

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century literary non-fiction

### Source B

This is an extract from a magazine article published in 1845. *Punch* was well known for poking fun at the upper classes, and particularly the politicians of the day. Conditions for labourers (poorer people doing manual, physical work often outdoors) were particularly harsh in this period.

#### “The Health of the Labourer”

The great social difficulty that has beset us in the amelioration of the condition of the labourer, is at length solved. To the DUKE OF RICHMOND, we believe, is to be attributed the happy discovery. Doubtless, when the full success of the plan is made manifest; when throughout the length and breadth of England, its wondrous agency is turning the huts of the labouring poor into abiding-places of substantial comfort – when it is calling smiles into the labourer’s cheek, and putting flesh upon his bones, and giving him the erect hearing and independent look of God’s primest work, – Man; then, we doubt it not, other claimants of the discovery will rise up, contesting with the Noble DUKE OF RICHMOND the originality of that stroke of philanthropic genius which has worked such blessed wonders. It has been so with the inventor of painting; with the discoverer of the motive principle of steam. Be it then our rewarding task at once to claim for RICHMOND his inalienable\* right to the gratitude of England’s labourers. He has discovered the infallible remedy for all their social ills. It is simply this: IT IS TO DRINK THEIR HEALTH.

MR. LANE tells us, that the Egyptian magicians enact their greatest wonders with merely a bowl of water. The DUKE OF RICHMOND performs his benevolent *hocus-pocus* with a glass of wine!

Oh, it is soothing to the soul, wearied and desponding from a contemplation of the crushing ills that press the very manhood out of thousands, to see a nobleman – philanthropic as PROMETHEUS\* – rise in a tavern hall; and with a voice melodious as ten silver trumpets, give – “THE HEALTH OF THE LABOURER!” There is no mistaking the look, the presence of the man. He is rapt, sublimated by the greatness of his mission; by the almost divine power of his discovery.

“THE HEALTH OF THE LABOURER!”

Magical are the syllables! What are they, in truth, but as the words of some spirit-compelling wizard – some political *Prospero*\* – that are no sooner dropt from the lips of the speaker than they arouse a swarm of genii – working vassals of benevolence! – and away they fly to carry on their wings a healing balm to thousands and thousands! So mighty is the necromancy of the toast, that when uttered, it is easy for imagination to behold a very cloud of *Ariels*\* rising from the Freemasons’ Tavern. East, west, north, and south they separate upon their glad mission. Some, carrying loaves – some, meat – some, kegs of nut-brown ale – some, new raiment, - and all of them alighting at the labourer’s fireless hearth, and calling cheerfulness and hope into his face, and making his gaunt wife and pallid little ones smile at the miracle of sudden plenty. What benevolent magic lies in that little sentence, “THE HEALTH OF THE LABOURER!” It is the “Open Sesame” to the heart of the country”.

35 And even when the labourer fails to receive the substantial sweetness of these fairy gifts, it is plain he is largely benefited, though all unconsciously, by the magical toast. Therefore, let him take heart. True it is, he may wither on seven shillings a week; but then, does not a Duke drink his health? and such condescension must more than double the miserable stipend.

40 Consider this, O labourer! It is possible that all day you have wanted food – at night you need shelter and firing. There are sullen thoughts clouding your brain; there is, too, a slow, withering heat at your vitals; night is coming on, and you know not where to lay your head. This, it must be owned, is an uncomfortable plight; nevertheless, you may shake off the misery like an ugly dream; for know, you have been toasted in a London tavern. Yes; at the  
45 Freemasons' the DUKE OF RICHMOND has given – “THE HEALTH OF THE LABOURER!”

You are breaking stones in a Union yard.\* Let the thought of the toast touch your brain with music, and somehow try and hammer on the granite a grateful accompaniment to – “THE HEALTH OF THE LABOURER!”

## Glossary

- \* inalienable – not transferable to another; not capable of being taken away or denied
- \* Prometheus – mythological God who is sometimes credited with creating humankind, or with giving them fire (which enabled progress/civilisation)
- \* Prospero – magical sorcerer from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*
- \* Ariels – in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel is Prospero's spirit slave who carries out his magical works
- \* Union yard – reference to the stone-breaking commonly done by men in Workhouses (where people unable to support themselves lived, often in bad conditions)

This extract is from “The Health of the Labourer” by author unknown in Volume 8 of *Punch* magazine (Jan-June 1845) and the full text of the article can be found online at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/iau.31858029795311?urlappend=%3Bseq=95>

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