

Middle-Class Success and How to Achieve It



62 ▼ Samuel Smiles, *SELF-HELP and THRIFT*

No writer expressed the hopes, fears, expectations, and values of nineteenth-century Europe's middle class more faithfully and successfully than the Scottish biographer, essayist, and businessman, Samuel Smiles (1812–1904). Born into the family of a papermaker and shopkeeper, Smiles received a medical degree, worked as a journalist in Leeds, and held several managerial posts in the railroad industry. He wrote biographies, histories, and travel narratives, but achieved worldwide fame through his inspirational books on morality and personal behavior. After it had been rejected by six publishers, his book *Self-Help* (1859) became a bestseller that in the nineteenth century went through dozens of editions and was translated into seventeen languages, including Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese. With an upbeat message that hard work, discipline, and high moral standards guaranteed success, *Self-Help* was followed by *Character* (1871), *Thrift* (1875), and *Duty* (1880). With his life spanning the century that saw the triumph of the middle-class values he championed, he died in 1904 at the age of ninety-three.

In the following excerpt, the first two sections, “Self-Help and Individualism” and “Habits of Successful Men,” are from *Self-Help*, and the third section, “Faults of the Poor,” is from *Thrift*.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Why does Smiles consider government incapable of solving the social and economic problems confronting early industrial England? In his view what should be government's proper role and function?
2. What definition would Smiles offer for the word “individualism”?
3. How would you define the “middle-class ethic” discussed by Smiles? What are its components?
4. According to Smiles, who is responsible for the widespread poverty in England? In his view, what can be done about it?
5. If given a chance to testify before one of the parliamentary committees about the effects of industrialization on the working class, what might Smiles have said?
6. How do Smiles's views resemble and differ from those of Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*? (See source 40.)

SELF-HELP AND INDIVIDUALISM

"Heaven helps those who help themselves" is a well-tried maxim, embodying in a small compass the results of vast human experience. The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigor and strength. . . . Whatever is done *for* men or classes, to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves; and where men are subjected to over-guidance and over-government, the inevitable tendency is to render them comparatively helpless.

Even the best institutions can give a man no active help. Perhaps the most they can do is, to leave him free to develop himself and improve his individual condition. But in all times men have been prone to believe that their happiness and well-being were to be secured by means of institutions rather than by their own conduct. Hence the value of legislation as an agent in human advancement has usually been much overestimated. . . . Moreover, it is every day becoming more clearly understood, that the function of Government is negative and restrictive, rather than positive and active; being resolvable principally into protection — protection of life, liberty, and property. Laws, wisely administered, will secure men in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labor, whether of mind or body, at a comparatively small personal sacrifice; but no laws, however stringent, can make the idle industrious, the thriftless provident, or the drunken sober. Such reforms can only be effected by means of individual action, economy, and self-denial; by better habits, rather than by greater rights. . . .

National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice. What we are accustomed to decry as great social evils, will for the most part be found to be but the outgrowth of man's own perverted life; and though we may endeavor to cut them down and extirpate them by means of Law, they will only spring up again with fresh luxuriance in some other form unless the conditions of personal life

and character are radically improved. If this view be correct, then it follows that the highest patriotism and philanthropy consist, not so much in altering laws and modifying institutions as in helping and stimulating men to elevate and improve themselves by their own free and independent individual action.

HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL MEN

Practical industry, wisely and vigorously applied, always produces its due effects. It carries a man onward, brings out his individual character, and stimulates the action of others. All may not rise equally, yet each, on the whole, very much according to his deserts. . . .

On the whole, it is not good that human nature should have the road of life made too easy. Better to be under the necessity of working hard and faring meanly, than to have every thing done ready to our hand and a pillow of down to repose upon. Indeed, to start in life with comparatively small means seems so necessary as a stimulus to work, that it may almost be set down as one of the conditions essential to success in life. Hence, an eminent judge, when asked what contributed most to success at the bar, replied, "Some succeed by great talent, some by high connections, some by miracle, but the majority by commencing without a shilling."

The necessity of labor may, indeed, be regarded as the main root and spring of all that we call progress in individuals, and civilization in nations; and it is doubtful that any heavier curse could be imposed on a man than the gratification of all his wishes without effort on his part, leaving nothing for his hopes, desires, or struggles. . . .

Attention, application, accuracy, method, punctuality, and dispatch are the principal qualities required for the efficient conduct of business of any sort. . . . They are little things, it is true; but human life is made up of comparative trifles. It is the repetition of little acts which constitutes not only the sum of human character, but which determines the character of

nations. And where men or nations have broken down, it will almost invariably be found that neglect of little things was the rock on which they split. Every human being has duties to be performed, and, therefore, has need of cultivating the capacity for doing them; whether the sphere of action be the management of a household, the conduct of a trade or profession, or the government of a nation. . . .

Men of business are accustomed to quote the maxim that Time is money; but it is more; the proper improvement of it is self-culture, self-improvement, and growth of character. An hour wasted daily on trifles or in indolence, would, if devoted to self-improvements, make an ignorant man wise in a few years, and, employed in good works, would make his life fruitful, and death a harvest of worthy deeds. Fifteen minutes a day devoted to self-improvement, will be felt at the end of the year.

FAULTS OF THE POOR

England is one of the richest countries in the world. Our merchants are enterprising, our manufacturers are industrious, our labourers are hard-working. There is an accumulation of wealth in the country to which past times can offer no parallel. The Bank¹ is gorged with gold. There never was more food in the empire; there never was more money. There is no end to our manufacturing productions, for the steam-engine never tires. And yet, notwithstanding all this wealth, there is an enormous mass of poverty. Close alongside the Wealth of Nations, there gloomily stalks the Misery of Nations, — luxurious ease resting upon a dark background of wretchedness.

Parliamentary reports have again and again revealed to us the miseries endured by certain portions of our working population. They have described the people employed in factories, workshops, mines, and brickfields, as well as in the pursuits of country life. We have tried to grapple

with the evils of their condition by legislation, but it seems to mock us. Those who sink into poverty are fed, but they remain paupers. Those who feed them, feel no compassion; and those who are fed, return no gratitude. . . . Thus the Haves and the Have-nots, the opulent and the indigent, stand at the two extremes of the social scale, and a wide gulf is fixed between them. . . .

With respect to the poorer classes, — what has become of them in the midst of our so-called civilization? An immense proportion of them remain entirely uncivilized. . . .

They work, eat, drink, and sleep: that constitutes their life. They think nothing of providing for tomorrow, or for next week, or for next year. They abandon themselves to their sensual appetites; and make no provision whatever for the future. The thought of adversity, or of coming sorrow, or of the helplessness that comes with years and sickness, never crosses their minds. In these respects, they resemble the savage tribes, who know no better, and do no worse. Like the North American Indians, they debase themselves by the vices which accompany civilization, but make no use whatever of its benefits and advantages. . . .

No one can reproach the English workman with want of industry. He works harder and more skilfully than the workman of any other country; and he might be more comfortable and independent in his circumstances, were he as prudent as he is laborious. . . . In prosperous times they are not accustomed to make provision for adverse times; and when a period of social pressure occurs, they are rarely found more than a few weeks ahead of positive want.

Hence, the skilled workman, unless trained in good habits, may exhibit no higher a life than that of the mere animal; and the earning of increased wages will only furnish him with increased means for indulging in the gratification of his grosser appetites. . . .

This habitual improvidence — though of course there are many admirable exceptions —

¹The Bank of England, England's central bank.

is the real cause of the social degradation of the artisan. This too is the prolific source of social misery. But the misery is entirely the result of human ignorance and self-indulgence. For though the Creator has ordained poverty, the poor are not necessarily, nor as a matter of fact, the miserable. Misery is the result of moral causes, — most commonly of individual vice and improvidence. . . .

Complaining that the laws are bad, and that the taxes are heavy, will not mend matters. Aristocratic government, and the tyranny of masters, are nothing like so injurious as the tyranny of vicious appetites. Men are easily led away by the parade of their miseries, which are for the most part voluntary and self-imposed, — the results of idleness, thriftlessness, intemperance, and misconduct. To blame others for what we suffer, is always more agreeable to our self-pride, than to blame ourselves. But it is perfectly clear that people who live from day to day without plan, without rule, without forethought — who spend all their earnings, without saving anything for the future — are preparing beforehand for inevitable distress. To provide only for the present, is the sure means of sacrificing the future. What

hope can there be for a people whose only maxim seems to be, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"?

All this may seem very hopeless; yet it is not entirely so. The large earnings of the working classes is an important point to start with. The gradual diffusion of education will help them to use, and not abuse, their means of comfortable living. The more extended knowledge of the uses of economy, frugality, and thrift, will help them to spend their lives more soberly, virtuously, and religiously. . . . Social improvement is always very slow. . . . It requires the lapse of generations before its effect can be so much as discerned; for a generation is but as a day in the history of civilization. . . . From the days in which our British progenitors rushed to battle in their war-paint, — or those more recent times when the whole of the labouring people were villeins and serfs, bought and sold with the soil which they tilled, — to the times in which we now live, — how wide the difference, how gratifying the contrast. Surely it ought not to be so difficult to put an end to the Satanic influences of thriftlessness, drunkenness, and improvidence!