

# **LIFE IN A RAILWAY FACTORY**

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Life in a Railway Factory by Alfred Williams

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FACTORY**



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BY

ALFRED WILLIAMS

AUTHOR OF  
'A WILTSHIRE VILLAGE'  
'VILLAGES OF THE WHITE HORSE'



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## PREFACE

My object in penning "Life in a Railway Factory" was to take advantage of the opportunities I have had as a workman, during twenty-three years' continuous service in the sheds, of setting down what I have seen and known for the interest and education of others, who might like to be informed as to what is the actual life of the factory, but who have no means of ascertaining it from the generality of literature published upon the matter.

The book opens with a short survey of several causes of labour unrest and suggestions as to its remedy. Then follows a brief description of the stamping shed, which is the principal scene and theatre of the drama of life exhibited in the pages, the central point from which our observations were made and where the chief of our knowledge and experience was acquired. After a glance into the interior we explore the surroundings and pay a visit to the rolling mills, and watch the men shingling and rolling the iron and forging wheels for the locomotives. Continuing our perambulation of the yard we encounter the shunters, watchmen, carriage finishers, painters, washers-down, and cushion-beaters. The old canal claims a moment's attention, then we pass on to the ash-wheelers, bricklayers, road-waggon builders, and the wheel-turning shed. Leaving them behind we come to the "field," where the old broad-gauge vehicles were broken up or converted, and proceed thence into the din of the frame-building shed and

study some portion of its life. Next follows an exploration of the smithy and a consideration of the smith at work and at home, his superior skill and characteristics. From our study of the smiths we pass to that of the fitters, forgemen, and boilermakers, and complete our tour of the premises by visiting the foundry and viewing the operations of the moulders.

The early morning stir in the town and country around the sheds, the preparations for work, the manner in which the toilers arrive at the factory, and the composition of the crowd are next described, after which we enter the stamping shed and witness the initial toils of the forgemen and stampers, view the oil furnace and admire the prowess of "Ajax" and his companions. The drop-hammers and their staff receive proportionate attention; then follows a comparison of forging and smithing, a study of several personalities, and an inspection of the plant known as the Yankee Hammers. Chapter XI. is a description of the first quarter at the forge expressed entirely by means of actual conversations, ejaculations, commands, and repartees, overheard and faithfully recorded. Following that is a first-hand account of how the night shift is worked, giving one entire night at the forge and noting the various physical phases through which the workman passes and indicating the effects produced upon the body by the inversion of the natural order of things. The remainder of the chapters is devoted to the description and explanation of a variety of matters, including the manner of putting on and discharging hands, methods of administration, intimidating and terrorising, the interpretation of moods and feelings during the passage of the day, week and year, holidays, the effects of cold and heat, causes of sickness and accidents, the psychology of fat and lean workmen, comedy, tragedy, short

time and overtime, the advantages—or disadvantages—of education and intelligence, ending up with a review of the industrial situation as it was before the war and remarks upon the future outlook. A table of wages paid at the works is added as an appendix.

The site of the factory is the Wiltshire town of Swindon. This stands at the extremity of the Upper Thames Valley, in the centre of a vast agricultural tract, and is seventy-seven miles from London and about forty from Bristol. Its population numbers approximately fifty thousand, all largely dependent upon the railway sheds for subsistence. The inhabitants generally are a heterogenous people. The majority of the works' officials, the clerical staff, journeymen, and the highly skilled workers have been imported from other industrial centres; the labourers and the less highly trained have been recruited wholesale from the villages and hamlets surrounding the town. About twelve thousand men, including clerks, are normally employed at the factory. A knowledge of the composition of the inhabitants of the town is important, otherwise one might be at a loss to account for the low rate of wages paid, the lack of spirited effort and efficient organisation among the workers, and other conditions peculiar to the place.

The book was never intended to be an expression of patriotism or unpatriotism, for it was written before the commencement of the European conflict. It consequently has nothing directly to do with the war, nor with the manufacture of munitions, any more than it incidentally discovers the nature of the toils, exertions, and sacrifices demanded of those who must slave at furnace, mill, steam-hammer, anvil, and lathe producing supplies for our armies and for those of our Allies in the field. It is not a treatise on economics,



for I have never studied the science. If I had set out with the intention of theoretically slaughtering every official responsible for the administration of the factory I should have failed signally. I never contemplated such a course. Instead I wished to write out my own experiences and observations simply, and from my own point of view, mistaken or otherwise, without fear or favour to any. I have my failings and prejudices. What they are is very well known to me, and I have no intention of disavowing them. Whoever disagrees with me is fully entitled to his opinion. I shall not question his judgment, though I shall not easily surrender my own. I am not anxious to quarrel with any man; at the same time I am not disposed to be fettered, smothered, gagged or silenced, to cower and tremble, or to shrink from uttering what I believe to be the truth in deference to the most formidable despot living.

A. W.

24th July 1915.

A portion of Chapter XIII. has appeared in the *English Review*. My thanks are due to the Editor for his courteous permission to reproduce it in the volume.

# LIFE IN A RAILWAY FACTORY

## CHAPTER I

### LABOUR UNREST

SOMEONE once asked the Greek Thales how he might best bear misfortune and he replied—"By seeing your enemy in a worse condition than yourself." He would have been as near the truth if he had said "friend" instead of "enemy." Everyone appears to desire to see every other one worse off than himself. He is not content with doing well; he must do better, and if his success happens to be at the expense of one less fortunate he will be the more highly gratified. This lust of dominion and possession dates from the very foundation of human society. It is a feature of barbarism, and one that the wisest teaching and the most civilising influences at work in the world have failed to remove or even very materially to modify. The idea behind the *Sic vos non vobis* of Virgil has always been uppermost in the minds of the powerful. This it was that doomed the captives of the Greeks and Romans to a life of wretchedness and misery in the mines. This was responsible for the subjugation of the English peasants, and their reduction to the order of serfs in feudal times. And this is what would enslave the labouring classes in mine, field, and factory to-day. It must not be permitted. There is a way

to defeat it. That is by law. Not a law made by the depredators but by the workers themselves. They have the means at their disposal. If they would summon up the courage to make use of them they might shatter the power of the capitalist at a stroke and free themselves from his domination for ever.

A principal cause of trouble everywhere between the employer and the employed is the lack of recognition of the worker. I mean this in its broadest sense. I do not mean merely that great and powerful combinations do not want to recognise Trade Unions. We all know that. It is a part of their policy and is dictated by pride and the spirit of intolerance. But they make a much more serious and fatal mistake. They refuse to recognise a man. All kinds of employers are guilty of this. The mineowner, the trading syndicate, the railway or steamship company, municipal authorities, the large and small manufacturer, the farmer and shop-keeper are equally to blame. If they would recognise the man they might be led to a consideration of his legitimate needs. They must first admit him to be equally a member of the human family and then recognise that, as such, he has claims as righteous and sacred as they. That is where the representative of capital invariably fails. He will not admit that the one under his authority has any rights of his own. To him the worker is as much a slave as ever he was, only he is conscious that his treatment of him must be subject to the limitations imposed by the modern laws of the land. And as he flouts the individual so he contemns the collective organisations of the men. He is determined not to recognise them. He considers this to be a proof of his strength. In reality it is a badge of his weakness. Sooner or later it will prove his undoing.

I will give an illustration. Several years ago, work-