of the country clergy and unhelped by the rest, it went on triumphantly until it had raised agricultural wages almost throughout the whole of England to a point at which the existence of the laborer was no longer *intolerable*. That much obtained, it collapsed. It is a remarkable instance of a great rising against long-endured oppression which contented itself with a bare rectification of the immediate wrong complained of. There was no violence, no resentment. This was undoubtedly due in great measure to the personal character and influence of the leader of the movement, Joseph Arch, a man of whom it is impossible to think without gratitude and respect. But it is no less true that the moderation shown by the men, both in their struggle and their success, argues a

certain want of resilience which testifies to the extent to which the fire and vigor of the race had been sapped by long-continued semi-starvation and enforced submission to petty tyranny. The Agricultural Union did not, I think, appreciably raise the laborer; it only raised his wages. Instead of calling up a spirit of independence like that which animated the leader (a man, we must remember, born and bred in a cottage the property of his father, not of his employer), it left them generally, although materially better off, individually as submissive and as incapable of assertion of their personal rights as they had been through long generations of practical serfdom.

But the apathy of their hopelessness had been disturbed. The employers' difficulty had been the emigration agents' opportunity, and the plethora of labor had been relieved by the departure of a large percentage of the agricultural population. When the smoke of the struggle cleared off it was quite obvious that horizons had widened. Young men who dared not defy the arrogance of their employers found courage enough to escape from it to the railways or the towns. In this way the best young blood kept gradually draining away. The process has been steadily going on since.

The best men go. Laboring parents plot escape for their boys from the land as if they were prisoners in an enemy's country. Nobody stays of choice. You may hear former farm laborers speak of their late employers as a seventeenth century mariner might have spoken of the Moors of Tangiers, among whom he had been a captive.

#### Is the Laborer in Fault?

It has been said by a vigorous clerical writer that the laborer's discontent is merely a survival from the "bad, old, black past," when he really had something to complain of. All that has long gone by. It is the laborer's "evil temper" that still "provokes masters to harsh measures, harsh words, driving, and all such seemingly needless regulations as the command to keep no fowls or pigs, the tied cottages, and the domineering tone." All this is the laborer's fault, says the writer. Things are not now as they were in the times when "laborers were scornfully trampled on—and when the Church, cowed and faithless, was as little inclined as the State to help their condition." All that is gone by. Farmers and parsons have undergone a wonderful change. Like the Homeric hero they "boast that they are a great deal better than their fathers." But the laborer is bad indeed. The characteristics of the laborer are "shirking, dishonesty and negligence." "Tom, Dick and Sam abuse their employer, sit under the hedge when he is out of sight, steal his corn and meal, leave his horses harnessed and go off drinking, teach him that they have no love or gratitude, but only fear." The coloring suggests the moral complexion of a chain-gang. He might have adopted the words which Mr. Sam Weller in *Pickwick* puts into the mouth of a "wirtuous clergyman." "He's a malicious, bad-disposed, worldly-minded, spiteful, vindictive creetur, with a hard heart as there ain't no soft'nin."

Our "wirtuous clergyman" in this case pronounces the rural villages to be in a state of utter decay, and exhorts us to build our hopes for the future entirely upon the progress of our urban population. Villages and villagers are played out.

Well, I dissent entirely. I am no believer in sudden and unintelligible changes. Farmers are much what they were sixty years ago. Clergymen are not so very different. The cut of their coats is altered, that is about all. Their intentions are as good as ever and the influence they exert exactly as bad, as far as the independence and manliness of their poor parishioners is concerned. And the laborer is what these have made him. He is still, as he has so long been, like an eel on an eel spear. He can wriggle, but that is about all. Until he is set free we can't expect anything very great of him in the way of moral improvement. But his good qualities are only dormant, held in abeyance till the winter of his discontent is made glorious summer by the sun of—Land Reform. At any rate, whatever he is, it is the social and economical system of England that has made him so. He has been crushed under an intolerable pressure, and until that is removed we must expect his faults to be of the grovelling sort. Give him opportunity and he will be erect, and his faults will probably be what they were in Froissart's time.

#### How the Laborer Lives.

Let us give one comprehensive glance to the conditions under which the laborer mostly lives, and under which some people expect him to cultivate all the Christian graces. A miserable cottage which as a tenant-at-will he can only repair or improve at the risk of his outlay in labor or in money being appropriated by his employer, a life of constant hardship, wages even now barely sufficient for food, fire and clothing, the proud man's contumely, the want of hope, the long vista of thankless drudgery through which the eye looks only to rest finally upon the workhouse, the absence of anything like social enjoyment, the tyranny of drink, the capricious restrictions upon personal liberty of action which his employer may at pleasure impose, and to which he must submit or go. It is a gloomy picture.

The strange thing is that up to so comparatively recent a time Englishmen should have accepted a life like this, a life still worse than this, as their natural doom, exactly as an Esquimaux may submit unrepiningly to the rigors of an Arctic climate. An Esquimaux wants more seals; ice and snow and darkness are matters of course. So Joseph Arch's men wanted more wages, they had no dislike to their occupation or the hardships inseparable from it. The best of them had doubtless the same pride and pleasure in their work which every skilled craftsman finds in the exercise of his skill. A great change has passed over the laborer in this respect. Tillage in all its branches appears to most of them sheer drudgery, absolutely uninteresting if not positively hateful. No mere rise of wages will alter this.

#### Skilled Labor and Farm Wages.

I do not think I can put this more forcibly before you than by condensing here a conversation I had a month or two ago with a man of the highest farming class, engaged in the management of one of those immense farms which seem to me to be the ruin of England.

It was a very favorable specimen. The management was evidently liberal, the owner, I believe, personally kindly. But the system was

too strong. On this great farm the piecework principle was in force. "So if a man wastes his time, he wastes what is his own," said my informant. The scale of pay was high for the district. "With these wages the men save, I suppose?" I said. "No, never. It goes as it comes. The men who get most don't live more comfortably than the others." "Do they take much interest in the work?" "Not the very slightest. If it were not for the piecework plan we might as well give up." "Are the men who are now in their prime as skilled in their work as the old men used to be?" "There is no comparison." He referred to an old laborer who possessed nine arts. I will count them up. Hedging and ditching (in two varieties), dry fence making, rick building, thatching, hurdle making, sheep-cage making, mowing, brewing. "You have no laborer who can do the same now?" "No, not one of them." "You mean no one man can do all?" "I mean that there is not a man on the farm who can do *one* of these things as it ought to be done."

Now, what is the reason of this? The general answer is "education." Education has something to do with it, doubtless. But let me read what Professor Thorold Rogers wrote in 1878 on the subject of rustic arts. He enumerates five or six, including ploughing, which I have omitted as too universal for special mention.

And he sums up thus: "Well, if you compare the work of the agricultural laborer who possesses the five or six qualifications I have mentioned with the work of an ordinary artisan who receives 35s. a week, the agricultural laborer, as regards the varied nature of his accomplishments, is inconceivably the superior of the artisan." I think we must add to this that the field hand is more exposed to wind and weather than the artisan. His life is a harder one. I have known men who lately have never had a dry stitch on them from Monday morning to Saturday night.

Now, let us suppose a farm hand to have mastered half a dozen of these arts. On the land he is *lucky* if he gets 15s. or 16s. a week, all counted. If he gets "on the line," the railway, just with pick and spade, he gets 18s. or 20s. What encouragement is there for a laborer to learn his craft? Again. The other day, in the village where I live, there was a little semi-political meeting, held by some working-men from a neighboring town. It was a lively little business enough. But few laborers came. There was a largish group of farm hands at the door just before the speaking began. Someone, I was told, asked them if they were not coming in. "Well," says one, "we've been thinking it over. But if we come in we shall hear of it to-morrow from the master." So they went off. The yoke is never for a moment off the agricultural laborer's neck. I daresay the ganger looks after the platelayers on the line at their work sternly enough. But when a man shoulders his pick and goes home he is his own man. And that is what a farm hand never can say. Perhaps education may have helped him to feel it.

Why do men dislike farm labor? How is it possible that they should like it? Here is an occupation in which skill brings no reward, which marks a man quite early in life with an ineffaceable brand of social inferiority, which compels submission in a way almost unknown to any other, which offers no hope and does not even

promise permanence enough for habit to go to work assuredly in the task of accommodating existence to its conditions.

All this explains discontent. But it does not explain why up to some thirty years ago the sort of discontent with which we now have to deal should apparently not have existed.

Education may have something to do with it. Even what a lad learns at the village school does to a certain extent develop his imaginative faculties; and imagination is like a kite. The stronger it flies the more it pulls its flyer after it. But personal contact with men from the outer world has done more. Modern ideas are introduced, not by the schoolmaster, but by the tramp, and the traveller and the tallyman. The laborer sees himself through their eyes. And, what is more, *he sees his master*. The conditions under which he labors are degrading. This is strangely brought home to him by comparison of his position with that of others. And he confounds the labor with the conditions. A country laborer's great ambition is to disguise his occupation. As far as he can he dresses like a townsman, and wishes to be taken for one.

I lately read a book called *Mendip Annals*, an account by Mrs. Hannah More's sister of the good work done in Somerset by those two plucky old ladies just a hundred years ago. Comparing the ordinary farmer as he is there depicted with Charles Kingsley's references to him in the forties, with what the condition of his laborers showed him to be in the fifties, with Joseph Arch's account of him in the seventies, and with what I have myself gathered from laborers and personal observation of his general character since, I should say that he had undergone less change in the course of the century than perhaps any other class of Englishman. A writer in *Longman's*, commenting upon Mr. Rider Haggard's *Farmer's Year*, says that the schools to which farmers' sons go very often do not teach them as much as the village school teaches the laborers' boys. It is hard to believe, I grant, but the tradition of class superiority is kept up in all its vigor in the farmhouse. The little Spartan, well taught or not, is reared up in the contempt of the little Helot. The consequence is that class characteristics survive in a curious way. The ordinary non-working farmer (there are, of course, exceptions) belongs to the period of Parson Trulliber and Squire Western. He has stood still. The laborer has reached a point from which he can, inarticulately, criticize his master. And he does. Enquire why a man leaves his place. The answer varies in form, but is generally the same in substance. "He couldn't stand the way Mr. So-and-so goes on."

Now how does Mr. So-and-so go on? If we can get a clear idea of him we shall be on the way to an explanation of laboring discontent.

### The Modern Farmer.

A century or so ago England was still the land of "characters." Uncle Toby and Lieutenant Lismahago, Commodore Trunnion and Parson Adams were popular in fiction because they were familiar in fact. The closer association of modern times has rounded off our angles into a somewhat distressing uniformity. We are too much afraid of one another not to straighten out the crooks in our natures



before a bend becomes a distortion. We show little mercy to eccentricity unless it has a powerful backer, wealth or rank or talent. People who live in a crowd learn to keep their elbows to themselves. In farming society there is elbow room and to spare. We all know the merchant skipper according to Clark Russell and Frank Bullen, and we understand that the conditions of seafaring life naturally evolve him, that any man in that position will have to fight a battle with himself not to become a brute. It is the same thing with the farmer. He is not so completely isolated as the skipper, the law is more present to him, his men are not so completely at the mercy of his temper. Self-indulgence in food and drink is qualified by the presence of his family; though very nearly, he is not entirely beyond the reach of public opinion. But the conditions of his life are such as to make him a petty tyrant unless he is superior enough to shape and fashion it for himself. Public opinion that keeps most of us on our legs, will give him no help in this. And a petty tyrant he generally is. As long as he keeps within the law he need not fear the cold shoulder among his fellows. "A man mustn't be unneighborly," they say. Now if there is one thing established by rural practice it is that farmers are farmers' neighbors. Laborers do not stand to them in that relation. Class charity covers a multitude of sins.

The non-working farmer is like Nora Creina in the song. His beauties are free "to sink or swell as Nature pleases." They mostly swell. He is under little extraneous restraint, and intellectual self-repression belongs to an intellectual level that he has not reached. We are all subject to attacks of temper. These are suppressed by a feeling of intellectual shame. It is this which mostly prevents passing irritation from hardening into petty spite. Now for a farmer to lose his temper seems to him and his class the most natural thing in the world. "Spite" is constantly looked for as a motive in rural matters, and petty generally found.

### Rural Spite.

I must give instances. You will ask, "How do you know them to be true?" Some, of course, are taken from reports of magisterial proceedings, or the like. For others, I can only say I believe them and I know them to be believed among the people whom they concern. What is believed to be fact does, morally, the work of fact. That is enough for my immediate purpose.

Here is one. Two elderly laborers had given offence to some farming magnates before whom, sitting in an official capacity, their wives had to appear in order to obtain their share of a village charity to which their claim had formerly been allowed without question. They, poor old women, were sneered rudely away and their just claim summarily refused. The whole of the circumstances were made public in three county papers. (I am glad to say that in this case the County Council was successfully invoked.) You would think that some apology was offered; you do not know the great farmer. Here is another case. A poor man had to carry round a circular, in which he was in no way concerned, emanating from the vicar of the parish. He took it to a great farmer in the same way as to the rest of the village. It did not please him, and he spoke very angrily to

the bearer. Such an ebullition of temper is sometimes too sudden to be restrained. Yes, but for weeks afterwards (for ever afterwards for aught I know to the contrary), when the poor man touched his hat, the great man passed on without noticing his salute. There is somewhere a fine translation of an old Spanish ballad of a Moorish king receiving the news of the taking of one of his towns by the enemy.

" Letters to the Monarch tell  
How Alhama's city fell.  
In the fire the scroll he threw  
And the messenger he slew."

The feeling is the same in both cases. Neither the fifteenth century tyrant nor the nineteenth century farmer could see any reason for repressing a natural feeling. Such men are not pleasant masters.

As far as my observation goes, I think primitive impulse is less restrained among non-working farmers than among any other equally well-fed and well-dressed class in England. For instance, cursing has died out among us generally. As villagers say, "We damn and done wi' it." It survives in corners where ridicule does not come. Here is rather an elaborate specimen of farming malediction. The speaker a well-gloved, well-hatted, well-groomed man, a non-working farmer. He had been disappointed (not in any way defrauded) of the services of the laborer to whom he was speaking.

"I wish you may die in a ditch without a rag to cover you or a crust of bread to put in your mouth. And I hope I may live to see it."

This want of the conscious self-restraint which is imposed by the pressure of public opinion produces what I have called "characters." In one farm there may be a half frantic sot; in another a man with a bad temper which he will discharge by following a laborer "up a furrow and down a furrow" and swearing at him all the way. One wealthy agriculturist is famous for his cottages which are known as "Tommy's Pigsties." He cannot bear to put his hand in his pocket for necessary repairs. It was in one of his cottages that the carpenter, going to measure a corpse for a coffin, started back in surprise. The white face was all streaked and blotched with green. It was only the drip of the rain through the rotten thatch—the moss, rather, for there was more moss than straw. "We've put un in the driest corner there was," said the family apologetically. People who live in the sight of society (I mean of those whom they consider their associates) may be proud, but their pride rarely takes an aggressive form. Villages are seldom visited by the search-ray of publicity. In them pride of class has its perfect working. A celebrated agriculturist in the Bible might be the patron saint of many of his modern fellows—Nabal. "Such a man of Belial that a man cannot speak to him." I have just been reading Sir Edmund Verney's book, *American Methods*. Nothing is more striking than the easiness of access of the employer and the way he invites suggestions. I told a story once of a laborer, a friend of my own, who sat up nearly a whole night to get a plough of his master's fit for work—without so much as a thank you. The employer was a

typical and leading man of his class. It would have been considered derogatory to notice a bit of work like that with a "thank you." Do what he will the laborer is an unprofitable servant.

To sum up this part of my subject. The isolation and the habits of life of the non-working farmer tend strongly to exaggerate in him those selfish instincts which make a man intolerable to his dependents. This is the more galling because his authority has been stretched so as to cover matters that lie quite outside the ordinary sphere of the relations of employer and employed.

I give this a leading place in the causes of rural depopulation.

### Cottages as Booby-Traps.

Another cause is to be found in the laborer's helplessness before what he rightly or wrongly considers injustice. I take the matter of housing as illustrative of this. Bad housing is admittedly one reason of rustic discontent. I speak here of the cottage merely as a booby-trap.

I used as a boy to read of the booby-birds on the islands of the South Seas. They sat in rows, and sailors knocked them on the head one after the other, without its occurring to them to fly away. Laborers are much of the same sort. So should we be, I suppose, if our faculties and our energies had been deliberately crushed down for generations. They are trapped one after the other with the most touching simplicity. But they do not like it. Irritations of this sort go on accumulating unnoticed until the cup runs over. It is running over now.

Most cottages are "tied" to farms. Say a farmer has a very bad one; how is he to get a laborer in and make him stay? What is he to do? First, there is the advertisement, "good cottage and garden." Much hiring is done by letter. The laborer sees the advertisement. To go and see the cottage means losing a day's wage. I wish the wives went. But they don't. And they don't encourage their husbands to go. There is the money lost to begin with, and very likely a bad head resulting from much strange beer; and after all "what could *he* tell if he saw it?" Such is the contempt felt for the masculine mind by our natural rulers! He applies by letter for the place, is accepted, and fetched over with family and furniture in his master's waggon. If he goes into the cottage provided, the trap falls. He will be had up before the magistrates if he refuses to fulfil his agreement of service, in writing or verbal. I must give instances. Here is one from an Oxfordshire paper of a couple of months ago. A laborer is inducted as I have described. He stays one day and goes. His plea is that he had not seen the inside of the cottage; that it was raining, and that he had no choice but to put his furniture and family under cover. The master's son says he took him round, and that he had "a chance" of seeing the inside before he took the place. I have no doubt he might have seen it if he had insisted. But laborers, as a fact, have no courage to insist. He had *not* seen it. Fined £2 6s.; a month's wages, I suppose.

Here is another case in which a man made the best of a bad business but grumbled loudly. The inside was here also in fault. "Well, didn't you see it before you took it?" "I seed the *outside*

right enough. But the master as took I round didn't *happen* to have the key wi' 'un." Trapped!

The story I am going to tell came from the poor woman concerned through a lady who repeated it to me immediately afterwards exactly as I tell it. The family were engaged by advertisement. On arriving they found the "good cottage" a hovel, and refused to take their things off the waggon. On going up to the house they saw the master, "a girt big man, dressed up to the nines," who dealt roundly with them. "So you're the new carter. And you don't like your cottage. Now I'll tell 'ee summut. You've got to go where you be put and do what you be bid. I don't want none of your chat." They return to the waggon, the things still loaded, the woman resolute, the neighbors amused. The master comes down and bullies. The woman declares that she will spend the night where she is. The master goes away. On returning he changes his tactics and addresses the husband. "Now don't you go on like this here, a-making a fool of I afore all the village! Come up to the house and talk it over reasonable."

He goes. The woman stays with the things and children. By-and-bye at dark night he comes back "as drunk as ever I seed 'un." The things are put in. Trapped! "Why didn't you go to the clergyman?" asked my informant, scandalized. "Clergyman! why he and Mr. Blank be as thick as two thieves!"

A laborer came to a place by train. He wanted to "see things." The master met him and never lost sight of him till he put him into the train again after he had signed his agreement. The man came and stayed the twelvemonth he had agreed for. No more. *He did not even get the cottage he had been shown.* Trapped!

Here is a Hampshire case. The main facts are that the man was promised a good cottage and got one which, he said, was a bad one. That a number of laborers left the farm after he came, so that his position was different to what it would have been had the farm been full-handed. That his "little boys" (lads) were compelled to do work he had never agreed that they should do and were paid next to nothing. Three were put to work and two shillings a week was paid. It was admitted that the boys had had "a rough time for a bit" in consequence of shorthandedness. The man thought he had not been fairly treated and left. He had a sickly wife and ten children. The cottage had only two bedrooms. He gave eight days' notice. He was fined with costs *eight guineas* for having broken his signed agreement. I enquired privately into the case from people who were in a position to know the circumstances. There was also some correspondence about it in the papers. He had the character of being a steady laborer. The impression left on my mind was that his place had become almost intolerable. What could he do? Prosecute his master for breach of contract? Farmers would laugh at the very idea. Once in the trap he had to stay—or pay whatever fine country magistrates might impose.

The words used by the employer, the boys had "a rough time for a bit," cover a good deal. I will give you an instance.

The Society for Preventing Cruelty to Children was called in to help two poor boys signed away by their father (by his mark : he

could not read or write), under an avowedly illegal agreement decorated with a sixpenny stamp to impress the signer, for two years to a farmer. The society removed them at once, their condition of cold, filth and misery being extreme. The excuse given (I heard it with my own ears) was that "life was a bit rough on a farm."

The conclusion of the whole matter is this. The law says to the laborer "Caveat emptor." It does not protect him from sharp practice. There is no public opinion to which he can appeal. His sons drift away to the towns. I was told once as a fact of an aged laborer who bound all his children *by an oath* never to bring up a boy to the land. Can anyone wonder at it?

Some months ago I read in a London paper that laborers from town did not get on with farming employers because they would not understand that "a farmer's word was his bond." That is where it is. If the laborer is taken round by a possible master to see a cottage, for instance, and disputes the great man's assertion or insists upon seeing it for himself, he "gives offence." He had better not take the place after that. If he takes things upon trust and finds that he has been done, he has practically no remedy. And the master is utterly unabashed.

Another thing is that country laborers are shy. To enter into sanitary details with a well-dressed man of dominant manners is extremely difficult to them. One came to me a year or so ago and asked me what he was to do. I can't enter into details. I think they would surprise you. He had been taken round, and the master had assured him on the subject with a comprehensive wave of the hand, "*That's all right.*" Of course nothing could be done. He had been trapped.

I must pass very slightly over many things which combine to make the laborer's lot distasteful, void of savor, if not disgusting. I may mention (as I once wrote something on the subject that was met with a good deal of contradiction) that the immense, well-conducted farm of which I have spoken has of course swallowed up several considerable holdings, the residences on which, good sizable houses, are empty. There is no letting them. Gentlefolk of moderate means will not bury themselves in country villages. No one knows better than I do how very trifling is the difference to the laborers that the presence in a village of an independent family of small means can make. But it does make a difference, just as the presence of a decent passenger makes a difference to the crew of a merchant ship commanded by a brutal skipper. The passenger is powerless. But he sees, and the skipper knows it. I place the general and increasing absence of small gentry as a contributory cause of the distaste for the village life felt by the laborer. There is no one to break the long *tête-à-tête* between master and man. *Except the parson.*

### The Laborer and the Church.

In speaking of the parson and the Church, I tread on dangerous ground. Let me begin by saying that parsons are almost invariably good and well-meaning men. My charge against them may almost be summed up in a rustic joke. The sign of "The Farmer's Man"

is not an uncommon one among village public-houses. The joke is that it ought to be taken down from the inn and hung up over the parsonage door. The parson is "the farmer's man." It can hardly be otherwise. According to the prevailing ecclesiastical theory, his object is to elevate the Church. The Church is to elevate the people. To do this, to give the Church the dominating influence necessary to her efficient action, the cordial co-operation of the leaders of the village world is indispensable. And it is not to be had for nothing. The payment made is simply this. The priest is to "pass by on the other side" while the farmer deals with the laborer. It is not his business to take a part in disputes. He is a man of peace—as far as his own village goes. His churchwardens are farmers. They are the Aaron and Hur who hold up the hands of Moses. So he conciliates them. He conciliates everybody of influence. He is perfectly civil to the publicans whose very existence depends upon their success in making laborers steady sots. He has a friendly greeting for the grocer, and knows nothing of adulteration and short weight. It is very unfortunate that cottages should be so bad. Encroachments on village rights are not within his province. Sometimes his desire to be pleasing to the great men of his flock goes further. Laborers very seldom use forcibly descriptive expressions. The turnips their grandfathers fed on have got into their blood. Yet I heard of one who was moved to speech after listening to an address in which a parson exhorted a number of laborers to be properly grateful for the generosity of their masters. "It was enough," he said, "to make a dog sick." I have felt the same myself.

A man and his master fell out. "Go to the parson and ask him what *he* thinks," said the master. "Why, you know, sir, what *he* would say," said the man.

I might go on. But I won't. Parsons are good men. But their very virtues keep the laborers down. They "seek peace and ensue it" at the cost of justice. Right and wrong are not merely the government and the opposition. Once admit party methods, and wrong infallibly prevails. It has prevailed. And the Church (like the man in Charles Lamb's celebrated thesis) "never knows it." She goes on. "I wonder you will still be talking, Signor Benedick. Nobody marks you." In a village nobody "marks" what the Church says.

We have all heard of Mithridates, the king of Pontus, who ate poison till he was poison-proof. So in *Hudibras*, the "King of Cambay, whose daily food is asp, and basilisk and toad." Well, an English village is saturated with religion until it is religion-proof. Everybody goes to church, immense pressure is brought to bear to get the old men and women confirmed, most people are communicants. And religion, as a rule of conduct or a motive power, is absolutely non-existent. Why?

The success of the Church is the extent to which she can command the attendance of the village at her services. That is gaugeable. The Church is the mill that, theoretically, grinds congregations into Christians. But there is something wrong with the machinery. They come out, not contrite, not "ground up," but exactly what they went in.

Let us look back. In 1846, before the repeal of the Corn Laws, can anything have been more horrible than the condition of the country laborer? That was the very time when the Oxford movement was in the first flush of its youthful energy. An immense deal was done—for the restoration of Churches. Erroneous ideas about Gothic architecture were severely dealt with. But the clergy thought infinitely more of crockets and finials than of cottages and cesspools. Five-and-twenty years later, at the time of the Agricultural Laborers' Union, it was exactly the same thing. The Church was contented that things should stay as they were. She saw no need of reform. It is said that she has undergone a complete change since: and the farmers also. What has brought about this wonderful, this *most* wonderful change?

No explanation is given. Is it not strange that the laborer should not have shared in it? He has sunk morally, it appears, while his spiritual guide and his kindly and tender employer have gone up. What is the natural inference? That the two have (wittingly or not) joined forces to keep him down.

For many, many years the position of Moses lay open to the acceptance of the Church. All she had to do was to qualify by slaying an Egyptian or two, by ranging herself definitely on the side of the oppressed. But the fear of families, as Job says, is too much for her.

In the forties, as in the seventies, she stood like a hen with a brood of ducklings, clucking reprobation while her charge faced the Red Sea. It was only when assured that the passage could be made dry-foot that she timidly ventured over.

The laborer hears the parson denounce from the pulpit the vices he condones in the street. He sees him greet with perfect friendliness a wealthy man known to all as an impudent thief of village rights, or the owner of tenanted cottages hardly fit for pigs, or a glutton and a soaker whose example makes his laborers sots. And he draws the natural conclusion. The parson is the farmer's man. The law is against him, the master is against him, and the parson maintains a benevolent neutrality.

To sum up. The law is dreaded by the laborer, not regarded as a protector. It is administered by men who mostly belong to the class who set it in movement against him. The clergyman identifies himself socially with the same class. Any power of combination that laborers might possess is nullified by the insecurity of their tenure as cottagers. He has no one to turn to in trouble.

What has the laborer to regret in leaving his village? Home ties have grown very weak. "The home" means, in rustic parlance, the beds and chairs and tables, "the bits of sticks" a family has got together. The tied cottage is no more to the laborer than a borrowed umbrella.

Village life is very dull. There is nothing communal in it. The school is the property of the parson and the managers, generally farmers. The poor have got to send their children. There their interest practically ceases. They want them to become half-timers as soon as possible, that is all. The Church gives them no interest. They have no voice in its management, and are fed with this doc-

trine or that as it pleases the patrons. At best, it represents to them the "circus" which Lord Salisbury said was more to their taste than a council.

### The Decay of the Village Band.

Sixty years ago music still survived in country villages. What killed it? The Church. The old church band was too independent for the clergyman of the Oxford movement. The "musicianers," as they were called, used to quarrel in an unseemly way. Disputes among the band were got rid of by something very like the summary process of the father who cuts his little boy's head off to cure him of toothache. The band was suppressed and a harmonium substituted. Away went fiddles and brass with the bass viol and the "old serpent" at their head into the limbo of the village past. (The old serpent was a brass instrument of mysterious convolution.) Music was promoted from the fireside to the schoolroom or the vicar's parlor, where the choir met for practice. The old fiddles were hung up and forgotten. Only the other day I was told by a lady of great musical accomplishment of an attempt she was making to get up a string band in a large parish. People laughed at her. How were poor people to buy violins? But nearly all the instruments wanted were there. In many poor families the old fiddles had been kept, though the art of playing had been utterly forgotten.

The intention of the clergy was admirable. A decorous worship, and the village boys brought under the influence of the Church. That is one side. On the other, the destruction of almost the last form of communal effort for a common end, the capture by "the powers that be" in a country parish, of a last little stronghold of the independence that has disappeared from our laboring population. There are none such now; the guns of the Church, directed by the landed interest, range unobstructed over a plain of dead and flat submission. Dissent! Dissent pays homage at births and deaths and marriages. The chapel has little power to raise. The old Puritan spirit, in country villages at least, seems to have been squeezed out of it.

### Co-operative Stores?

What inducement is offered to the laborer to stay in the village? I am told by a very competent authority that, reckoning quality and price, to deal at London stores is 25 per cent. cheaper than to buy at the village shop. Besides, laborers are mostly in debt, and "beggars mustn't be choosers." That makes things still worse. The remedy, of course, is co-operation. But how are families to co-operate when neighborhood is not permanent? Besides which, mutual trust has perished with community of interest. It has been atrophied by want of exercise.

Half-a-dozen villagers might conceivably club together to let some lady, for instance, whom they all knew, get them a side of the best bacon from the stores at the price they paid for the very worst at the shop, and divide it. She would certainly be accused of partiality but *perhaps* not of absolutely dishonesty. But to do such a thing among themselves would be out of the question.



Fixity of tenure must precede co-operation, and until co-operation is the rule the laborer will continue to be despoiled in every petty transaction of his existence. One attraction of the city for him is that there he gets more choice and better value for whatever little money he has. Whatever he may possibly regret in the "land of Egypt, the house of bondage," it is not the flesh-pots. A "penn'orth of fried fish" in Whitechapel is probably a tastier meal than the escaped ploughboy has ever put into his mouth.

### Village Schools.

What does the village school do with the brains entrusted to it? Brains are valuable. The Yankees are teaching us that. Well, in one village school I know, with an average attendance of between 80 and 90, I cannot hear on enquiry that any lad educated there has risen in the last twenty years above the position of a mere laborer. Go to the town or stay in the village; it is all one. Schooling directed by the Church and the Land has naturally turned out the article wanted by the Church and the Land—men of low intelligence and no enterprize. There are no games, and there is none of the initiative that comes of games. There is no recreation ground, no village green. The 3,500 acres of the village are practically divided into three great farms, sprinkled with the remains of former smaller homesteads. There was in old times a recreation ground. Old men have told me of the back-swording and wrestling that went on there. It was "absorbed" long ago, whether legally or illegally I know not.

### Remedies.

To suggest remedies hardly comes within the limits of my subject. If I touch upon that I must be brief indeed. And every word may be a bone of contention. Well, the great farmer stops the way. No progress is possible as long as he dominates the situation. We must call into existence a class of small, independent cultivators, the natural growth of which will progressively thrust him off the track. Some small beginnings have been already made. The results show, I think, that the machinery provided by law (Agricultural Holdings Act, 1892—result, 700 or 800 acres) will not work. Local government has become the appanage of acres. Parish councils, rural district councils, county councils, they all represent the essence of landed interest in various degrees of concentration. And the classes that now enjoy a practical monopoly of the land will never efficiently help in dispossessing themselves.

Now, what part of England has the largest interest in the land of England's being made the most of? The country? Or the town? The town population is four to one of the country population. And a large proportion of the number represented by the one only live by sufferance on the land. This is the case with almost the whole of agricultural laborers. The evils inflicted upon the great majority by this insignificant minority are, I think, the following:

1. Dearness of food arising from low productivity of land.
2. The burden of providing labor for country men. The land does not take her share of the task of finding employment

for the working men of England, but shuffles it off upon the towns.

3. The consequent congestion of the towns.
4. The ruin of the country as the breeding-field which ought to keep up the vigor of the town populations.
5. The closing of the country to the towns, so that increased facilities of locomotion do not do anything like the good to the towns that they should.

The moral I draw is that the towns should claim the right of dictating to England the way in which the land should be put to profit. The great majority of the classes nearest the land, squires and farmers and parsons, are disqualified respectively by self-interest, by religious prejudice that scruples at anything that may lead to the mental enfranchisement of the poor, and by sheer sluggishness of intellect joined to a blind selfishness without parallel in any class of English society. The land and the laborer have hitherto been left to them. And we want a change of management.

I should like to say something of the last of the evils I have enumerated. The closing of the country to the towns.

Take a mechanic with 35s. a week. He wants country air. There is the bicycle and there is the beanfeast. One means dust, the other drink. If he is enterprizing he will go down to Brighton or Ramsgate and change the asphalte of the streets for the asphalte of the promenade and a crowded park for a stretch of crowded sand. Lodgings are dear, so is food. He gets uncommonly little refreshment for the good money and the priceless holiday he throws away there. To go down and spend his three days in a country village never occurs to him. And rightly. But suppose it does. What is he to do? Take lodgings in a cottage? If he is a decent man it would turn his stomach. In a beer-house? Hardly better. The food would be uneatable, the price calculated by his coat. At the lowest, it would be three times that at which he could feed himself well in London. What is he to do with himself? The park is closed, the downs warn him off with a threatening notice. "Farmer Blank," he is told, "doesn't like people trespassing in his fields." The churchyard or the bar-parlor, he may spend his day in either and welcome. Perhaps, not generally, there is a village green, with a goose or two. It is a fine evening, but there are no children at play. He asks. "Ay, the farmers get up a match at cricket among 'emselves once or twice i' summer." "Don't the boys play?" "Naw. Summon gied 'em a bat but they bin and lost the ball."

He returns to London in despair and disgust.

Let us suppose 30 or 40 small independent holders to have taken the place of three or four large farmers. From what we know of Denmark, Belgium, France, Holland, and of recent experiments in Ireland, we have reason to believe that co-operation will have largely taken the place of the individual struggle for life that now makes of an English village a den of hungry beasts. We may hope that in a few years villagers will have re-learnt the forgotten art of enjoyment. They will have learnt to feel with energetic conviction that the

natural beauties that surround a village are the property of the village, as far as the *enjoyment* goes that neither does material damage nor interferes with other legitimate enjoyment. They will have learnt to believe that the maddest dog in England is the Dog in the Manger, and when such a one shows his nose in a village their belief will be very apt to take an active form.

Views are not damaged by being looked at ; it does not spoil timber to sit in the shade of a tree ; grass is little hurt by children's picking cowslips in cowslip time ; blackberrying breaks few hedges.

### A New Village Industry.

You here know better than I do to how many Londoners "each simple joy the country yields" would be an attraction and a real rest and refreshment, if they could only come by them. I look forward to a time when the entertainment of London visitors will be one of the great industries of country villages. When the country will be to London what Switzerland is to Europe. When the communal guest-house will "do" a London visitor *well* for 2s. 6d. a day and night and bring a handsome profit to the community. When relations of friendship will exist between townsmen and countrymen and when the born rustic who happens to be a native of Whitechapel will quite naturally and easily take the place of the born Londoner who came into the world at Stogginton. When a girl going up to service in town will find that she has there a circle of acquaintances made in the country, and holiday London, instead of swarming like bees to the treacle-pots of Ramsgate and Hastings, will scatter itself over the villages within a radius of 50 or 60 miles. A game of bowls under a tree is pleasanter than "Aunt Sally" on the sands ; a stretch over high downs and sandwiches under a may-bush are better than the foulness of the sea beach at the great tripping places and the heart-sickening uniformity of the cheap restaurant.

London should remember that the restoration of the laborer to the land in the character of an independent peasant may mean to London the opening of several hundred places of enjoyment ; to many thousands of Londoners, themselves only two or three generations away from the country, the re-awakening of that natural love of fields and leaves which exists in them so strongly as children and is so terribly obscured as they grow up by the uncounteracted influences of the public-house and the music-hall. London should remember, too, that it is better that the country should send up to recruit her population young freemen, with a happy boyhood behind them, than heart-broken drudges escaping from a bitter servitude.

There is no making a Garden City of London. But the whole country within a radius of 70 or 80 miles may be made a garden of pleasure for Londoners to enjoy, with wrong to none, with infinite good to many, and to the general benefit of England.

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