

Classic Poetry Series

Stephen Leacock

- poems -

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Oh! Mr. Malthus!

"Mother, Mother, here comes Malthus,
Mother, hold me tight!
Look! It's Mr. Malthus, Mother!
Hide me out of sight."
This was the cry of little Jane
In bed she moaning lay,
Delirious with Stomach Pain,
That would not go away.
All because her small Existence
Over-pressed upon Subsistence;
Human Numbers didn't need her;
Human Effort couldn't feed her.
Little Janie didn't know
The Geometric Ratio.
Poor Wee Janie had never done
Course Economics No. 1;
Never reached in Education
Theories of Population, --
Theories which tend to show
Just how far our Food will go,
Mathematically found
Just enough to go around.
This, my little Jane, is why
Pauper Children have to die.
Pauper Children underfed
Die delirious in Bed;
Thus at Malthus's Command
Match Supply with true Demand.
Jane who should have gently died
Started up and wildly cried, --

"Look, mother, look, he's there again
I see him at the Window Pane,
Father, -- don't let him, -- he's behind
That shadow on the window blind, --"
In vain the anxious parents soothe, --
What can avail their useless Love?
"Darling, lie down again; don't mind;
Branches are moving in the Wind."
With panting Breath, with Eyes that stare,
Again she cries, "He's there, he's there!"
The frightened Parents look, aghast,
Is it that something really passed?
What is it that they seem to scan,
Ghost or Abstraction, Dream or Man? --
That long drawn Face, the cloven Lip,
The crooked Fingers all a-grip,
The sunken Face, cadaverous,
The dress, Ah, God deliver us!
What awful Sacrilege is that?
The Choker and the Shovel Hat,
The Costume black and sinister,

The dress of God's own minister!
What fiend could ever urge a Man
To personate a Clergyman!
The Father strides with angry fist
"Out, out! you damned Economist!"
His wife restrains his threatening Paw, --
"William, it's economic Law!"
She shrieks, -- "Oh William! don't you know
The Geometric Ratio? --
William, God means it for the best
Our Darling's taken! we've transgressed -- "
And crying, "Two times two makes four,"
She crashes swooning to the Floor.
And when her Senses come again
Janie had passed from mortal Pain
And scowling Malthus had moved on
Murm'ring, "That's one more Infant gone,"
To other Windows, one by one; --
Later he came and took their Son.
With Jane and John gone, out of seven,
They kept at five and just broke even.
"Mary," the chastened Father said,
"I feel God's wisdom; two are dead
The world has only food for five,
Quintuplets are the thing that thrive."
She sobbed, -- "We'll do it if we can!
But, oh that awful Malthus Man."

Such is the tale, we have it straight from Wordsworth's pious Pen
He happened to be out, not late, just after sunset, when
He met a little cottage Girl, she was eight years old, (she said),
Her Hair was thick, he saw, with Curls that clustered on her Head;
And he recalls in pious Verse the Interview she gave
While sitting eating Porridge on her Sister Janie's Grave,
Reciting with her Baby Voice and placid Infant's Breath
The orthodox complacent Thought on pauper Children's death;
And thus the plump and happy Child, her Belly full of food,
Drowsy with Sunset Porridge smiled, -- the World was pretty good.
With her little Belly fully
Satisfied, her Mind got woolly;
She was just like all the rest
Couldn't stand an acid Test,
Took her thoughts too near the Place
Where Digestion had its Base.
What the Child mistook for Knowledge
Just fresh air and lots of Porridge, --
Here is where Biology
Moves into Ontology.

But Willie, Willie Wordsworth, if again you walk the Street
Just meet a little Cottage Girl, and get the thing complete.
You'll find her just as charming as a Child upon a Grave,

And her Hair in Curl is permanent with what she calls a Wave.
She needs no babbling Innocence, no baby Words to show,
The danger spots of little Tots in moving Ratio.
That population is a Thing that all the world must shun,
She'll show you as a Theorem in Economics One, --
At least until four years ago, when all the World went crack
And all the world got overfed, and all the World got slack.
And by the Bump we call the Slump, Production's Force was torn
And Coffee Beans went up in Flames beside ungathered Corn
And Melons floated out to Sea and Hogs were left unborn,
And beer rolled down the Tennessee and California Wine
Was used as Blood for Hollywood, and Rye thrown in the Rhine
And Super-Products in a Stack, --
But stop, a bit, we must turn back.

Turn back to Malthus as he walked o'er English Fields and Downs
And walked at night the crooked Streets of crooked English Towns,
Lifeless, undying, Shade or Man, as one that could not die
A hundred years his Shadow fell, a hundred Years to lie,
The Shadow on the Window Pane when Malthus' Ghost went by.

He chuckled as he passed at night God's Acre filled with Dead;
The little Graves were packed as tight as Paupers in a Bed.
But he never heard the little wings that rustled overhead,
Or heard the Voices in the Air
Of unborn Souls lamenting there.

He wandered in the Summer Lanes when all the World was green,
And he never heard the Wedding Bells of Brides that might have been,
Tall English Flowers that drooped and fell and withered on the stem,
Victims of Malthus' evil Spell, -- what should he know of them?
In rustled Silk and Lavender the Garden Path they trod
And listened where the Hollyhocks and tall Delphiniums nod,
And whisper to the blushing Face behind the Bonnet hid,
Of Wedding Bells that were to ring, -- that were, but never did.
And he never knew the empty Homes with angry Quarrels rent,
He never knew the blighted Souls, out of their Nature bent,
The blighted life of Man and Wife where Children are not sent,
And Love's Illusion wears away
And Single Self comes back to stay.

He scowled to see the Working Class was disobedient still,
The teaching that the Gentry grasped was lost on Jane and Bill,
And round the Slum
The Children come,
As Children ever will.

In vain upon the Brain of Jane and Bill was cast the Thought
That Hope of Social Gain was nil and Poverty their lot,
That social Betterment could not
Permit a Baby in the Cot.
"All right," says Bill, "we'll have them still,"

And Jane she said, "Whoi not?"
"I likes to see 'em, reverend sir,
A crawling round, and so does her;
We're not like Gentry Folks, you see,
There ain't much else for her and me."

And all the while the World roared on, each Decade passing by,
Machine and Power and glowing Sun to Malthus gave the Lie.
The silly Pedants could not see
Man's Food grows faster far than he.
The Wheat Plant easily can grow
A hundred grains per Seed
Three times a year, what, Baker, Ho!
How much is it you need?
One Buckwheat Pancake, only one,
Swells in three months to half a ton.
The Barley of a single Year
Would turn the Rhine to Lager Beer.
The oyster with a million Lives,
If each potential Oyster thrives,
As with Encouragement they do,
Can turn the World to Oyster Stew,
Our social Future only wants
Bigger and Brighter Restaurants.

Thus from a hundred dusty Chairs in dusty Schools of Thought,
Professors' talks with Boards and Chalks the Work of Malthus taught,
Explained the social Danger hid
In each superfluous extra Kid.
Each Decade as it moved along
Rehearsed the wearisome Sing Song.
"When Numbers on Subsistence press then Wages cannot rise,
Humanity is in Distress because it multiplies.
No hope of social Betterment can ever be made good
Because the Wicked Working Class will eat up all the Food.
So if the Poor are here to stay
We need not worry anyway,
And Patati et Patata
And Quack, quack, quack, and there you are!"

With every Decade more and more two Giant Forms were seen
To stride across the Universe as Power and as Machine,
And little Man beside them ran, knee-high he ran between,
All ignorant he was of why,
Or what these Things might mean.
Their Eyes of Brass, their Arms of Steel,
That Grip and Drive the Plunging Wheel,
That tear the Forest, burst the Soil,
And make the cloven Ocean boil,
Turn the white torrent's foaming Might
To strike with Death or blaze with Light.
-- What is the meaning, Little Man,

And have you got your little Plan?
"Ask teacher?" My dear sir, alack!
Your Teacher only says, "Quack, quack."

Thus forward drove the World, divorced from any one Control,
Each Man might grasp a little Part, no man could view the Whole.
The Giants drove it like the Wind
And Little Man clung on behind,
Picture of Terror and Despair
His Coat Tails flying in the Air.
Faster and faster, on they sped,
Machine and Power went mad, saw red,
On Little Man fell their Attack
And smashed his World to Bric-a-brac, --
Broke it with War and at its Cease,
They turned and broke it worse with Peace,
Broke it with overwork, and then, with myriads of Workless Men;
Starved it with Want, then changed their Clutch and choked the World with Overmuch.
And when their Rage had spent its Shocks,
Left little Man upon the Rocks
Of Economic Paradox.

His mournful Face and weeping Eyes
Look on his World in mild Surprise,
See Milk on the Potomac roll
And milkless Children on the Dole,
A crazy World it seems, grotesque,
Where all his Theory is Burlesque,
All jig-saw Bits,
Where nothing Fits
So there he sits
Bereft of Wits, --
And murmurs through his little Hat,
"Will someone tell me where I'm at?"

Start once again, O Little Man!
Remember, when you first began,
What a determined Cuss you were
And how your Efforts made a Stir;
Recall again through Time's dim haze
The dear old Neolithic Days!
With bed-room Exercise your Shape
You raised above the Common Ape.
You muttered to yourself, "They'll see!
There's no Ourang-Outang in me."
You practised every manual Trick, --
Like how to use a pointed Stick,
Bent down a Bough and let it go
And grasped the notion of a Bow.
Deep-seated in a Cocoa-tree,
You learned to count as far as three;
Moved into Theory, went higher,

And saw that Heat was got from Fire.
You did not know it, but you were
The first Research Professor, sir,
Contained, within your hairy Body,
A noble Rutherford or Soddy.
Nay, -- what is more, -- your Lot was rude
But showed the College attitude,
You made it an unswerving Rule
To disregard the Common Fool,
You overlooked the silly chaff
Of Laughing Jackass, gay Giraffe,
You heeded not the caustic Smile
Of Dinosaur or Crocodile,
Passed undisturbed the Ridicule
Of comic Crow or haw-haw Mule, --
In short, in Culture's earliest Span
You acted like an Oxford Man.
Their Idleness soon proved their Loss;
You made yourself Creation's Boss
Do it again, -- see what I mean? --
Come Little Man! Beat the Machine.
You that the Pterodactyl slew, --
Show this new Demon who is who!

And first you have to throw away
The stuff that led you all astray.
Numbers are not the Bane of Man
And numbers never yet outran, --
... Go think it out; I'm sure you can.
For want and Poverty may come to empty Prairie, crowded Slum, --
Enough, enough -- it's quite enough,
Get rid of all the Malthus Stuff. --

Let's seek the Shade of Malthus out from where he walks at Night,
And bring him up for Punishment, -- It certainly seems right;
He that misled a hundred Years Man's Footsteps from his Path, --
That turned our Household Joy to Tears, -- how shall he feel our Wrath?
Shall boiling Oil reduce his Flesh to Chicken à la King,
Would molten Lead upon his Head be pretty much the Thing?
Ah, no! not bye-gone Cruelty his erring Soul shall harry,
We'll fit the Punishment to Crime, make Mr. Malthus marry.
Ho! Reverend Robert, come and doff
That cleric suit; yes, take it off, --
Nay, never mind the leather Face
The faded parchment skin,
Come, stand up, Robert, chuck a Brace,
Another life begin!

We'll dress him all in Love's Attire our great grandfathers knew
As one who led a Bride to wed the Year of Waterloo.
Behold the Sandy Beaver Hat, the Sandy-coloured Suit
The gorgeous Vest, the high Cravat, the glowing Hessian Boot!

Enormous Buttons, made of Horn,
Our Wedding Bridegroom shall adorn.
O! Hear the Bells -- that ring Ding, Dong,
For Malthus Euthalameon,
Pop-u-la-tion for the Na-tion
Spells and tells its long sal-va-tion.

Now hold the Chime a little Time,
Malthus, the ringers stand beside
And let us go and bring the Bride.
She stands upon the Garden Path where she was wont to tread,
Eternal flowers, that know not Death, still nod beside her head.
In rustled Silk and Lavender, a hundred Years alone,
Is it in Truth a Maiden's Form, or withered Frame of Bone?
Seek not the hooded Face to scan where hides the drooping Head
Perchance the Curls lie damp upon the Features of the Dead;
Perchance in place of glowing Life, now desiccated, null,
Earth's final Parody of Love, the Simpering of a Skull.

Or Maid, or Ghost, or Pictured Fate
Let her be what she may,
We bring her forth to join her Mate
This Golden Wedding Day.

Moving before us,
Singing in Chorus,
Golden and Glorious,
Time honoured Lay,
Of wearing a Bonnet,
A blue ribbon on it,
On a Golden Wedding Day.

<i> Bring on the same old Thesis
Of how Man Increases
As the Clover Blossoms blow.
And we'll sing such Pieces
Till we get Paresis
And we go where Ratios go.

For if Man increases
If he never, never ceases
If he never, never says, "Go Slow!"
If he will not let the Pop-stop
Why then, ergo, there's a drop-stop
But it's all right -- Let er -- go.</i>

Stephen Leacock

The Social Plan

I know a very tiresome Man
Who keeps on saying, "Social Plan."
At every Dinner, every Talk
Where Men foregather, eat or walk,
No matter where, -- this Awful Man
Brings on his goddam Social Plan.

The Fall in Wheat, the Rise in Bread,
The social Breakers dead ahead,
The Economic Paradox
That drives the Nation on the rocks,
The Wheels that false Abundance clogs --
And frightens us from raising Hogs, --
This dreary field, the Gloomy Man
Surveys and hiccoughs, Social Plan.

Till simpler Men begin to find
His croaking aggravates their mind,
And makes them anxious to avoid
All mention of the Unemployed,
And leads them even to abhor
The People called Deserving Poor.
For me, my sympathies now pass
To the poor Plutocratic Class.
The Crowd that now appeals to me
Is what he calls the Bourgeoisie.

So I have got a Social Plan
To take him by the Neck,
And lock him in a Luggage van
And tie on it a check,
Marked MOSCOW VIA TURKESTAN,
Now, how's that for a Social Plan?

Stephen Leacock