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THE QUEST OF THE SIMPLE LIFE

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Содержание

CHAPTER I 4
CHAPTER II 16
CHAPTER III 30
CHAPTER IV 43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 48

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CHAPTER I
THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE

For a considerable number of years I had been a resident in London, which city I regarded alternately as my Paradise and my House of Bondage. I am by no means one of those who are always ready to fling opprobrious epithets at London, such as 'a pestilent wen,' a cluster of 'squalid villages,' and the like; on the contrary, I regard London as the most fascinating of all cities, with the one exception of that city of Eternal Memories beside the Tiber. But even Horace loved the olive-groves of Tivoli more than the far-ranged splendours of the Palatine; and I may be pardoned if an occasional vision of green fields often left my eye insensitive to metropolitan attractions.

This is a somewhat sonorous preface to the small matter of my story; but I am anxious to elaborate it a little, lest it should be imagined that I am merely a person of bucolic mind, to whom all cities or large congregations of my fellow-men are in themselves abhorrent. On the contrary I have an inherent love of all cities which are something more than mere centres of manufacturing

industry. The truly admirable city secures interest, and even passionate love, not because it is a congeries of thriving factories, but rather by the dignity of its position, the splendour of its architecture, the variety and volume of its life, the imperial, literary, and artistic interests of which it is the centre, and the prolongation of its history through tumultuous periods of time, which fade into the suggestive shadows of antiquity. London answers perfectly to this definition of the truly admirable city. It has been the stage of innumerable historic pageants; it presents an unexampled variety of life; and there is majesty in the mere sense of multitude with which it arrests and often overpowers the mind.

As I have already, with an innocent impertinence, justified myself by Horace, so I will now justify myself by Wordsworth, whose famous sonnet written on Westminster Bridge is sufficient proof that he could feel the charm of cities as deeply as the charm of Nature. 'Earth hath not anything to show more fair,' wrote Wordsworth, and of a truth London has moods and moments of almost unearthly beauty, perhaps unparalleled by any vision that inebriates the eye in the most gorgeous dawn that flushes Alpine snows, or the most solemn sunset that builds a gate of gold across the profound depth of Borrowdale or Wastwater. He who has seen the tower of St. Clement Danes swim up, like an insubstantial fabric, through violet mist above the roaring Strand; or the golden Cross upon St. Paul's with a flag of tinted cloud flying from it; or the solemn reaches of the Thames bathed in

smoky purple at the slow close of a summer's day, will know what I mean, and will (it is possible) have some memory of his own which will endorse the justness of my praise.

From this exalted prelude I will at once descend to more prosaic matter, leaving my reader, in his charity, to devise for me an apology which I have neither the wit nor the desire to invent for myself. With the best will in the world to speak in praise of cities it must be owned that the epic and lyric moments of London are infrequent. As a casual resident in London, a student and spectator, free to leave it when I willed, I could have been heartily content; but I, in common with some insignificant millions of my fellow-creatures, was bound to live in London as a means of living at all. He is no true citizen who merely comes up to town 'for the season,' alternating the pleasures of town with those of the country; he alone is the true citizen who *must* live amid the roar of the street all the year round, and for years together. If I could choose for myself I would even now choose the life of pleasant alternation between town and country, because I am persuaded that the true piquancy and zest of all pleasures lies in contrast. But fate orders these things for us, and takes no account of our desires, unless it be to treat them with habitual irony. At five-and-twenty the plain fact met me—that I must needs live in London, because my bread could be earned nowhere else. No choice was permitted me; I must go where crowds were, because from the favour or necessities of such crowds I must gather the scanty tithes which put food upon my table and clothes upon

my back. When eminent writers, seated at ample desks, from which they command fair views of open country, denounce with prophetic fervour the perils which attend the growth of cities, they somewhat overlook the fact that the growth of cities is a sequence, alike ineluctable and pitiless, of the modern struggle for existence. One cannot be a lawyer, or a banker, a physician or a journalist, without neighbours. He can scarce be a literary man in perfect sylvan solitude, unless his work is of such quality—perhaps I should have said such popularity—that it wins for him immediate payment, or unless his private fortune be such that he can pursue his aims as a writer with entire indifference to the half-yearly statements of his publisher. In respect of the various employments of trade and commerce, the case is still plainer. Men must needs go where the best wages may be earned; and under modern conditions of life it is as natural that population should flow toward cities, as that rivers should seek the sea. These matters will be more particularly discussed later on; it is enough for me to explain at present that I was one of those persons for whom life in a city was an absolute necessity.

It is not until one is tied to a locality that its defects become apparent. A street that interests the mind by some charm of populous vivacity when it is traversed at random and without object, becomes inexpressibly wearisome when it is the thoroughfare of daily duty. My daily duty took me through a long stretch of Oxford Street, which is a street not altogether destitute of some real claim to gaiety and dignity. At first I was ready

to concede this claim, and even to endorse it with enthusiasm; but from the day when I realised that Oxford Street conducted me, by a force of inevitable gravitation, to a desk in an office, I began to loathe it. The eye became conscious of a hundred defects and incongruities; the tall houses rose like prison walls; the resounding tumult of the streets seemed like the clamour of tormented spirits. For the first time I began to understand why imaginative writers had often likened London to Inferno.

I well remember by what a series of curious expedients I endeavoured to evade these sensations. The most obvious was altogether to avoid this glittering and detested thoroughfare by making long detours through the meaner streets which lay behind it; but this was merely to exchange one kind of aesthetic misery which had some alleviations for another kind which had none. Sometimes I endeavoured to contrive a doubtful exhilaration from the contrast which these meaner streets afforded; saying to myself, as I pushed my way through the costers' stalls of Great James Street, 'Now you are exchanging squalor for magnificence. Be prepared for a surprise.' But the ruse failed utterly, and my mind laughed aloud at the pitiful imposture. Another device was to create points of interest, like a series of shrines along a tedious road, which should present some aspect of allurement. There was a book-shop here or an art-shop there; yesterday a biography of Napoleon was exhibited in the one, or a print of Murillo's 'Flight into Egypt,' in the other; and it is become a matter of speculation whether they were there to-day. Just as a solitary sailor will

beguile the tedium of empty days at sea by a kind of cribbage, in which the left hand plays against the right, so I laid odds for and against myself on such trifles as these, and even went so far as to keep an account of my successes and my failures. Thus, for a whole month I was interested in a person quite unknown to me, who wore an obsolete white beaver hat, appeared punctually at the corner of Bond Street at half-past five in the afternoon, and spent half an hour in turning over the odd volumes displayed on the street board of a secondhand-book shop not far from Oxford Circus. His appearances were so planetary in their regularity that one might have reckoned time by them. Who he was, or what his objects in life may have been, I never learned. I never saw him walk but in the one direction; I never saw him buy one of the many books which he examined: perhaps he also was afflicted with the tedium of London, and took this singular way of getting through a portion of his sterile day with a simulated interest. At all events he afforded me an interest, and when he vanished at the end of the month, Oxford Street once more became intolerable to me.

These particulars appear so foolish and so trivial that most persons will find them ridiculous, and even the most sympathetic will perhaps wonder why they are recorded. They were, however, far from trivial to me. The marooned seaman saves his sanity by cutting notches in a stick, the solitary prisoner by friendship with a mouse; and when life is reduced to the last exiguity of narrowness, the interests of life will be narrow too. No writer,

whose work is familiar to me, has ever yet described with unsparing fidelity the kind of misery which lies in having to do precisely the same things at the same hour, through long and consecutive periods of time. The hours then become a dead weight which oppresses the spirit to the point of torture. Life itself resembles those dreadful dreams of childhood, in which we see the ceiling and the walls of the room contract round one's helpless and immobile form. Blessed is he who has variety in his life: thrice blessed is he who has both freedom and variety: but the subordinate toiler in the vast mechanism of a great city has neither. He will sit at the same desk, gaze upon the same unending rows of figures, do, in fact, the same things year in and year out till his youth has withered into age. He himself becomes little better than a mechanism. There is no form of outdoor employment of which this can be said. The life of the agricultural labourer, so often pitied for its monotony, is variety itself compared with the life of the commercial clerk. The labourer's tasks are at least changed by the seasons; but time brings no such diversion to the clerk. It is this horrible monotony which so often makes the clerk a foul-minded creature; driven in upon himself, he has to create some kind of drama for his instincts and imaginations, and often from the sorriest material. When I played single-handed cribbage with the few trivial interests which I knew, I at least took an innocent diversion; and I may claim that my absurd fancies injured no one, and were certainly of some service to myself.

The outsider usually imagines that great cities afford unusual opportunities of social intercourse, and when I first became a citizen I found this prospect enchanting. I scanned the horizon eagerly for these troops of friends which a city was supposed to furnish: quested here and there for a responsive pair of eyes; made timid approaches which were repulsed; and, finally, after much experiment, had to admit that the whole idea was a delusion. No doubt it is true enough that, with a settled and considerable income, and the power of entertaining, friends are to be found in plenty. But Grosvenor Square and Kentish Town do not so much as share a common atmosphere. In the one it is a pleasant tradition that the house door should be set wide to all comers who can contribute anything to the common social stock; in the other, the house door is jealously locked and barred. The London clerk does not care to reveal the shifts and the bareness of his domestic life. He will reside in one locality for years without so much as seeking to know his next-door neighbour. He will live on cordial terms with his comrade in the office, but will never dream of inviting him to his home. His instinct of privacy is so abnormal that it becomes mere churlishness. His wife, if he have one, usually fosters this spirit for reasons of her own. Her interests end with the clothing and education of her children. She does not wish for friends, does not cultivate the grace of hospitality, and is indifferent to social intercourse. In short, the barbaric legend that an Englishman's house is his castle, is nowhere so much respected as in London.

The exhausting character of life in London, and the mere vastness of its geographical area, do something to produce this result. Men who leave home early in the morning, sit for many hours in an office, and reach home late at night, soon lose both the instinct and desire for social intercourse. They prefer the comfortable torpor of the fireside. If some imperative need of new interests torments them, they seek relaxation in the music-hall or some other place of popular resort. The art of conversation is almost extinct in a certain type of Londoner. He knows nothing to converse about outside his business interests, his family concerns, and perhaps the latest sensation of the daily newspaper. Those lighter flights of fancy, those delicate innuendoes and allusions of implied experience or culture—all the give-and-take of happily contending minds—all, indeed, that makes true conversation—is a science utterly unknown to him. A certain superficial nimbleness of mind he does sometimes possess, but for all that he is a dull creature, made dull by the limitations of his life.

If it should happen, as it often may, that such a man has some genuine instinct for friendship, and has a friend to whom he can confide his real thoughts, the chances are that his friend will be separated from him by the mere vastness of London. To the rural mind the metropolis appears an entity; in reality it is an empire. A journey from the extreme north to the extreme south, from Muswell Hill to Dulwich, is less easily accomplished, and often less speedily, than a journey from London to Birmingham.

There is none of that pleasant 'dropping-in' for an evening which is possible in country towns of not immoderate radius. Time-tables have to be consulted, engagement-books scanned, serious preparations made, with the poor result, perhaps, of two hours' hurried intercourse. The heartiest friendship does not long survive this malignity of circumstance. It is something to know that you have a friend, obscurely hidden in some corner of the metropolis; but you see him so rarely, that when you meet, it is like forming a new friendship rather than pursuing an old one. It is little wonder that, under such conditions, visits grow more and more infrequent, and at last cease. A message at Christmas, an intimation of a birth, a funeral card, are the solitary relics and mementoes of many a city friendship not extinct, but utterly suspended.

I dwell on these obvious characteristics of London life, because in course of time they assumed for me almost terrifying dimensions. After ten years of arduous toil I found myself at thirty-five lonely, friendless, and imprisoned in a groove of iron, whose long curves swept on inevitably to that grim terminus where all men arrive at last. Sometimes I chided myself for my discontent; and certainly there were many who might have envied me. I occupied a fairly comfortable house in a decayed terrace where each house was exactly like its neighbour, and had I told any one that the mere aspect of this grey terrace oppressed me by its featureless monotony, I should have been laughed at for my pains. I believe that I was trusted by my employers,

and if a mere automatic diligence can be accounted a virtue, I merited their trust. In course of time my income would have been increased, though never to that degree which means competence or freedom. To this common object of ambition I had indeed long ago become indifferent. What can a few extra pounds a year bring to a man who finds himself bound to the same tasks, and those tasks distasteful? I was married and had two children; and the most distressing thought of all was that I saw my children predestined to the same fate. I saw them growing up in complete destitution of those country sights and sounds which had made my own youth delightful; acquiring the superficial sharpness of the city child and his slang; suffering at times by the anaemia and listlessness bred of vitiated air; high-strung and sensitive as those must needs be whose nerves are in perpetual agitation; and when, in chance excursions to the country, I compared my children with the children of cottagers and ploughmen, I felt that I had wronged them, I saw my children foredoomed, by an inexorable destiny, to a life at all points similar with my own. In course of time they also would become recruits in the narrow-chested, black-coated army of those who sit at desks. They would become slaves without having known the value of freedom; slaves not by capture but by heritage. More and more the thought began to gather shape, Was I getting the most, or the best, out of life? Was there no other kind of life in which toil was redeemed from baseness by its own inherent interest, no life which offered more of tranquil satisfaction and available, if humble, happiness? Day

by day this thought sounded through my mind, and each fresh discouragement and disability of the life I led gave it sharper emphasis. At last the time came when I found an answer to it, and these chapters tell the story of my seeking and my finding.

CHAPTER II
GETTING THE BEST OUT OF LIFE

The reader will perhaps say that the kind of miseries recounted in the previous chapter are more imaginary than real. Many thousands of people subsist in London upon narrow means, and do not find the life intolerable. They have their interests and pleasures, meagre enough when judged by a superior standard, but sufficient to maintain in them some of the vivacity of existence. No doubt this is true. I remember being struck some years ago by the remark of a person of distinction, equally acquainted with social life in its highest and its lowest forms. Mr. H., as I will call this person, said that the dismal pictures drawn by social novelists of life among the very poor were true in fact, but wrong in perspective. Novelists described what their own feelings would be if they were condemned to live the life of the disinherited city drudge, rather than the actual feelings of the drudge himself. A man of education, accustomed to easy means, would suffer tortures unspeakable if he were made to live in a single room of a populous and squalid tenement, and had to subsist upon a wage at once niggardly and precarious. He would be tormented with that memory of happier things, which we are told is a 'sorrow's crown of sorrow.' But the man who has known no other condition of life is unconscious of its misery. He has

no standard of comparison. An environment which would drive a man of refinement to thoughts of suicide, does not produce so much as dissatisfaction in him. Hence there is far more happiness among the poor than we imagine. They see nothing deplorable in a lot to which they have become accustomed; they are as our first parents before their eyes were opened to a knowledge of good or evil; or, to take a less mythical illustration, they are as the contented savage, to whom the refinements of European civilisation are objects of ridicule rather than envy.

I quote this opinion for what it is worth; but it has little relevance to my own case. I am the only competent judge of my own feelings. I know perfectly well that these feelings were not shared by men who shared the conditions of my own life. There was a clerk in the same office with me who may be taken as an example of his class. Poor Arrowsmith—how well I recall him!—was a little pallid man, always neatly if shabbily dressed, punctual as a clock, and of irreproachable diligence. He was verging on forty, had a wife and family whom I never saw, and an aged mother whom he was proud to support. He was of quite imperturbable cheerfulness, delighted in small jokes, and would chatter like a daw when occasion served him. He had never read a book in his life; his mind subsisted wholly upon the halfpenny newspapers. He had no pleasures, unless one can count as such certain Bank Holiday excursions to Hampstead Heath, which were performed under a heavy sense of duty to his family. He had lived in London all his days, but knew much

less of it than the country excursionist. He had never visited St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey; had never travelled so far as Kew or Greenwich; had never been inside a picture gallery; and had never attended a concert in his life. The pendulum of his innocuous existence swung between the office and his home with a uniform monotony. Yet not only was he contented with his life, but I believe that he regarded it as entirely successful. He had counted it a great piece of luck when he had entered the office as a youth of sixteen, and the glow of his good fortune still lingered in his mind at forty. He regarded his employers with a species of admiring awe not always accorded to kings. The most violent social democrat could have made nothing of Arrowsmith; there was not the least crevice in his heart in which the seed of discontent could have found a lodgment. As for making any question of whether he was getting the best or most out of life, Arrowsmith was as incapable as a kitten.

The virtues of Arrowsmith, which were in their way quietly heroic, impressed me a good deal; but his abject contentment with the limitations of his lot appalled me. I felt a dread grow in me lest I should become subdued to the element in which I worked as he was. I asked myself whether a life so destitute of real interests and pleasures was life at all? I made fugitive attempts to allure the little man into some realms of wider interest, but with the most discouraging results. I once insisted on taking him with me for a day in Epping Forest. He came reluctantly, for he did not like leaving his wife at home, and

it seemed that no persuasion could induce her to undertake so adventurous a jaunt. He was no walker, and half a dozen miles along the Forest roads tired him out. By the afternoon even his cheerfulness had vanished; he gazed with blank and gloomy eyes upon the wide spaces of the woodland scenery. He did not regain his spirits till we drew near Stratford on the homeward journey. At the first sight of gas-lit streets he brightened up, and I am persuaded that the rancid odours of the factories at Bow were sweeter in his nostrils than all the Forest fragrances. I never asked him again to share a pleasure for which I now perceived he had no faculty; but I often asked myself how long it would take for a city life to extirpate in me the taste by which Nature is appreciated, as it had in Arrowsmith.

I have taken Arrowsmith as an example of the narrowness of interest created by a city life, and it would be easy to offer an apology for him, which I, for one, would most heartily endorse. The poor fellow was very much the creature of his circumstances. But this was scarcely the case with another man I knew, whose circumstances, had he known how to use them, might have afforded him the opportunity of many cultivated tastes. He was the son of a small farmer, born in the same village as myself. By some curious accident he was flung into the vortex of London life at seventeen, and became a clerk in a reputable firm of stockbrokers in Throgmorton Street. He rose rapidly, speculated largely and successfully for himself, became a partner, and was rich at thirty. I used to meet him occasionally, for he never

forgot that we had sat upon the same bench at school. I can see him still; well-fleshed and immaculately dressed; his waistcoat pockets full of gold; a prop of music-halls, a patron of expensive restaurants; flashing from one to the other in the evening hours in swift hansoms; a man envied and admired by a host of clerks in Throgmorton Street to whom he appeared a kind of Napoleon of finance. I will confess that I myself was a little dazzled by his careless opulence. When he took me to dine with him he thought nothing of giving the head waiter a sovereign as a guarantee of careful service, or of sending another sovereign to the master of the orchestra with a request for some particular piece of music which he fancied. He once confided to me that he had brought off certain operations which had made him the possessor of eighty thousand pounds. To me the sum seemed immense, but he regarded it as a bagatelle. When I suggested certain uses for it, such as retirement to the country, the building of a country house, the collection of pictures or of a library, he laughed at me. He informed me that he never spent more than a single day in the country every year; it was spent in visiting his father at the old farm. He loathed the quiet of the country, and counted his one day in the year an infliction and a sacrifice. Books and pictures he had cared for once, but as he now put it, he had 'no use for them.' It seemed that all his eighty thousand pounds was destined to be flung upon the great roulette table of stock and share speculations. It was not that he was avaricious; few men cared less for money in itself; but he could not live without the

excitement of speculation. 'I prefer the air of Throgmorton Street to any air in the world,' he observed. 'I am unhappy if I leave it for a day.' So far as knowledge of or interest in London went, he was not a whit better than poor shabby Arrowsmith. His London stretched no further than from the Bank to Oxford Circus, and the landmarks by which he knew it were restaurants and music-halls.

The man seemed so satisfied with everything about his life that it was a kind of joy to meet him. The sourness of my own discontent was dissolved in the alembic of his joviality. Yet it was certain that he lived a life of the most torturing anxiety. There were recurring periods when his fortune hung in the balance, and his financial salvation was achieved as by fire. When he sat silent for a moment, strange things were written on his face. Haggard lines ran across the brow; the hollows underneath the eyes grew deep; and one could see that black care sat upon his shoulders. There was a listening posture of the head, as of one apprehensive of the footfall of disaster, and though he was barely forty, his hair was white. What happened to him finally I do not know. I missed him for a year or two; inquired at the hotel where he had lived and found him gone; and I thought I read in the sarcastic smile of the hotel-manager more knowledge than he was willing to communicate. I imagine that he went down in some financial storm, like ships at sea that are heard of no more; the Napoleon of finance had somewhere found his Waterloo. The reflection is inevitable; what had he got out of life after all? He had won

neither peace nor honour; he had known nothing of the finer joys or tastes; he had enjoyed no satisfying pleasures; such triumph as he had known had been the brief triumph of the gambler. Upon the whole I thought the narrow tedious life of Arrowsmith the worthier.

Reflections of this nature are usually attributed to mere envy or contempt of wealth, which is a temper not less sordid than a love of wealth. For my part I can but profess that I feel for wealth neither envy nor contempt. On the contrary, I love to imagine myself wealthy, and I flatter myself—as most poor men do—that I am a person peculiarly fitted by nature to afford a conspicuous example of how wealth should be employed. I like to dramatise my fancies, and the more impossible these fancies are, the more convincing is the drama that can be educed from them. Thus I have several times built palaces which have rivalled the splendours of the Medici; I have administered great estates to the entire satisfaction of my tenants; I have established myself as the Maecenas of art and literature; and were I ever called to play these parts in reality, I am convinced that my competence would secure applause. The point at which I stick, however, is this: rich men rarely do these things. It is the pursuit of wealth, rather than wealth itself, that is their pleasure. Let us suppose the case of a man who has toiled with undivided mind for thirty years to acquire a fortune; will it not be usually found that in the struggle to be rich he has lost those very qualities which make riches worth possessing? He buys his estate or builds his house;

but there is little pleasure in the business. He is the mere slave of land-agents, the puppet of architects and upholsterers. He has no original taste to guide or interest him: what he once had has perished long ago in the dreary toil of money-grubbing. The men who build or decorate his house have a certain pleasure in their work; all that he does is to pay them for being happy. If he should adopt the rich man's hobby of collecting pictures or a library, he rarely enjoys a higher pleasure than the mere lust of possession. He buys what he is told to buy, without discrimination; he has no knowledge of what constitutes rarity or value; and most certainly he knows nothing of those excitements of the quest which make the collection of articles of vertu a pursuit so fascinating to the man of trained judgment but moderate means. And, as if to complete the irony of the situation, he is after all but the infrequent tenant of the treasure-house which he has built; the blinds are drawn half the year; the splendid rooms are seen by no wiser eyes than those of his butler and his housekeeper; and his secretary, if he be a man of taste and education, draws the real dividend of pleasure from all these rare and costly things which Dives has accumulated. Dives is in most cases little more than the man who pays the bill for things which other folk enjoy.

Let Dives be accounted then a public benefactor, we may say; perhaps so, but the question still remains, does Dives get the most and best out of life? The obvious answer is that the best things of life are not to be bought with money; it would be nearer the truth to quote the prophetic paradox, they are

bought 'without money and without price.' I was present once at a dinner given by a millionaire newspaper proprietor to a crowd of journalists, on the occasion of the founding of a new magazine. The millionaire ate little, spoke little, and sat throughout the feast with an anxious cloud upon his brow. I recognised the same furtive look of apprehension in his eyes that I had seen in the eyes of my stock-broking friend long before. As I glanced round the room I found myself able to pick out all the men of wealth by that same look. It would seem that the anxieties of getting money only beget the more torturing anxiety of how to keep it. That, I am persuaded, was the dominant thought of my millionaire host throughout the meal; he knew the fear and fever of the gambler risking an enormous stake, the agitation of the soldier on the eve of a battle, in which victory is highly problematical. But that crowd of hungry journalists, how they did eat! What laughter sat on those boyish faces, what zest of life, what capacity of pleasure! There was not one of them whose daily bread was not precarious; not one perhaps who had a decent balance at the bank; yet they were so gay, so resolutely cheerful, so frankly interested in life and in themselves, that I could fancy those gloomy eyes at the head of the table watched them with a sort of envy, I think there must be something fatal to gaiety in the mere responsibilities of wealth; I am sure that there is something corrupting in the labours of its acquisition. I think I had rather be a vagrant, with a crust in my knapsack, a blue sky above me, and the adventurous road before me, than look upon the world with a pair of eyes so

laughterless as his who was our host that night.

Again I protest that I make no railing accusation against wealth in itself. I am so far convinced of the truly beneficent utilities of wealth, that I would quite willingly take the risks of a moderate competence, should any one be disposed to make experiment with my virtues. There is some magnanimity in this offer, for I can no more foretell the effects of the bacillus of wealth upon my moral nature, than can the physician who offers his body for inoculation with the germ of some dire disease that science may be served. It argues some lack of imagination among millionaires that it has occurred to no one of the tribe to endow a man instead of an institution, if it were only by way of change. It would at least prove an interesting experiment, and it would be cheap at the price of the few unmissed thousands which the millionaire would pay for it. To such an experiment I would be willing to submit, if it were only to ascertain whether I have been right or wrong in my supposition that I am better qualified by nature than my fellows for the right administration of wealth; but there is one thing I would never do, I would never undertake that laborious quest of wealth, which robs men of the power to enjoy it when it is obtained.

It is there that the pinch comes; granted that some degree of competence is needed for a free and various use of life, is it worth while to destroy the power of living in attaining the means to live? What is a man better for his wealth if he does not know how to use it? A fool may steal a ship, but it takes a wise

man to navigate her towards the islands of the Blest. I am told sometimes that there is a romance in business; no doubt there is, but it is pretty often the romance of piracy; and the pleasures of the rich man are very often nothing better than the pleasures of the pirate: a barbaric wading in gold, a reckless piling up of treasure, which he has not the sense to use. As long as there are shouting crews upon the sea and flaming ships, he is happy; but give him at last the gold which he has striven to win, and he knows nothing better than to sit like the successful pirate in a common ale-house, and make his boast to boon companions. I believe that the dullest men in all the world are very rich men; and I have sometimes thought that it cannot need a very high order of intelligence to acquire wealth, since some of the meanest of mankind appear to prosper at the business. A certain vulpine shrewdness of intelligence seems the thing most needed, and this may coexist with a general dulness of mind which would disgrace a savage.

The thing that is least perceived about wealth is that all pleasure in money ends at the point where economy becomes unnecessary. The man who can buy anything he covets, without any consultation with his banker, values nothing that he buys. There is a subtle pleasure in the extravagance that contests with prudence; in the anxious debates which we hold with ourselves whether we can or cannot afford a certain thing; in our attempts to justify our wisdom; in the risk and recklessness of our operations; in the long deferred and final joy of our possession;

but this is a kind of pleasure which the man of boundless means never knows. The buying of pictures affords us an excellent illustration on this point. Men of the type of Balzac's *Cousin Pons* attain to rapture in the process because they are poor. They have to walk weary miles and wait long weeks to get upon the track of their treasure; to use all their knowledge of art and men to circumvent the malignity of dealers; to experience the extremes of trepidation and of hope; to deny themselves comforts, and perhaps food, that they may pay the price which has at last, after infinite dispute, reached an irreducible minimum; and the pleasure of their possession is in the ratio of their pains. But the man who enters a sale-room with the knowledge that he can have everything he wishes by the signing of a cheque feels none of these emotions. It seems to me that money has lost more than half its value since cheques became common. When men kept their gold in iron coffers, lock-fast cupboards, or a pot buried in an orchard, there was something tangible in wealth. When it came to counting out gold pieces in a bag, men remembered by what sweat of mind or body wealth was won, and they had a sense of parting with something which was really theirs. But a cheque has never yet impressed me with the least sense of its intrinsic value. It is a thing so trivial and fragile that the mind refuses to regard it as the equivalent of lands and houses and solid bullion. It is a thing incredible to reason that with a stroke of the pen a man may sign away his thousands. If cheques were prohibited by law, and all payments made in good coin of the realm, I believe we should

all be much more careful in our expenditure, for we should have at least some true symbol of what expenditure implies.

In an ideal state all incomes beyond 10,000 pounds per year should be prohibited. Almost all the real luxuries of life may be enjoyed on half that sum; and even this is an excessive estimate. Such a regulation would be of vast advantage to the rich, simply because it would impose some limit at which economy commenced. They would then begin to enjoy their wealth. Avarice would decline, for obviously it would not be worth while to accumulate a larger fortune than the State permitted. We might also expect some improvement in manners, for there would be no room for that vulgar ostentation in which excessive wealth delights. If a man chose to exceed the limit which the law prescribed he would do so as a public benefactor; for, of course, the excess of wealth would be applied to the good of the community, in the relief of taxation, the adornment of cities, or the establishment of libraries and art-galleries. It would no doubt be objected that the great historic houses of the aristocracy could not be maintained on such an income; five thousand pounds a year would hardly pay the servants on a great estate, and provide the upkeep of a mansion. But in this case the State would become the custodian of such houses, which would be treated as national palaces. It is by no means improbable that their present owners would be glad to be rid of them on generous terms, which provided for a nominal ownership and an occasional occupation. However this may be, it is certain that the rich would profit by

the change, for their chance of getting the most and best out of life would be much increased by the limit put upon cupidity and ostentation.

CHAPTER III
GETTING A LIVING, AND LIVING

Getting the best and most out of life, I take to be the most rational object of human existence. Even religion, although it affects to scorn the phrase, admits the fact; for no man would be religious unless he were convinced that he thereby added something to his store of happiness. It is a matter of temperament whether a man treats religion as a panacea for his mortal troubles, or the 'Open Sesame' of brighter worlds, but it is quite certain that he regards it as a means of happiness. I cannot doubt that the anchorites, ascetics, and cloistered nuns of mediaeval times were happy in their own way, although it was in a fashion that appears to us highly foolish and absurd. Even a St. Stylites had his consolations; he was kept warm upon his pillar by the comfortable sense of his superiority to his wicked fellow-creatures.

To get the best out of life there must be some adequate fulfilment of one's best self. Man is a bundle of tastes and appetites, some lofty, and some ignoble, but all crying out for satisfaction. Wisdom lies in the discernment of essentials; in just discrimination between false and true tastes. Man has been a long time upon the earth, and he has spent his time for the most part in one ceaseless experiment, viz., how he may become a satisfactory

creature in his own eyes. All civilisations converge upon this point; and we maybe sure that, in their lonely hours of meditation, the fantastic warder on the great wall of China, and the Roman soldier pacing to and fro in the porticoes of the Palatine, had much the same thoughts. Whosoever speaks to man on the art of becoming happy is secure of a hearing; even though he be the vilest of quacks he will have his following, even though he were the worst of scoundrels some will take him for a prophet. In short, we are all the dupes of hope, and it needs some experience to assure us that our only real hope is in ourselves. In our own hearts lies the Eldorado which we scour the world to find; could we but fulfil our best selves we should ask no other happiness.

The question that soon comes to obtrude itself upon the mind of a thoughtful man in a great city, is this old persistent question of whether his method of life is such as to answer to the ideal of fulfilling his best self? It seemed to me that the inhabitants of cities were too busy getting a living to have time to live.

Let us take the life of the average business man by way of example. Such a man will rise early, sleep late, and eat the bread of carefulness, if he means to succeed. He will probably live—or be said to live—in some suburb more or less remote from the roaring centre of affairs. The first light of the winter dawn will see him alert; breakfast is a hurried passover performance; a certain train must be caught at all hazard to digestion, and the most leisured moments of the day will be those he passes in the railway carriage. Once arrived at his office he must

plunge into the vortex of business; do battle with a thousand rivalries and competitions; day after day must labour in the same wearisome pursuits, content, perhaps, if at the end of the year he shall have escaped as by a miracle commercial shipwreck. He will come back to his residence, night after night, a tired man; not pleasantly wearied with pursuits which have exercised his complete powers, but tired to the point of dejection by the narrowness and monotony of his pursuits. I say he returns to his residence; I scorn to say his home, for the house he rents is merely the barrack where he sleeps. Of the life that goes on within this house, which is nominally his, he knows nothing. In its daily ordering, or even in its external features, he has no part. He has chosen no item of its furniture; he has had no hand in its decoration; he has but paid the tradesmen's bills. His children scarcely know him; they are asleep when he goes off in the morning, and asleep when he returns at night; he is to them the strange man who sits at the head of the table once a week and carves the Sunday joint. It is well for them if they have a mother who possesses gifts of government, sympathy, and patient comprehension, for it is clear that they have no father. He gets a living, and perhaps in time an ample living; but does he live?

It may be said that this picture is exaggerated; on the contrary, I think it is under-estimated. I have myself known men whose average daily absence from 'home' is twelve hours; they disappear by the eight o'clock morning train, and in times of special

business pressure it is not far from midnight when they return. The trains, cabs, and public vehicles of London convey, day by day, one million three hundred thousand of these homeless men to their employments in the city. Here and there a wise man may be found who resents this tyranny of suburbanism. I know a young business man, who also chances to possess domestic instincts, for whom suburbanism grew so intolerable that he took a house in the very heart of London, that he might lunch and dine with his wife at his own table without neglecting his business interests. He was a wise man, but he is the only one I know. Counting the time passed at luncheon and dinner, the later departure in the morning, and the earlier arrival at night, he is the clear gainer, day by day, of three to four hours of domestic intercourse. At the end of the week he has thus added to the credit of his family life four-and-twenty hours; at the end of a year he has enjoyed more than fifty full days of domestic intercourse which would have been forfeited had he continued to live at Surbiton. He has also saved money, for though the rent he pays in Central London is more than the rent he paid at Surbiton, yet he has saved the expense of his season-ticket, lunches, and occasional dinners at a club or restaurant, and cabs to Waterloo when he was pressed for time. But it is quite vain to urge such considerations on the average man of business. He would tell you frankly that nothing would induce him to live in a house within a stone's-throw of Leicester Square, although it is a far better built and more comfortable house than the gimcrack

villa which he rents at Surbiton. The gain in domestic intercourse would not attract him, for he has long ago lost taste for it; and the privilege of lunching with his family would repel him, for he is deeply suspicious of the virtues of domestic cookery. Nor, I suppose, would it influence him to tell him that by living in Central London, he could command without inconvenience the full attractions of the town, such as concerts, lectures, theatres, or those special assemblies which are representative of London life; for he desires nothing of the kind. Considerations of economy might affect him, but with all his skill at figures he seldom has the sense to see that the moiety of income paid yearly to the railway, by himself and his family, goes a long way toward the doubling of his rent. In short, suburbanism is his fetish; it is the keynote of his poor respectability, and he is not to be diverted from it by any reasons which a sane man would regard as considerable, if not imperative.

The most usual excuse of suburbanism is that it is a good thing for the wife and family of a business man, though it is a bad thing for him. It is singular that no one seems to recognise the gross selfishness of this plea. It is like the plea of the vivisectionist, that vivisection is a bad thing for a rabbit, but a very good thing for humanity, since humanity profits by the torture of the rabbit. But for my part I doubt whether there is any real profit to anybody in suburbanism. There is a town life, and there is a country life, each of which has peculiar compensations of its own; but suburbanism is a miserable compromise, which like

most compromises combines not the qualities but the defects of two antagonisms. Its worst effect is that it sets up in one family two standards of life, which have nothing in common. After a while it must happen that there is a serious estrangement of taste, and it is not surprising if this often leads to a much more serious estrangement of affection. The air of Surbiton may be a little fresher than the air of Bloomsbury, but what does this count for if the atmosphere of the hearth be poisoned? Moreover, among the Anglo-Saxon peoples women are not encouraged to take any vital interest in the pursuits of their husbands as they are among the Latin races. I should not be surprised to find that half the women in the London suburbs do not know the precise nature of their husbands' occupations. A French woman of the bourgeois class often has a real aptitude for business. She can manage a shop, keep accounts, take an interest in markets, and in all questions of commercial enterprise she is the confidante, and often the adviser, of her husband. Your English woman of the same class prides herself rather on her total ignorance of business. It is probable that in twenty years of married life she has not once visited the warehouse or the office where her husband earns the income which she spends. She is 'provided for without the sweet sense of providing.' She sees her husband elated or depressed by things that have happened in the city; but to her the reasons of his hope or fear are not communicated, nor would she understand them if they were. His mind speaks a language foreign to her; his daily operations in the city have for her only the remote interest

of things that have happened in a foreign country, which appear too unreal to excite any sincere sympathy or apprehension. Is this divided life good for either party?

Were some curious observer from another planet to arrive in London, I think few things would appear to him so extraordinary as a London suburb at noonday. By ten o'clock in the morning at latest he would see it denuded of all its male inhabitants. Like that fabulous realm of Tennyson's *Princess*, it is a realm inhabited by women; and the only male voice left in the land is the voice of the milk-boy on his rounds, the necessary postman, and the innocuous grocer's tout. There is something of the 'hushed seraglio' in these miles of trim houses, from whose doors and windows only female faces look out. An air of sensible bereavement lies upon the land. Woman, deprived of her lord and natural complement, cuts but a poor figure anywhere, but nowhere so poor as in a wide realm populous with grass widows. By what interests or avocations, or by what delinquency of duty the tedious hours are cheated, is not revealed to any male philosopher; but he is a poor observer who does not recognise something unnatural in this one-sided life. A few miles away the loud Niagara of London runs swift, and the air vibrates with all the tumult of the strenuous life of man; but here the air is dead, unwinnowed by any clamorous wind, unshaken by any planetary motion. I cannot think this narrow separated life good for woman, and I am surprised that in these days when woman claims equal privilege with man, she will submit to it. In the act

of getting a living she also suffers, and loses something of the power to live. If the distraction of the city hurts the man she is not less injured by the torpor of the suburb. Let a woman be never so intelligent and keenly wrought, a suburb will soon enfeeble her, and take the fine edge off her spirit. Left to the sole society of nursemaids and cooks in her own house for many hours a day; to the companionship of women outside her house, whose conversation is mainly gossip about household difficulties; to the tame diversions of shopping at the nearest emporium; what power of interest in the larger things of life can be expected of her? The suburb is her cloister, and she the dedicated bride of littleness.

This seems a hard saying, but it can easily be verified by observation. I have myself known women, rich enough to keep a carriage, who had never been so far as Hyde Park, never visited the National Gallery, and never sought any finer music than could be furnished by a local concert. For them, London as an entity did not exist. This parochialism of suburban life is its most surprising feature. There is after all some excuse for Mr. Grant Allen's description of London as an aggregation of villages, when we find that so vast a number of Londoners really live the life of villagers. But it is not patriotism that binds them to the soil, nor local pride, as is the case with genuine villagers; it is rather sheer inertia. Such pride, if it existed, might do much for the regeneration of great cities, by creating a series of eager and intelligent communities, which would vie with one another in

civic self-improvement; but this is just the kind of pride which does not exist. No one cares how his suburb is misgoverned, so long as rates are not too exorbitant. A suburb will wake into momentary life to curb the liberal programmes of the school-board, or to vote against the establishment of a free library; a gross self-interest being thus the only variation of its apathy. It soon falls asleep again, dulled into torpor by the fumes of its own intolerant smugness. For much of this the element of family separation in suburban life is answerable. The men pay their rates and house-rent at Surbiton, but they live their real lives within hearing of the bell of St. Paul's; how should they take any interest in Surbiton? After all, Surbiton is to them but a vast caravansary, where they are lodged and fed at night; and one does not inquire too closely into the internal amenities of his hotel so long as the food is tolerable, and the bed clean.

Suburbanism is, however, but a branch, though an important branch, of the larger question, whether in cities men do not ultimately sacrifice the finer qualities and joys of life to the act of getting a living. It will perhaps be said that the man with a true genius for business must in any case live in a city; that he is not discontented with the conditions of his life; that, all things being considered, he is probably living the kind of life for which he is best fitted. May not a writer, who is presumably a person of studious and quiet habits, misinterpret the life of a business man precisely in the same way that he misinterprets the life of the poor, by applying to it his own standards instead of measuring

it by theirs? Business, for the man of business genius, is more than an employment; it is his epic, his romance, his adventurous crusade. He brings to it something of the statesman's prescience, the diplomatist's sagacity, the great captain's power of organising victory. His days are battles, his life a long campaign; and if he does not win the spoil of kingdoms, he does fight for commercial supremacy, which comes to much the same thing. No doubt there is much truth in this putting of the case, though it really begs the main question. But even if we grant that in the larger operations of commerce a certain type of genius is required, we must remember that the men of this order are few in number. Every lord of commerce is attended by a vast retinue of slaves. Very few of these humble servitors of commerce can ever hope to rise from the ranks into supreme command. They must labour to create the wealth of the successful merchant as a private soldier suffers wounds and hardships that fame may crown his general. Do these men share the higher privileges of life? Is not life with them the getting of a living rather than living? Nay, more; is it not the getting of a living for some one else?

The merchant-prince fulfils himself, for his highest powers of intelligence are daily taxed to the uttermost; but the case is very different with that vast army of subordinates, whom we see marching every morning in an infinite procession to the various warehouses and offices of London. I have often wondered at their cheerfulness when I have recollected the nature of their life. For they bring to their daily tasks not the whole of themselves, but

a mere segment of themselves; some small industrious faculty which represents them, or misrepresents them, at the tribunal of those who ask no better thing of them. Few of them are doing the best that they can do, and they know it. They are not doing it because the world does not ask them to do it; indeed, the world takes care that they shall have no opportunity of doing it. A certain faculty for arithmetic represents a man who has many higher faculties; and thus the man is forced to live by one capacity which is perhaps his least worthy and significant. This is not the case in what we call the liberal professions and the arts. The architect, the barrister, the humblest journalist needs his whole mind for his task, and hence his work is a delight. The artist, if he be a true artist, does the one thing that he was born to do, and so 'the hours pass away untold, without chagrin, and without weariness,' nor would he wish them to pass otherwise. Many times as I took my way to the dreary labours of my desk I stopped to watch, and sometimes to talk with, a smiling industrious little Frenchman, who repaired china and bronzes in a dingy shop in Welbeck Street. He was an expert at his trade; knew all the distinctive marks of old china, and could assign with certainty the right date of any piece of bronze he handled; and to hear him discourse on these things would have been a liberal education to a budding connoisseur. I never knew a man so indefatigably happy in his work; his eye lit up at any special glow of colour or delicacy of design; he used his tools as though he loved them; and if he dreamed at night, I doubt not that his canopies were

coloured with the hues of Sèvres, and that bronze angels from the hand of Benvenuto stood about his bed. Plainly the man was happy because his work engaged his whole attention; and to every cunning rivet that he fashioned he gave the entire forces of his mind. Here was a man who not merely got a living but lived; and I, chained to my desk, knew well enough that his life was much more satisfactory than mine.

Money has little to do with this problem of satisfactory living; I think that this was the first discovery I made in the direction of a better mode of life. My French workman earned perhaps two pounds a week: I earned four or five; but he bought happiness with his work, whereas I bought discontent and weariness. Money may be bought at too dear a rate. The average citizen, if he did but know it, is always buying money too dear. He earns, let us say, four hundred pounds a year; but the larger proportion of this sum goes in what is called 'keeping up appearances.' He must live in a house at a certain rental; by the time that his rates and taxes are paid he finds one-eighth of his income at least has gone to provide a shelter for his head. A cottage, at ten pounds a year, would have served him better, and would have been equally commodious. He must needs send his children to some private 'academy' for education, getting only bad education and high charges for his pains; a village board-school at twopence a week would have offered undeniable advantages. He must wear the black coat and top-hat sacred to the clerking tribe; a tweed suit and cap are more comfortable, and half the price. At all points he

is the slave of convention, and he pays a price for his convention out of all proportion to its value. At a moderate estimate half the daily expenditure of London is a sacrifice to the convention or imposture of respectability.

Unless a man have, however, a large endowment of that liberal discontent which makes him perpetually examine and reexamine the conditions of his life, he will be a long time before he even suspects that he is the victim of artificial needs. When once the yoke of habit is imposed, the shoulder soon accustoms itself to the bondage, and the aches and bruises of initiation are forgotten. There are spasms of disgust, moments of wise suspicion; but they are transient, and men soon come to regard a city as the prison from whence there is no escape. But is no escape possible? That was the question which pressed more and more upon me as the years went on. I saw that the crux of the whole problem was economic, I knew that I was not the gainer by a larger income, if I could buy a more real satisfaction on less income. I saw that it was the artificial needs of life that made me a slave; the real needs of life were few. A cottage and a hundred pounds a year in a village meant happiness and independence; but dared I sacrifice twice or thrice the income to secure it? The debate went on for years, and it was ended only when I applied to it one fixed and reasoned principle. That principle was that my first business as a rational creature was *not to get a living but to live*; and that I was a fool to sacrifice the power of living in securing the means of life.

CHAPTER IV
EARTH-HUNGER

Like Charles II., who apologised for being so unconscionably long in dying, I must apologise for being so long in coming to my point, which is the possibility of buying happiness at a cheaper rate than London offers it. As it took me twenty years of experience to make my discovery, I may claim, however, that three chapters is no immoderate amount of matter in which to describe it. My chief occupation through these years was to keep my discontent alive. Satisfaction is the death of progress, and I knew well that if I once acquiesced entirely in the conditions of my life, my fate was sealed.

I did not acquiesce, though the temper of my revolt was by no means steady. There were times when—to reverse an ancient saying—the muddy Jordan of London life seemed more to me than all the sparkling waters of Damascus. Humanity seemed indescribably majestic; and there were moments when I sincerely felt that I would not exchange the trampled causeways of the London streets for the greenest meadows that bordered Rotha or Derwentwater. There were days of early summer when London rose from her morning bath of mist in a splendour truly unapproachable; when no music heard of man seemed comparable with the long diapason of the crowded streets;

when from morn to eve the hours ran with an inconceivable gaiety and lightness, and the eye was in turn inebriated with the hard glare and deep shadows of abundant light, with the infinite contrasts of the streets, with the far-ranged dignity of domes and towers swimming in the golden haze of midday, or melting in the lilac mists of evening. I felt also, in this vast congregation of my fellow-creatures, the exhilarating sense of my own insignificance. Of what value were my own opinions, hopes, or programmes in this huge concourse and confusion of opinion? Who cared what one human brain chanced to think, where so many million brains were thinking? I was swept on like a bubble in the stream, and I forgot my own individuality. And this forgetfulness became a pleasure; the mind, wearied of its own affairs, found delight in recollecting that the things that seemed so great to it were after all of infinitesimal importance in the general sum of things.

Astronomy is often credited with providing this sensation; writers of fiction especially are fond of explaining how the voyage of the eye through space humbles the individual pride of man through the oppression of magnitude and vastness. They might come nearer home, for terrestrial magnitudes produce the same effect as celestial magnitudes; the mind loses itself as readily in the abyss of London as in those gulfs of chaos that open in the Milky Way, confronting the eye with naked infinitude; and this sense of personal insignificance is at once a horror and a joy. That humble acquiescence of the Londoner

in his fate which we call his apathy, is the natural consequence of an overwhelming sense of personal insignificance. The great reformer should be country-born; in the solitude of nature he may come to think himself significant, and have faith in those thoughts and intuitions which no one contradicts. But in London, collective life, by its mere immensity, overwhelms individual life so completely that no audacity or arrogance of genius can supply that continuous and firm faith in himself which the reformer must possess.

If I resisted these debilitating influences, it was through no particular virtue of my own: it was rather through what I may call a kind of earth-hunger. I had an obstinate craving for fresh air, unimpeded movement, outdoor life. I wanted the earth, and I wanted to live in the close embrace of the earth. Some ancestor of mine must have been a hermit on a mountain, a gipsy, or a peasant: I know not which, but something of the temperament of all three had been bequeathed to me. The smell of fresh-turned earth was a smell that revived in me a portion of my nature that had seemed dead; a flower set me dreaming of solitary woods; and I found myself watching clouds and weather-signs as though my bread depended on their lenience. The first time I saw a mountain I burst into tears, an act which astonished me no less than my companions. I could offer no explanation of my conduct, but I felt as though the mountain called me. I said to myself, 'There is my home, yonder is the earth of which my corporeal part is fashioned; it is there that I should

live and die.' Even a London park in the first freshness of a summer morning produced these sensations; and those rare excursions which I took into the genuine country left me aching for days afterwards with an exquisite pain. I often imagined myself living as Wordsworth did in Dove Cottage, as Thoreau did in the Walden Woods, and the vision was delightful. I took an agricultural paper, and read it diligently, not because it was of the least practical utility to me, but because its simple details of country life seemed to me a kind of poetry. In my rambles I never saw a lovely site without at once going to work to build an imaginary cottage on it, and the views I had from the windows of my dream-cottages were more real to me than the actual prospects on which I looked every day. I have even gone so far as to seek the offices of land-agents, and haggle over the price of land which I never meant to buy, for the mere pleasure of fancying it was mine; and this kind of game was long pursued, for land-agents are a numerous tribe, and when one discovered my imposture, there was always another ready to accept me as a capitalist in search of the picturesque. In short, to possess one small fragment of the world's surface; to have a hut, a cabin, or a cottage that was verily my own, to eat the fruits of my own labour on the soil—this seemed to me the crown and goal of all human felicity. Conscript of the city as I was, drilled and driven daily in the grim barrack-yard of despotic civilisation, yet I was a deserter at heart; an earth-hunger as rapacious and intense as that of any French or Irish peasant burned in my bones, and, like the

peasant conscript that I truly was, my dreams were all of green pastures and running streams, and the happy loneliness of open spaces under open skies.

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