The Selected Prose of John Gray

McCormack, Jerusha Hull

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"Old Gough"

The Butterfly, 1 (October 1893), 335–344.

An example of Gray's naturalistic style, it reminds one (as Zaina remarks) "of some of the stories in the Keynotes series by writers who had read their Maupassant" (p. 77). Gray's father, a wheelwright, was clearly a model for "Old Gouth"—and his perversity might reflect a family trait, as Gray himself at this time often consciously acted against the grain. Gray also turns his own experience as an apprentice in the Woolwich Arsenal to good use in the detailing of trade union practice and attitudes of the working class of his day.

The original has three illustrations signed by O. Eckhard (reproduced on the opposite and following pages).
HE men in the Wheel Factory had long been growing more and more discontented. Perhaps this was largely the fault of the foreman. He was old; he had been on the works since he was a boy; he had been apprenticed under the old partners, and any morning he was likely to be found dead over the desk in his little glass cabin in the corner of the shop. He managed badly; he had his favourites; the work was not well distributed; younger foremen contrived to shift their poor hands upon him and to filch his better men. Three at least of his forty odd men might well have been “sacked”; but so well did those three or four marked ones know how to turn his weakness to their advantage, that they managed to hang on in spite of him.

At one time the Wheel Factory had been what they called on the works, “a quiet crib”—a day-work shop, where, in consequence, rates were a trifle higher, and where the work was supposed to be of a better order than elsewhere. At piece-work, a man might earn half again the amount of his rating, while at day-work he could only draw his rated wages.

Now, it was neither one thing nor the other. The mechanics had dwindled to about five-and-twenty, and all sorts of rag-tag had drifted there. There were half a dozen copying-lathes, for example, and a couple of circular saws. The foreman had never been able to get even one hand-saw into his shop, and thus a whole section of well-paid and comparatively skilled work was monopolised “down
at the mills.” Then he had two lads on his hands. These were rated as apprentices. Apprentices! They had been “let in” without premiums, their fathers being old employés of the firm. All they did was to cut wedges and turn pegs—a poor hour’s work a day—loafing about for the rest, laying hands on this and that, to curry favour with “the men.”

Everything was in a thoroughly unsatisfactory state. The Wheel Factory was no longer as it had once been, a thoroughfare. Scarcely ever did any one pass through it; it was as dusty as a mill, and strangely well described by the pet name it bore, The Cemetery.

The mechanics were disgusted with it all: with their work, their foreman, their colleagues. The machine hands and labourers threw in their fate with these, their betters, in a common grumble and vague murmuring for higher rates. The demands were indeed vague; they scarcely knew whether they wanted more work, a higher rate, or each to try his fortune elsewhere. But about the disaffection there could be no mistaking: it was strong and general.

Save for one exception. Old Gough never grumbled. He was never seen whispering to the foreman until that dodderer turned away in confusion, red up to the roots of his hair; he got on with his job while others did this. For years his shop-mates had left him to himself; they did not much care for him: he was too indifferent. Anyone who would banter seldom got much change from him. But when discontent seemed to be coming to a head, a sudden desire arose in the shop to convert Old Gough to the general idea. One or another would come sidling up to him, to open a conversation; it was long before he would look up, and again long before he would put down the tool he was using. Then it would be, with chuckling derision,—

“Go out? What are you talking about? In most places you wouldn’t have much choice, from what I’ve seen of you.” Or, addressed more to the individual, “Then why don’t you go? You’re young. Anyone
would offer you three pounds a week before you got down the street. Go, if you're not satisfied; they'll respect you for it. You're young. It's different for an old man like me.”

Then he would chuckle and resume his work. Old Gough had probably put his tools on his back oftener than most men of his trade. He had been over a good deal of the world. He sometimes spoke, in a tone of jesting brag peculiar to him, of going back to Shanghai. But though he “took it” from no one, he knew when he was well off far better than did most of the high-talking wheelers he worked with.

It is no light thing for an old man to look for a job, though Gough was a first-rate workman, and not a day more than fifty. Still, he had young children, his home was comfortable, and he meant more than he would have admitted when he said it was different for an old man.

Saturday noon came, the Wheel Factory knocked off, and the men went to get their wages of the week preceding. No one had even a passable bill, and the following Saturday the week they had just finished would be poorer still. Old Gough was supposed to have the best bill; but, following his custom, he kept the amount his own secret. The grumbles took clearer shape as the men left the works.

“Don't get downhearted,” the foreman said to them with hollow cheeriness; “it'll be better next week.” He had known of the discontent all along, but fear of the rap on the knuckles he would get in doing so prevented him from naming the ringleaders to his manager. The weak will always risk the greater to avoid the lesser evil.

Monday morning, first quarter, there was more talk than work in the Wheel Factory. Some had held council together meantime. Those who were not sore from the discontent of their wives at a short allowance were greedy to have the handling of a week's wages (though a poor one) on a Monday morning. Two of the men came up to Old Gough.

“Bob,” said one, “we're going out after breakfast.”
"All?"
"Yes."
"What for?"
"A better rate."
"How much?"
"A ha'penny an hour."
"You won't get it."
"No, but we'll get better work, and more of it."

After a good deal of parleying Old Gough agreed to join, on their solemn assurances of "meaning it." So, after breakfast, they all put on their coats, Old Gough, eyed curiously by the rest, last of all, and they stood in a group as a demonstration before the distracted foreman, who at last made up his mind to send one of the lads down to the office. At this moment the father of the other apprentice came round, and, finding his son with his coat on, soundly cuffed his ears. Then the strikers moved out into the yard in a body, where they stood sheepishly, looked on by men from other shops from a distance, and from round every corner in sight.

Presently the young partner came down to the yard with quick steps, throwing away the end of his cigarette as he approached.

"Well, men," he began hurriedly and very business-like, "what's this I hear? You don't think the firm's got work and won't give it you? You all know as well as the partners how slack things are, or you ought to. Some of you have been here twelve or fifteen years; go or stay as you like, but if you'll take good advice, I say: Think of your families, and get back to work sharp. The firm won't be hard; they know there's not much doing. It's the same everywhere. If you go out, I don't suppose you'll get a job this side of Botchester. For your own sakes, go back to your work."

No one answered, until Old Gough said, "You haven't heard what we want, sir; we've come out for a better rate."
"Take my advice, men," said the young man; and, turning to Old Gough, "As I tell you, go or stay; but I don't suppose you'll get a job this side of Botchester."

"Then perhaps," answered Old Gough, "I'll get a job on the other side."

The men looked at one another a moment, but seeing only each himself reflected in the others' faces, they turned tail, and filed into the shop. Only Old Gough held his ground. Wiping his face with his pocket-handkerchief broke the spell of his disgust, and he made a step in the opposite direction.

"Foreman," said the young partner coldly, "give this man a pass out for his tools. If you come down to the office with me, Gough, I'll give you your bill."