WORTH AND WEALTH: A POEM

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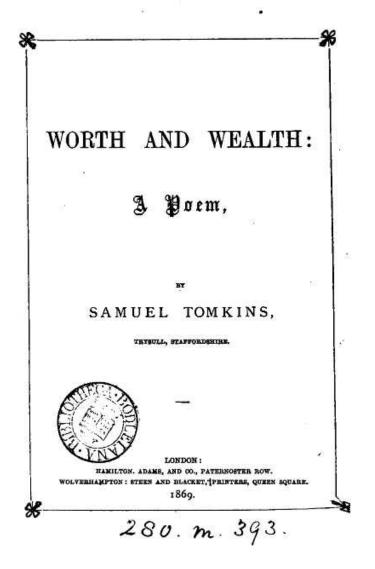
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SAMUEL TOMKINS

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Trieste





Part First.

In a sweet English village, quite removed From the rough bustle and the din of towns, Down at the bottom of a lovely vale, With lofty hills all round, down whose steep sides The traveller descended ere he saw A single cottage, or the rustic church ; And winding round those lofty hills there ran, Right through the vale, a willow-margined stream-A brook, wide as a river in its flow. In this small hamlet dwelt both rich and poor. Though hidden from the view of all the world, Yet still the fashions of the world were there, With social grades, and servile nods and bows. A wealthy man there was : and one, whose lot Was neither rich nor poor ; his skill Earned raiment, food, and what he far more prized, Good education for the growing folk That gathered round his hearth. Widely diverse Were these two men-the rich and him not rich-

In disposition and desires : diverse In mental calibre and moral worth. The early struggles of the poorer man Had much developed an extensive brain, And sole dependence on his God had made Him deeply thoughtful; while he blessed that Hand Which scattered daily mercies in his way, He picked them up with thankful heart, and found Provision all-sufficient for his wants. Of all good things he was conservative ; From evil things his spirit turned away With thoughts abhorrent : but with charity He measured all his neighbours in the vale ; For well he knew frail man hath narrow views-Oft makes mistakes ; thro' different coloured glass Beholds his own and other people's deeds. Of strict religious views, and fervent mind, He loved to pray to God and sing His praise ; Fanatical he was not, for a chord Of common sense, uncommon, intertwined The fibres of his mind, and reined in The soaring fancy and each fervent thought. He saw God's hand in all things, and believed : But yet he wrought with diligence for bread, And every gift he duly occupied.

All through an even life of fifty years He dwelt within the vale, and paid his way, By all regarded as an honest man : Yet were there those who liked him not, because

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He by his better life reproved their sins And set them on a thinking, which disturbed The self-complaisant feelings of their minds. They could not call him "Methodist" in scorn, Who never wandered from his parish church, But in the tavern, merry o'er their cups, They called him a "Psalm-singer" in reproach.

The richer man, unto possession born Of wealth abundant, had no fear of want; His fortune so secure, he felt no need Of trust in Him who is alone the trust Of humbler mortals, and whose generous care Supplies the sparrows and the poor with food. Anticipated all his wants, he put Not forth his talents to some useful work. He seldom knelt in prayer-or when he did It was with form of words repeated o'er From childhood, thoughtlessly, and never felt. He knew not want, then wherefore should he pray? Endowed with health and vigorous appetite. He at his best lived as an animal, With this distinction, that he could forecast To please his appetite with studied art From cellar and from larder richly stored. Incarnate Goodness saw the snares of wealth, And spoke in earnest language unto men. The life of men is not what they possess, But that immortal mind that in them thinks-That moral sense that gives them power to know

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And love and worship Him, who lends them breath To work His will while it is called "to-day." The world outside the valley knew the wealth Of the rich man, and duly flattered him : The pastor feared him, and rich neighbours smiled ; He moved in good society, and walked Abroad as one whom foolish men had taught That God had chiefly made the world for him. He passed his neighbour with a sickly nod, Or haughty or severe, just as his mood Was at the moment; for he truly felt A gulf impassable was fixed of right Between their social spheres. One man is formed To labour for his bread ; another formed But to enjoy the wealth he earned not, And to receive the homage of the poor. There was no common bond between these two, Near neighbours as they were : this mattered not : The rich man had his pleasures, and the man Who was not rich or poor, constant employ, . To earn his bread and cultivate his mind.

They both had children born within the vale— Young romping boys and maidens—and these grew In stature and in age both night and day; And while their parents thought them still so young Their hearts were troubled with the verb "to love,"— A plaintive voice—they knew not whence—was heard To speak within. Spontaneously there grew A power that Nature planted in the heart:

And artificial pride, by luxury bred, Hath tried, with fitful efforts, every age, To kill fair Nature in the soul : but she, Akin to gods immortal, cannot die. Wounded and bruised, beneath the proud man's foot, Still doth she rise again, with strength renewed ; And taught by her-the else untutored eye Discovers treasures by herself bestowed. Oft in the humbler ranks of life there grow Those truer beauties which enchant the mind. A manly form-a maiden's lovely grace-Which art can never copy, nor wealth buy : A mighty intellect-mysterious gifts, That show themselves in acts and outward form. The lofty brow-the eye that with its glance Speaks through the outward senses to the soul : Shines with intelligence, which feebler minds In mansion or in cottage ever lack.

These neighbours' children, all were passing fair— The maidens beautiful, the young men strong; Yet of the two—it happeneth so sometimes In every clime,—the poorer folk excelled In gifts and graces, both of form and mind; And in acquirèd knowledge, pressing need Had caused the poorer children to put forth Their energies, good talents to improve. They sought for knowledge which to them was bread; Their daily mercies, under God, were hung Upon their fathers' labours. Hoarded gold

They had but little of; sickness or death Of him their chief bread winner, would dissolve The atmosphere of comfort which they breathed. Yet still they prized knowledge more than gold, Trusting to God and it—if He should please To take their father from them—to supply Their daily wants.

These children marvelled not That they should all the hamlets' beauties share, Live in the lovely vale, and breathe alike The country air, and yet as strangers be To those from whom barely a furlong's space Divides their dwellings. Yet they were apart, Not by inferior natures, but by gold, Or chiefly that. In all the eye could see The poorer folk were richer; and their minds In book lore, talents, and scholastic wealth, Far better stored; their feelings better trained; But, lacking wealth, they met and made no sign, And passed as strangers.

On the Sabbath day

They met together in the house of prayer; But when the service ended, the rich folk Sat in their pews till all beside themselves Had homeward gone. All that great care could do Was done, that children of the wealthy man Should quite ignore their neighbour's gifted folk. But there are instincts in the human heart—