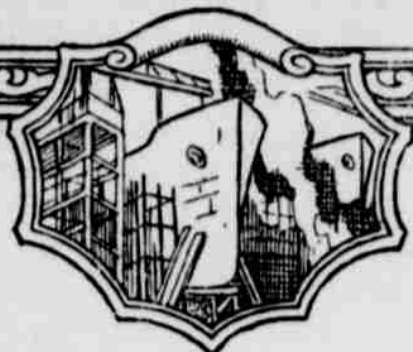


## Mr. Ford's Page



**I**T IS all right to preach thrift to the American people, but it is wrong to put such pressure on them that they will be driven to reduce their standard of living to the level of people who have not yet won their economic freedom. There should be no sordid element in the kind of thrift which is advised for Americans. There should be no forcing down of the substantiality and refinement of the American ideal of what constitutes a decent livelihood. Any condition or movement which tends toward such a result should be regarded with suspicion.

Thrift is all right. Thrift itself is a sign of refinement. Nothing is so certain a sign of immaturity as the spendthrift habit. The sturdy generations which laid the foundations of this nation were thrifty, but they were not stunted. Their spacious houses, their generous social life, their appreciation of the substantial and wholesome good things of life is proof of this. And whether they prospered or whether they just went along an even way, they lived after the same fashion. They did not flaunt their wealth, and even when retrenchment was necessary they retrenched gracefully without injury to the essentials of their life.

It is not money that makes people thriftless, for among the most thriftless are those who have no money; thriftlessness is a state of mind. And it is a state of mind which is induced in people by outside stimulation, for the most part. Because certain strips of cloth, called neckties, which cost as much as a suit of working clothes formerly cost, are being worn, certain types of men feel that they must wear them too, in order to be in the fashion. The intrinsic value of the strip of cloth and the labor put upon it do not justify the price asked, but apparently the willingness of young men to be in the fashion is made to justify anything.

The ease with which money is allowed to go for gew-gaws indicates an infantile conception of the value of money. After all, the only value we can purchase with money is a certain feeling of satisfaction, and there are people who get more satisfaction out of the strip of cloth around the neck—which is worth nothing in exchange—than a substantial sum in the bank which helps to make them independent of the emergencies of fortune.

And so we have whole industries which are constantly dependent on the stimulation of the people to extravagance and a false sense of values. The non-essential industries, which are the industries that serve the vices of the people—the respectable vices as well as the other kind—are the curse of the world. They use up material, they use up labor, they use up the earnings of the worker, but most harmful of all they fix within the mind a condition of helplessness in which it is impossible to distinguish between the necessities of life and its worse than useless adornments. No longer are food, clothing and shelter the basic necessities, but needless and wasteful delicacies, dresses that do not dress and clothing that does not clothe, houses that themselves are show-places more than homes.

If these things added anything to the refinement and beauty of life, nothing could be urged against them; but they make life hard and meaningless, they sap sentiment of its vitality, they are hideous in themselves and ruthless in their demands upon the energies of life. Waste and ostentation are vices of the first degree.

Everybody for a little while seemed carried before the storm of incitement to extravagance. The leeches of society reaped a rich harvest. An organized campaign was made by interests, which it would not be hard to identify, to drive the people to the very limit of slavery to those exorbitant demands which are based on false and feverish desires. Human nature is faulty enough, but it is no longer charged by discerning minds with being guilty of the reign of recklessness from which we are now happily emerging. The incitement to recklessness came as the result of a carefully planned campaign. Unfortunately there are interests whose fortunes depend on the recklessness of the people, just as once there were

interests whose fortunes depended on careful cultivation of the taste for drugs and drink among the people. A sudden reaction occurred, and soon the country was filled with people preaching the opposite extreme. All sorts of odd movements arose. A few people said they would buy no more clothes; they would wear overalls; and a few of them did buy overalls, whereupon the price went up. There was a "cheaper cut" movement among housewives. This in its way was educationally good; there is no reason why the "cheaper cuts" should not be used up along with the less desirable ones; but equally there is no reason why one class should have one cut and another class another. Then there was a brief "Don't eat potatoes" campaign.

All of this would have been good enough had there been a real shortage of these essentials and had it been necessary for everyone to economize a little for the benefit of all. But there was no real shortage. There was plenty of everything which forms the essentials of everyday living.

The danger comes in this, that the people by these means might be beaten down to a lower standard of living, and having been once put there could be kept there, while the exploiters with the stuff thus saved could cajole and cultivate other fields and in time beat them down too, and so reduce the world to a sort of lower class peasantry. Perhaps we Americans eat too much, perhaps we burn too much coal, but curtailment to the proper degree should not be the result of our exploitation by certain classes that also eat and burn too much, but through education in true values.

It is a strange reflection on our social system that in order to bring exploiters to terms the people should be compelled to make a threat of starving themselves or to wear clothing which proclaims a slow rate of social advancement. And the worst of it is that this seems to be their only recourse. The facts are kept from them. The governmental agencies, on which they have a right to depend for protection, fail them. They are bewildered in a maze of explanations which apparently do not agree with the facts at all.

And then there is always the sinister possibility that the whole pressure downward on the scale of living is for a purpose.

One fact comes into clear and clearer light, namely, that no matter how bewildering the situation may be down in the regions where the people live their daily lives, it is perfectly clear in those circles—higher or lower—where control is exercised. This control does not come from a better knowledge of the laws of economics—what those laws are, and how much our artificial system of economics is worth, is always a question. No, the control comes from inhuman cunning joined with the brute power of money, speculatively gained and speculatively used.

If the people were really saving anything when they saved, the case would again be different. But however careful they become in order to escape the pres-

sure, that pressure somehow follows them into the hidden recesses of their thrift and takes from them what they had thought, by denial of extravagance, by stoppage of waste, and by painstaking planning, to reserve for themselves.

However, the new thrift which has actuated the people the last few weeks is making itself felt in profiteering circles, and it may add to the sum of popular knowledge if the people would simply register where prices have made phenomenal falls without any indicated change in the situation which a little while ago was advanced as the cause of high prices. They may mark then where the abuse was most fostered, and they may learn how human foibles and not economic law explain many things.

When, however, thrift is pressed lower and lower yet, until it approaches a peasant standard, it is time for the government to exercise its power, not in threats and promises, but in real acts of protection for the people from the power of speculative brigands.

***IF THERE is any intention of driving the American people back toward peasantry and encouraging them by "thrift" to live on bread and water, it will fail. Thrift does not mean lowering the standard of living, taking the decency and refinement out of life. Thrift means abolishing waste and silly extravagance. It would doubtless suit certain interests if the American people could somehow be driven back to one-room shacks and company rations. That is the spirit of industrial exploitation. Industry can and must be made to yield not only the necessities, but the comforts and securities of life, to the handworker as to the manager. The extravagance of the people is encouraged and stimulated by the very interests that would enslave them. Those who wheedle you out of your money for gaudy nothings are part of the same gang that tries to beat you down in wages.***