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THE
TRIUMPHANT MACHINE
(A Study of Machine Civilisation)

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(A Study of Machine Civilisation)

By
R. M. FOX

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How came this pigmy rabble spun,
After the gods and kings of old,
Upon a tapestry begun
With threads of silver and of gold.

We now are servile to the mean
Who once were slaves unto the proud.
No lordlier life on earth has been
Although the heart be lowlier bowed,
Is there an iron age to be
With beauty but a memory.

A. E.

PREFACE

FROM the standpoint of a man who spent many years of his life as apprentice and journeyman in an engineering workshop, Mr. Fox attempts in this little book to discuss what is, perhaps, the fundamental problem of our civilisation. Anthropologists have occasionally studied the misery which overcomes Africans when they are driven into the mechanical routine of labour on a plantation. Hard work does not injure them, if it is spasmodic, but the monotony of a mechanical round destroys their happiness, and weakens their resistance to disease. One asks, after reading this book, whether in reality the instincts of the white worker of the West are better adapted to the life which the machine age has imposed upon him. The vertiginous pace of mechanical progress seems to have outrun the capacity of man to adapt himself to the new environment which industry has created.

Mr. Fox has the gift of enabling those of us who have escaped this experience in our own lives, to understand what a boy of the working-class feels as he is "broken in" to the discipline of the factory. If he had been content to record his own impressions, one might have supposed that minds less sensitive than his might pass through the ordeal without injury. But his

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observation of the effects of a brutalising routine on the average worker, who has no gift of language to make his loss articulate, is even more convincing than his own personal record. One sees the machine at work, numbing and limiting its human servant.

Here is a problem which lies outside the customary preoccupations of politics. A fairer distribution of wealth would affect it only indirectly. Even the transference of ownership which Socialists demand, from the private capitalist to the community, would not in itself be a solution. In the state workshop the question would still confront us whether the man must adapt himself to the machine, or the machine to the man. We all have our moments of radical despair, in which we are ready to join Tolstoy in returning to the life of the primitive village, and admire the courage of Gandhi, who would tolerate no machine more elaborate than an Indian spindle.

Mr. Fox has been modest in his search for solutions, and one asks at the end whether his suggestions are more than mitigations. The naive belief in the discoveries of Taylorism is already weakening. Intelligent managers realise that the *bonus* system brings with it a moral blight. Factories have been known in which the workers may sing at their work. It is even conceivable that architects may come to design them with some regard, not merely for the comfort, but also for the æsthetic susceptibilities

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of the workers. But Mr. Fox lays stress chiefly on frequent changes in the workers' allotted tasks, a plan which would relieve monotony while it would add to the workers' understanding of the whole process of manufacture. The second essential is that he should at the start be helped in industrial schools to take an intelligent interest in this process. If at the same time the works council should embolden him to feel himself a power in the factory, it is conceivable that, even when he cannot escape repetition work, his attitude to the machine may change, until he thinks of himself rather as its lord than its slave. This may be a sanguine reckoning, but all the reforms which Mr. Fox advocates are good in themselves, and in some degree must have this tendency. The Russians, it is true, have reconciled themselves to machinery with fantastic enthusiasm. But that, they might retort, is because their working-class has conquered and possessed the factory after a stubborn struggle. The machines, at least, are its own. But I confess that this Russian exultation in the power of the machine leaves me sceptical. Mechanism is a novel toy in Russia. Men want it because they do not know it. The root question remains, whether the instincts which interminable centuries of a more various and natural life have bred in us, can in any measurable time adapt themselves to the manufacture of "standardised parts."

H. N. BRAILSFORD.