THE RISE AND DECADENCE OF THE CRAFTSMAN:

AN HISTORICAL NOTE.

BEFORE the appalling words of John Stuart Mill: “It is doubtful whether the use of machinery has yet lightened the day’s toil of a single human being,” one may well stand aghast. They were pronounced with the deep conviction of despair; they proceeded from a high type of mind, and from one who had given his life to the study of social science. Their pessimism is so sincere as to go far toward making the statement authoritative. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Mill was a man of emotion; that to his “stern science” he added affection, pity and passion, which were often fanned into white flame. His systematic intellect was dominated by his great heart. But although his utterance would seem to contain a note of exaggeration, it still commands, after the lapse of forty years, the respectful attention of men of thought. Therefore, with this somewhat depressing opinion as a clue, it may not be an idle act to advance a few steps within the labyrinth of that intricate and vexed problem: the present condition of the artisan.

Among the Americans, a nation of proverbial creative genius, machinery and so-called labor-saving inventions are produced with a fertility rivaling that of the earth in the Golden Age. The effect of such fertility is not to lighten the task and relieve the mental fatigue of the workman, as it might first appear. Rather, it is depressing and disastrous. Industrial improvements, so-called, induce the division and subdivision of labor. As a secondary result, the workman becomes a specialist. Through disuse of his art or trade as a whole, he loses his skill. His judgment and reason, no longer called upon to meet constantly varying demands, gradually fail him. The co-operation of his brain and
hand ceases. His muscular power weakens. The intelligent, alert and vigorous workman declines, until he seems to form a part of the machine which he operates; his human intellect obeying a mechanical power, his individuality forfeited, and his physical liberty confined within narrow limits. Thus it would appear to the student of history as if Time had turned back upon itself, forcing the class born to labor into its primitive condition of servitude, with the difference that the master and the slave are no longer man and man. For under the modern industrial system, the dominant power is the machine, while the man, as the subservient force, is threatened with all the evils peculiar to the servile state: he possesses nothing in which he can feel the legitimate joy of ownership; his task is compulsory, involving neither the activity of creation, highly pleasurable in itself, nor the responsibility of one who produces and sends out into the world a reflection of his own powers; finally, in the natural revolt of one hampered, harassed, and despoiled, if his character be not upright and firm, he practices the petty deceptions, the small thefts of time, the dishonesties which creep into the work of one whose labor is not made light by hope. Indeed, with all considerations allowed for the changes wrought by religion, science and general progress, the artisan of to-day is the evolutionized representative of the character around whom the action of the classic comedies revolves. The playwrights of Athens and Rome, in their studies of manners and customs, lavished their highest art upon the delineation of the chattel slave who tricked his master and lived by his wits, dividing his life between the tears wrung from him by the bitterness of his lot and the sinister gayety excited by his specialized, self-conscious power to deceive and betray. And the similars of this slave were those who chiefly carried on the industrial production of their time; thus, as a necessary consequence, forcing their work into disrepute, and removing the crafts from their natural place beside the higher intellectual arts.
In the later classical period, industrialism fell into an open contempt which lasted until the social system was itself dissolved and chattel slavery abolished.

With the new order of society, there arose, in the early Middle Ages, the new laborer: the field-serf, who having performed certain definite duties toward his lord, was free to earn his living within the limits of his own manor. The feudal system, replacing the worship of the city—that is, centralized power—by setting up codes adapted to particular districts and magistrates, created individualism: a spirit, which at first purely a political principle, gradually penetrated into the most obscure relations and interests of life, casting all sorts and conditions of men into the struggle for existence. Thus the serf, to a degree independent, was committed to improve his position as best he might, amid the conflicting rights of king, clergy, lord and burgher. And then, for the first time, there appeared, in the interests of labor, signs of co-operation and combination among the producers and the distributors of articles of use and consumption. Hence, the formation of the Guilds, which, as the expression of the new spirit, were naturally developed in England and Denmark, the countries least affected by classic institutions. These bodies corporate, formed in times of licence, marauding and blood-violence, were at first benefit, or insurance societies, organized against the exactions and cruelties of the feudal lords—the “crag-barons,” as Ruskin picturesquely calls them. In the second stage of their development, which followed closely upon the first, the Guilds stood for the protection and freedom of commerce: establishing connections between trading-points remote from one another, improving methods of finance, and assuring the safety of merchandise in transit upon the highways.

The Merchant Guilds becoming aggressive and powerful, commanded universal respect, and in raising themselves to a position of dignity, carried
with them the interests under their protection. Their primary object was, as we have seen, to develop and facilitate commerce, but this very object entailed the production of goods and wares which should maintain the credit and integrity of the carrier merchants. The consequent importance of industrialism awakened a new life within the commercial bodies, out of which now arose the Craft-Guilds, whose object was the regulation and practice of the lesser arts in freedom from feudal exactions.

Under the protection of these last-named bodies, the artisan reached a development which is unique in history. His honored position in the rich, laborious, teeming, artistic cities of the Low Countries, or again in the Florentine Republic, is too well known to merit more than a passing reference. But yet it can not be too often repeated to the glory of industrialism that the craftsman and the merchant who distributed the wares and goods of the craftsman, supplied the wealth, the intelligence and the integrity of that most famous of mediaeval Italian towns, whose citizens, while constituting "a nation of shopkeepers," conducted the political and diplomatic affairs of Europe: negotiating national loans, receiving royal crowns in pawn, acting with great acceptability as ambassadors to sovereigns temporal and spiritual, until they deserved the compliment paid them by Pope Boniface VIII., when he declared that they were "the fifth wheel of creation."

Throughout the thirteenth century, the artisan developed, together with the parliamentary and university systems and that superb style of architecture which is misnamed Gothic: three movements containing the highest elements of civilization, as standing for the dignity, the enlightenment and the beauty of human life. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the supremacy of the craft-guilds over the earlier and more purely commercial bodies was complete; their power being wisely exercised in efforts to foster ingenuity and
art, to maintain absolute industrial and commercial integrity, and to promote fraternity among the workmen—in short to realize a democratic ideal. To form a conception of the intense vitality of these institutions, we have but to turn to Wagner's opera of "The Mastersingers," wherein the busy, joyous, useful life of old Nuremberg is reflected as in a mirror; or yet again to the great picture of Rembrandt falsely called "The Night Watch," which is now acknowledged to represent one of the great companies or guilds of Amsterdam marching under the banners of its patron saint. So, from such historical documents as these we may gather materials with which to reconstruct the life of the mediaeval craftsman. He was, we are sure, a self-respecting man, since he owned no superior but his art. He used his talents and skill not only to gain his livelihood, but even yet more freely to produce beautiful things simply to rejoice in them, and this pure pleasure served him as an extra wage. He was master of his time, his tools and his materials, and therefore had no temptation to squander them. As the sole maker and designer of his wares, he was directly responsible for their quality, and for this reason he was genuinely interested in them. He produced directly for his friends and neighbors, who needed his chests and chairs, his fabrics or utensils, his weapons or instruments. He had consequently no inclination to enter, as a gambler, into the haphazard of supply and demand. There was no division of labor, and universally, until early in the sixteenth century, the artisan was an artist, joining the useful to the beautiful, and adapting the whole to the common uses of life.

The date assigned for the beginning of the decadence of the craftsman coincides with that of the Reformation. At that time, in many of the most important districts of Germany and the Netherlands, art was divorced from the Church, and the creator of art: labor, was robbed of its greatest attractions and incentives.
In England, conditions were similar, but even worse, since the rapacity of Henry VIII. countenanced the brutal despoilment of the cathedrals, those sacred monuments of mediaeval art and craftsmanship. Beside, the entire island, which, up to that time, had been a country of tillage cultivated for livelihood, then became a grazing country farmed for profit. The cult of utility, as hostile to beauty, was instituted, and rapid changes occurred in the condition of the workman, as well as in the exercise of the handicrafts. Among the losses then sustained by the skilled artisan may be counted one too great to be calculated by any medium of exchange; that is, the loss of pleasure in work; of that beneficent element which had been the means and the foundation of the long union between the crafts and the great intellectual arts. The workman came from his bench or his loom set up in his home, where he had lived a full life of labor and love and healthful merriment, to be herded with others of his kind in a great pen-like workshop, there to suffer in the interests of economy of space, fuel, lighting, and the other comforts of existence. Closely upon this change there followed another and a greater one: the division of labor, which, during the Middle Ages, had been theoretically unknown; the master craftsman acquainted with every detail of his calling, then representing the unit of production. Therefore, the change which occurred in the sixteenth century may be briefly explained as the transfer of the unit of labor from the master craftsman, active, independent and creative, to a group of workers, each member of which depended on every one of the others, and was individually helpless. Under this system, when strictly enforced, we find the workman condemned to a life equaling, by its monotony and restrictions, that of the famous prisoners of romance: we find him, throughout the long years of his service, pledged to the making of a trifling part of some insignificant article of commerce.

The division of labor became
the parent of a long line of unhappy consequences. As the craftsman had worked for his livelihood, his pleasure and his friends, so the new unit,—the group of artisans,—now worked for a profit, for that indefinite and fluctuating quantity called the public, and for the production of commercial, rather than artistic articles: conditions which were clearly understood through both knowledge and sympathy by William Morris, when he wrote:

“Art as well as mere obvious utility became a marketable article, doled out according to necessities of the capitalist who employed both machine-workman and designer, fettered by the needs of profit. The division of labor so worked that instead of all workmen being artists, as they once were, they became divided into workmen who were not artists, and artists who were not workmen.”

The Workshop System, most typical in England during the latter half of the eighteenth century, was superseded in the nineteenth and in the same country by conditions of still greater rigor. Economic changes, which in the short space of fifty years had advanced the thickly-populated island to the first place among manufacturing countries, generated the Factory System: a regime responsible for the lowest stage in the degeneration of the craftsman, and under which the human laborer, who had already played the part of a machine, was forced, by the rapid multiplication of mechanical devices and the demands of the world-market, to render slave’s duty to this Moloch-god of industrialism.

The very thought of such duty is revolting to the free mind. The slave of the machine must follow its movements at the peril of his health, sanity and life. He finds a crazing sameness in its appearance and its action. He has little or no responsibility in the worth or the worthlessness of the work which he is aiding to accomplish. He is in all things the opposite of the master craftsman: matching inventiveness with sterility,
and the alertness of perception with that dullness of despair which breeds negation and revolt.

To annihilate this distressing and dangerous type created by the nineteenth century will be one of the first and greatest duties of the period just now beginning. The movement initiated by Ruskin and William Morris will be vigorously carried forward by other no less sincere disciples of the Religion of Beauty, until the time shall again come when “every artist shall be a workman,” and every workman an artist in his own field of activity. The advancement of the cause demands thorough and practical measures. In our own country and colonies we must profit by the experience of England, lest with us industrialism also secure its sacrifice of human happiness, energy and joy. The trades and crafts must be raised from the disrepute into which they fell through the division of labor. The laboring classes must be wisely guided by State and School until, self-respecting and thoroughly enlightened, they shall be heard to declare: “We are men, and nothing that is human is foreign to us.”

In this work, art must be the prime factor, and a practical knowledge of drawing be made the basis of all the handicrafts. Thus, through the widened avenues of perception, Beauty will pass to relieve fatigue, to create pleasure for the toiler, and to show things in their true proportions and relations: in a word to re-incarnate the citizen spirit of the Middle Ages in a community purified by Science from all superstitions.