THE SIMPLE LIFE" BY CHARLES WAGNER • A REVIEW

THE spirit of simplicity is a great magician. It softens asperities, bridges chasms, draws together hands and hearts. The forms which it takes in the world are infinite in number; but never does it seem to us more admirable than when it shows itself across the fatal barriers of position, interest, or prejudice, overcoming the greatest obstacles, permitting those whom everything seems to separate to understand one another, esteem one another, love one another. This is the true social cement, that goes into the building of a people.

Such is the concluding paragraph of a little book which, written from the fulness of knowledge and experience, has been sent out by its author upon a sacred mission to encourage and uplift, to warn and to teach. In the reading rooms of our public libraries, the book may be seen in the hands of earnest men and women whose faces brighten and grow young as they come upon some truth or sentiment which they themselves have long and deeply felt, but have lacked the power to formulate. The book in both thought and expression is of that quality which the French characterize as "intimate." Therefore, it grows precious as one reads it. Its utterances echo in the mind like those of some cherished voice. It seems almost to have assumed the personality of a friend.

The introduction to "The Simple Life," sympathetically written, contrasts the volume of essays with the city of Paris, from which it was sent forth. It declares that a "limpid, bubbling spring, fresh and cool from its forest source, running down one of the boulevards, would hardly appear more miraculous to the eye, or more refreshing to the senses." The statement is forceful and true to a degree. Yet the connection of the great complex city with the simple life is quite explicable, natural, and even usual. For it is well established that aversion for the beauties of nature and hatred of simplicity most often embitter the lives of tillers of the
soil and cottagers; while the true lover of the great realities may as easily be a sovereign as a peasant. It must be remembered that the most exquisite pastorals, barring the Hebrew, have been composed at courts, or in crowded cities, and that the greatest modern inheritor of the classic nature-spirit was a Frenchwoman, a participator in the most complex phases of Parisian life. Furthermore it was a child of the Latin Quarter who, from the heights and depths of his rapid experiences, cried: "The soul can open wings wide as heaven in a dungeon narrow as the hand." Certain it is that the French, although taxed with being artificial and vain, yet bear away the crown in art and literature for the most complete and most delicate expression of simplicity; as it is amply proven by Millet and Breton, L’Hermitte and Bonheur in modern painting, and by George Sand, Loti and Bazin in modern prose-writing. The book of "The Simple Life" is no anomaly. It is clearly the product of a rational intellect trained and alert, polished by attrition with the argumentative minds of the French middle-classes, and reaching in intent and aspiration above and beyond all barriers of time and space.

The author of "The Simple Life" is an Alsatian, a shepherd from that hill country which, together with the fertile Lorraine, was lost to France by the war of 1870. The writer is a Lutheran pastor who was educated in both French and German universities and is now established over a congregation in Paris which includes almost every intellectual and social element in modern France: a body, therefore well qualified to participate in the work of religious and moral unification which Wagner regards as the great issue of the age.

It is said that this teacher and writer is at best in his pulpit; that his sermons rouse and startle like a call to arms, losing no force from the fact that they are not pleas for individual salvation, but gain-
ing in breadth and significance by their demand for human solidarity against injustice, the relief of misfortune, and the spiritualization of life. The Pastor Wagner's work of instruction does not end with formal sermons. He has enrolled from his congregation a society of young men and another of young women with whom he discusses the questions of the day which are to him matters of religion. Then, outside his pastoral duties, he labors in behalf of the working men of Paris, for whom he organizes meetings and whom he serves in other ways; working always in the belief that the morality of the greater number is the only resource by which liberty can live in a democracy; seeking to effect an alliance of effort for moral action, a union and brotherhood based upon convictions of patriotic and civic duty.

Unlike many reformers, the Pastor Wagner has a thoroughly practical genius, as is proven by his fruitful activity and large share in the establishment of the so-called "popular universities," which are courses of instruction designed to educate working men in the rudiments of economics, history, art and ethics; the number of these institutions having increased from one opened in 1898, in that hot-bed of insurrection, the Faubourg Saint Antoine, to twenty that are now flourishing in various quarters of Paris, and more than one hundred in France.

It is this practical genius which vitalizes the words of "The Simple Life," and sends them upon an effective mission to all sorts and conditions of men, without raising questions of creed, race or class, and awakening in every touched heart a sentiment responsive to that impulse under whose mastery Wagner himself confesses to write: "I am a man and nothing that is human is indifferent to me."

The book is, like all other writings of its author, the outcome of his lectures, sermons and daily experiences of life, and a glance at its table of
chapters shows that genius for analysis and order which minds of French training alone possess. In clear concepts, crystallized in exquisite form, reminding one of the jewel-like style of La Rochefoucauld, the Lutheran pastor discusses our complex life; the essence of simplicity; simplicity of speech, simple duties, needs, pleasures and beauty; the world and the life of home; pride and simplicity in the intercourse of men; and the education for simplicity.

Judged by his words, M. Wagner is no radical, revolutionist or reversionist. He proposes no hard or fast rules to be observed by those who would reform society and save the world. He simply offers individual ideals which to follow would be to ensure for ourselves and others the possession of beauty, comfort and happiness such as we do not now know. In taking his point of view, he expresses his belief that simplicity does not belong to special social or economic phases: rather that it is a spirit, able to vivify and modify lives of very different sorts. In his own words: “All of men’s agitations for greater justice and more light have also been movements toward a simpler life; and the simplicity of olden times, in manners, art and ideas, still keeps its incomparable value, only because it achieved the setting forth in high relief of certain essential sentiments and certain permanent truths. It is a simplicity to cherish and reverence; but he little comprehends it who thinks its peculiar virtue lies in its outward manifestation. In brief, if it is impossible for us to be simple in the forms our fathers used, we may remain simple, or return to simplicity in their spirit.”

While it is the first principle of M. Wagner that material prosperity without an offset, diminishes capacity for happiness and debases character, he says plainly that, in his view, simplicity does not reside in externals, but is a state of mind; that livery counts for nothing, the heart alone being the index and measure of
character. And here he writes: "A man is simple when his chief care is the wish to be what he ought to be; that is: honestly and naturally human. We may compare existence to raw material. What it is, matters less than what is made of it, as the value of a work of art lies in the flowering of a workman’s skill. True life is possible in social conditions the most diverse, and with natural gifts the most unequal. It is not fortune, or personal advantage, but our turning them to account, that constitutes the value of life. Fame adds no more than does length of days; quality is the thing."

Under the head of "simple needs," Mr. Wagner emphasizes certain truths which we all more or less strongly feel, but which few of us have courage to exemplify in our lives. He insists that our wants should be our servants, rather than the turbulent, seditious legion of tyrants which they have become in our complex life. This thought is not a new one. It was even more strongly expressed by Plato, when, in his Ideal Republic, he compared the natural passions and impulses of man with the artisan-classes of the State, who work incessantly upon raw material, which they convert into useful articles, or else utterly and wickedly waste and destroy. But the words of Mr. Wagner are such as quickly captivate the ear and mind of the modern man. He thus speaks of the results of the reign of need: "After us the deluge! To raze the forests in order to get gold, to squander your patrimony in youth, destroying in a day the fruit of long years; to warm your house by burning your furniture, to burden the future with debts for the sake of present pleasure; to live by expedients and sow for the morrow trouble, sickness, ruin, envy and hate—the enumeration of all the misdeeds of this fatal regime has no end." Then, having offered this picture of chaos, he reasons in that spirit of thrift and contentment so characteristic of the French provincial:

The more simply you live, the
The North chamber.
A wall in the South chamber.
Middle chamber showing fitment and tiled fireplace.
more secure is your future; you are less at the mercy of
surprises and reverses. Having simple needs, you find
it less painful to accustom yourself to the hazards of for-
tune. You remain a man, though you lose your office
or your income, because the foundation on which your
life rests is not your table, your cellar, your horses, your
goods and chattels, or your money. In adversity you
will not act like a nursling deprived of its bottle and rattle.
Stronger, better armed for the struggle, presenting, like
those with shaven heads, less advantage to the enemy,
you will also be of more profit to your neighbor. Less
absorbed in your own comfort, you will find the means
of working for that of theirs."

Such is the sentiment of self-
restraint and altruism, therefore of true Christianity, which
pervades and perfumes the volume of "The Simple Life."
It announces that France has arrived at a parting of the
ways, and that she is even now entering upon a work of
regeneration in letters, art, religion and national life: in
a word, that she is passing from a critical into an organic
period.