

**COMPANIONS
OF MY SOLITUDE**

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Companions of my solitude by Sir Arthur Helps

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SIR ARTHUR HELPS

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BY THE AUTHOR OF "FRIENDS IN COUNCIL."

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CHAPTER I.

WHEN in the country, I live much alone : and, as I wander over downs and commons and through lanes with lofty hedges, many thoughts come into my mind. I find, too, that the same ones come again and again, and are spiritual companions. At times they insist upon being with me, and are resolutely intrusive. I think I will describe them, that so I may have more mastery over them. Instead of suffering them to haunt me as vague faces and half-fashioned resemblances, I will make them into distinct pictures, which I can give away, or hang up in my room, turning them, if I please, with their faces to the wall ; and, in short, be free to do what I like with them.

Ellesmere will then be able to deride them at his pleasure ; and so they will go through the alembic of sarcasm : Dunsford will have something more to approve, or rebuke ; Lucy something more to love, or to hate. Even my dogs and my trees will be the better for this work, as, when it is done, they will, perhaps, have a more disengaged attention from me. Faithful, steadfast creatures, both dogs and trees ; how easy and charming is your converse with me compared with the eager, exclusive, anxious way in which the creations of my own brain, who at least should have some filial love and respect for me, insist upon my attention.

It was a thoroughly English day to-day, sombre and quiet, the sky coming close to the earth, and everything seeming to be of one colour. I wandered over the downs, not heeding much which way I went, and driven by one set of thoughts which of late have had great hold upon me.

I think often of the hopes of the race here, of what is to become of our western civilisation, and what can be made of it. Others may pursue science or art, and I long to do so too ; but I cannot help thinking of the state and fortunes of large masses of mankind, and hoping that thought may do something for them.

After all my cogitations, my mind generally returns to one thing, the education of the people. For want of general cultivation how greatly individual excellence is crippled. Of what avail, for example, is it for any one of us to have surmounted any social terror, or any superstition, while his neighbours lie sunk in it? His conduct in reference to them becomes a constant care and burden.

Meditating upon general improvement, I often think a great deal about the climate in these parts of the world; and I see that without much husbandry of our means and resources, it is difficult for us to be anything but low barbarians. The difficulty of living at all in a cold, damp, destructive climate is great. Socrates went about with very scanty clothing, and men praise his wisdom in caring so little for the goods of this life. He ate sparingly, and of mean food. That is not the way, I suspect, that we can make a philosopher here. There are people who would deride one for saying this, and would contend that it gives too much weight to worldly things. But I suspect they are misled by notions borrowed from Eastern climates. Here we must make prudence one of the substantial virtues.

One thing, though, I see, and that is, that there is a quantity of misplaced labour, of labour which is not

consumed in stern contest with the rugged world around us, in the endeavour to compel Nature to give us our birthright, but in fighting with "strong delusions" of all kinds ; or rather in putting up obstacles which we laboriously knock down again, in making Chinese mazes between us and objects we have daily need of, and where we should have only the shortest possible line to go. As I have said elsewhere, half the labour of the world is pure loss—the work of Sisyphus rolling up stones to come down again inevitably.

Law, for example, what a loss is there ; of time, of heart, of love, of leisure ! There are good men whose minds are set upon improving the law ; but I doubt whether any of them are prepared to go far enough. Here, again, we must hope most from general improvement of the people. Perhaps, though, some one great genius will do something for us. I have often fancied that a man might play the part of Brutus in the law. He might simulate madness in order to ensure freedom. He might make himself a great lawyer, rise to eminence in the profession, and then turn round and say, "I am not going to enjoy this high seat and dignity ; but intend henceforward to be an advocate for the people of this country against the myriad oppressions and vexations of the

law. No Chancellorships or Chief-Justiceships for me. I have only pretended to be this slave in order that you should not say that I am an untried and unpractical man—that I do not understand your mysteries.”

This, of course, is not the dramatic way in which such a thing would be done. But there is greatness enough in the world for it to be done. If no lawyer rises up to fill the place which my imagination has assigned for him, we must hope that statesmen will do something for us in this matter, that they will eventually protect us (though, hitherto, they never have done so) from lawyers.

There are many things done now in the law at great expense by private individuals which ought to be done for all by officers of the State. It is as if each individual had to make a road for himself whenever he went out, instead of using the king's highway.

Many of the worst things in the profession take place low down in it. I am not sure that I would not try the plan of having public notaries with very extensive functions, subjecting them to official control. What exclamations about freedom we should hear, I daresay, if any large measure of this kind were proposed; which exclamations and their consequences have long been in my mind, a chief obstacle to our

possessing the reality of freedom. What difference is it whether I am a slave to my lawyer, or subject indirectly to more official control in the changing of my property? I do not know a meaner and sadder portion of a man's existence, or one more likely to be full of impatient sorrow, than that which he spends in waiting at the offices of lawyers.

It is to be observed that all satire falls short when aimed against the practices in the law. No man can imagine, not Swift himself, things more shameful, absurd, and grotesque than the things which do take place daily in the law. Satire becomes merely narrative. A modern novelist depicts a man ruined by a legacy of a thousand pounds, and sleeping under a four-legged table, because it reminded him of the days when he used to sleep in a four-post bed. This last touch about the bed is humorous, but the substance of the story is dry narrative only.

These evils are not of yesterday, or of this country only; I observe that the first Spanish colonists in America write home to the Government begging them not to allow lawyers to come to the colony.

At the same time, we must not forget how many of the evils attributed solely to the proceedings of lawyers result from the want of knowledge of business in the world in general, and its inaptness for business,