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REV. JAMES I. VANCE

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SERIES

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Simplicity in Life

BY

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"The simplicity that is in Christ."—*Saint Paul*.

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SIMPLIFY!

From one of the peaceful villages in the Vosges a preacher has come to Paris. His name is Charles Wagner. His theme is "The Simple Life"; and no hall in that gay and giddy city of shams and artificialities, of complexities and sophistications, is large enough to hold the audiences which come to hear him preach.

Charles Wagner's father was a village preacher, as was his father's father. His paternal and maternal ancestors for generations have belonged to the same simple folk. He declares that he has had to unlearn their hard theologies and dismiss some of their narrow views of God; but he has retained their simplicity, and carried some of the crystal beauty and limpid sparkle of the streams which flow through the valleys of the Vosges into the turgid

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river of the city's life, and the people crowd the banks to dip a cup from the mountain waters and slake their thirst.

Wagner has published some of his sermons in a little volume called *The Simple Life*, in which he strikes a chord to which more than a Parisian audience will give a grateful hearing. He is sounding a return to that for which Paul pleaded long ago, in a letter to the people dwelling in another city of shams and artificialities, of complexities and sophistications. What Wagner is saying in Paris, Paul said to Corinth when he urged a return to "the simplicity that is in Christ."* Both men have a message our age needs sorely to lay to heart.

COMPLEXITY

Human life to-day is most complex. This fact confronts us in whatever direction we may turn.

* 2 Cor. 11: 8.

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We have vastly increased our facilities for living. We have finer cities, better paved streets, more imposing public buildings, elaborate systems of water works and sewerage, elevated and subway trains, skyscrapers beside which the tower of Babel is tame, scientific preparation of food, artistic tailoring, and schools with palatial equipments and fabulous endowments and bewildering faculties. Our facilities for living have increased, until the story of them reads like a tale of fairy land.

But we have not measurably increased the satisfaction of living. We have not added, by all this, to the happiness or goodness of human life. We have not made it less difficult to achieve integrity, fraternity, virility. It is as hard as it ever was to be unselfish and kind, contented and courageous. It is as hard to have friends, to bring up children, to meet the varied demands of life. All of our increased facilities

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have not made easier the problem of living nor cheapened the expense of dying.

Indeed they seem to have increased the burden. They have not changed either the traveler or his route. They have merely multiplied his baggage.

Artificiality has grown apace. Conventionalism has become insolent. Appearance has been enthroned as the criterion. Shams have multiplied. Simplicity has departed. Amid all this bewildering complexity, the dignity of unadorned and genuine manhood has been eclipsed, and self-respect has been retired to make room for the admiration of the baggage. The man has gone down before his trunk.

Consider for a moment the social side of life. We never enjoyed ampler facilities for meeting each other. The transportation problem, which is fundamental to the development of society, is completely solved. Yet it was never

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such a task to meet people. It was never more of a burden to know people. Social duties were never more exacting. Entertainment was never so exhausting and expensive. People must needs flee the town six months in the year to escape their social duties. Instead of the occasion of heartfelt hospitality or the hour of unadorned friendship, there are ten days of stirring preparation, during which the host is on the brink of collapse from nervous strain. Then a *function*. Then two weeks of absolute rest, during which the worn-out system seeks recuperation. Simplicity has departed from our social life.

The same bewildering complexity stares us when we consider the cause of education. There was a time when the subject of education was measurably simple. The ordinary mind could at least understand what was meant by the curriculum; but now what end-

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less tickets are offered, what confusing courses, what numberless varieties of routes to the goal of degrees. In the *Educational Review*, Mr. Wilson Farrant, Headmaster of the Newark Academy, has published a suggestive and able article on "The Existing Relations between School and College." Let me quote a paragraph from that article, bearing on the subject before us. In speaking of the lower schools, the writer says:

There seems to be a growing belief in the omnipotence of education. Every fault in our individual and collective nature is ascribed to defective education, and the weaknesses of heredity and environment that the kindergarten does not profess to overcome are calmly turned over to the school to remedy. When one stops to combine and collate the various theories propounded in our newspapers, at our Mothers' Clubs, and at our Teachers' Institutes, one is filled with awe.

It is not enough that the child should learn to handle skillfully the tools of all

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learning—the three R's; his sense of form and his æsthetic nature must be developed by drawing; his hand must be trained by manual work; his musical nature must be awakened by song; he must be brought into harmony with his external environment by means of nature lessons and the study of science; his patriotic impulse must be roused by the study of American history and by flag drills; temperance must be instilled into him by lessons in physiology with special reference to the effects of alcohol on the human system; his imagination must be cultivated by means of acquaintance with Greek and Norse mythology; he should gain some knowledge of the great heroes and events of general history; through the plentiful reading of masterpieces he should acquire a love for and an appreciation of the best literature, while at the same time his mind should be stocked with choice gems of prose and poetry that will be a solace and a comfort to him throughout his later life; it will be well if by displacing a little arithmetic or geography he can gain some knowledge of the elements of Latin or of a modern language; in some manner there should be roused in him a love for trees, a

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respect for birds, an antipathy to cigarettes, and an ambition for clean streets; and somewhere, somewhere in this wild chaos, he must learn to spell! All these things, together with sewing, cooking, carpentry, principles of morality, and gymnastic exercise can easily be acquired in the grammar grades, provided only we have good teaching and proper economy of effort. Do you wonder that sometimes teachers in progressive schools confide to us that they fear their pupils are slightly bewildered? Do you wonder that pupils do not gain the habit and the power of concentrated, consecutive work?

This is the state of things in many of the lower schools, and when we reach what is termed "the higher branches" the complexity increases, just as it does the higher you go into the branches of a tree.

The condition of a pupil to-day amid all this educational bewilderment is very like that of a starfish, floating helplessly in its environment, and trying to capture the whole round horizon

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by throwing out not very well organized members in all directions. It were better for him to be built on the plan of the virile, agile bass, going with swift, deft stroke toward a sought goal. It is something to be educated; it is better to be "educated for something."

Even religion, which should be of all things the most simple, has caught the disease of manifolding itself, until it has elaborated so intricately and extensively, not only its creeds and rubrics and rituals, but its schemes for spiritual culture, its machineries and methods for propagating the faith, its conventions of all sizes and colors for all classes and ages and places, that even an archangel might well hesitate to enter the labyrinth without an experienced guide.

Amid all this complexity, struggle was never fiercer. It is not a struggle for necessities so much as for superfluities. The Master's admonition

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was: "Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" There never was a time when we had more to eat, and yet the food question was never so complicated. There never was a time when we had more to drink, and yet the drink question was never so annoying. There never was a time when we had more to wear, and yet the question of clothes was never so perplexing. The struggle is not a battle for what life needs to sustain it; but a competition incited by passion for gain, or love of show. We are spending ourselves on the baggage and forgetting the scenery along the route and neglecting the friends who come down to meet us or who share with us the journey.

A gentleman residing on Lake Chau-tauqua, one day saw an eagle suddenly sweep from the sky to the water and emerge with a fish, weighing about ten

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pounds. There was a clash of fins and feathers, and then the eagle, with the fish in its claws, began soaring. When it reached an altitude of about a thousand feet, it stopped and began to descend, slowly at first, then more rapidly, until it struck the water. Shortly afterward, bird and fish were picked up dead. The fish had evidently been too heavy for the eagle, but unable to extricate its claws, the exhausted bird had been dragged down and drowned by its prey. It is a picture of much of human life to-day. We are weighed down by the things we seek, and drowned by our success, defeated by our victories.

It would be a great blessing if we could simplify and get rid of some of the baggage. It would be a vast improvement if in society we could have less function and more friendship, if in education we could have fewer fads and more force, if in the church we

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could have less machinery and more religion. It would be a decided gain if we could spend less time on food and drink and clothes, and more on life. A lady said to me the other day, "My idea of heaven is that of a place, where I shall need but one robe and that will be ready-made." Doubtless there are many who would hail with gladness a deliverance from the distractions of clothes. We should be happier if we could be rid of some of the baggage. That is all it is; this show and parade of things, this fuss and feathers, this hurry and bustle and struggle—it is mere baggage. Why spend your life in a trunk room or a baggage car, when you may get out in the open fields and under the trees and hear the birds sing and see the sunshine?

SIMPLICITY

We should seek simplicity in life.
We should get the man on top again.

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I do not mean that we are to discredit civilization, but we need not deify it. It is not necessary to live in a hat box and have no change of clothing to reach simplicity. The dignity of life may reside in palace or hut, but wherever it is, it must refuse to get down on its face before the inanimate. We must rate the man above his wardrobe and locate the center of being elsewhere than in the organs of digestion.

I am not pleading for a return to primitive ways of thinking and living. I am not urging that we discard the railroad train and go back to the stage coach; that we smash our electric lights and return to the tallow dip; that we tear out our facilities for bathing, heating and cooking, and reside in the hut of the savage; that we substitute the old field school for the university, and invade the drawing-room with the frontier. Simplicity does not consist in wiping out civilization.

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It does mean getting up off your knees from before civilization. It means treating civilization as a servant and not as a master. It means thinking more of the traveler than of the stuff he has in the baggage car, more of the destination than of the method of transportation. All of this surrender to complexity is a sign of littleness. It is a mark of inferiority, an evidence of defeat. It is allowing the driver of a commissary cart to dictate to the general of the army. True greatness and simplicity live together. The greatest in art and the greatest in character, like the greatest in nature, is simple. He who lives a simple life has already learned to live a great life.

It was this kind of life Christ lived. Jesus had very little baggage. "The Son of Man had not where to lay His head." Christ was great in His simplicity. He was easily approached. The wisest of earth felt that in His

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presence they were before a Master, and yet the plain people and the children could understand Him. Things did not hinder Him, much less wear Him out. When asked about His kingdom, He declared its simplicity by setting a child before them and saying, "Of such is the kingdom." He drew His lessons from the sources of simplicity, nature, birds, flowers, the common life. As we think of the way He lived, the picture which rises before us is one of pastoral simplicity. He is by the lake, in the fields, beside the well, on the streets of the villages, mingling with the people, talking in an unaffected way with His disciples, comforting any in trouble, healing the sick, not hindered by conventionality nor restrained by custom. It was the simple life.

Paul says we should get back to it. Perhaps he does not mean that we should copy literally Christ's program ;

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although it would be a happy reform if the drift could be changed from the city to the country and more people live in contact with nature. The crowding of human lives in congested cities adds to the conditions of complexity. The farther we go from nature, the easier it is to be artificial. But whether we be urbanites or ruralites, we can adopt the ideals which governed Jesus. As we do, we shall be coming to "the simplicity that is in Christ," and achieving simplicity in life.

THE ROADS TO SIMPLICITY

There are at least three things which Paul must have had in mind in writing of Christ's simplicity, and which may be called "the roads to the simple life."

I

First, be natural. Be yourself. Be unaffected. Be genuine.

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Not a little of the burden comes from the fact that you are trying to be some one else. You are trying to do as your neighbor, and make your style of living and scale of expenditure as elaborate. You want to keep up with the procession and maintain appearances. You go beyond your income in order to equal or eclipse your fellow traveler.

Why do it? Why badger your life for so trifling a cause? Why tax your purse for so empty a triumph? When one trunk is all you want, why have thirteen merely because Mrs. Lumber-ton has twelve? Why make yourself unhappy over new clothes when the old suit you? Why do that which is positively distasteful to you, merely because it is expected? Rise up and assert your freedom. You are not in the world to be a slave. Why sacrifice yourself on the altar of so small a god as custom?

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Be natural. Do not try to be that which you are not. The violet is making a mistake that tries to be a sunflower. The myrtle bush is a silly shrub that tries to pose as a fir tree. A canary is a fool for wanting to be a pelican.

Be yourself. It is the easiest way to be happy. Speak in a natural tone of voice and with unaffected accent; dress in such a way as not to attract attention; act in a natural way without being scared by conventionalisms or intimidated by artificialities.

Be yourself. God made you as you are, and He does not expect you to duplicate your neighbor. Man is not an ape. Life is too short to spoil it moping over the fact that you have only half as much stuff in the baggage car as your neighbor across the aisle.

It requires courage to be natural, and not a little common sense. A man of large means who insists on living in

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a simple way will have some one call him "mean." A woman who refuses to wear herself out with all sorts of social extravagances will be dubbed "eccentric."

The bravest man is not always he who becomes a warrior and carries a gun. The highest courage is not necessarily in the field of struggle where brawn and brain toil to acquire thrift. It is perhaps a higher quality of courage than either of these, to defy appearances and be true to yourself. Insolent occasions threaten to crush those who refuse to yield. Insinuating expediency sounds its alarms or whispers its lullabies to soothe conscience to sleep. There is the terror of public criticism, and the scorn which is always heaped on the head of a man who is brave enough to be singular. It requires a high quality of courage, before all this, to have a decent self-respect, and keep faith with your own

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inner convictions of fitness and duty.

Circumstances are insolent and they crowd and crush and command and condemn. It takes an independent spirit to stand up in their face and refuse to be other than yourself. But the joy of being yourself, of talking in a natural way, of rising above the babel of shams and the confusion of conventionalisms and being free, is worth all it costs.

This is the first thing Paul meant by "the simplicity that is in Christ." Christ was supernatural, but He was something else not less great—He was natural.

II

Along with being natural, *let us value the dignity of life as against the importance of things.*

Every now and then some one, gone mad with the distemper of despair, writes an interrogation mark after ex-

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istence and asks, "Is life worth living?" Why should not life be worth living? Animate existence is better than pulseless dust. Just to be alive in such a world as this is a boon. What a beautiful world it is! Man cannot paint its matchless tints nor adequately describe its faultless symmetries. After the painter has done his best, a sunset flies his brush, a morning sky baffles his art. After orators have spoken and singers have sung the world's beauty, birds and brooks discount human music, and heavens declare God's glory. Why should the tenant of such a world fall down in pessimism and ask, "Is life worth living?"

Living in such a world, enriched by all the achievements of invention and discovery, blessed with all the opportunities of a splendid era, dowered with all the past and heir to all the future, enjoying the finest fruits of

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freedom, and with a peerless chance to seek and have the best, why should life be deemed a burden too great to bear?

Nevertheless it is. Well-gowned women and prosperous, cynical men, who have about all the material world can offer, become inexpressibly bored with life and unutterably weary of existence. They find no delight in pleasure, no zest in work, no satisfaction in friendship. Some say they would end the farce and quit the game, but they lack the nerve. Ever and again there is a pistol shot, a fatal drug, a desperate plunge, and one more unfortunate has said, as the curtain falls in the middle of the scene: "Life is not worth living."

What creates the doubt which discredits life? What raises the question? What is the explanation of this horrible nightmare whose fateful finale is self-murder? Surely one must have

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blundered terribly in the experiment of living.

It is no explanation to cite the hardships and calamities of life. There are innumerable instances of people who suffer the worst of the hard side of life, but never doubt its priceless value. Martyrs chant the Magnificat at the stake; dire poverty cries, "I have all things and abound"; obscurity is happy in a cabin; and affliction sings in the night. On the other hand, the pessimistic wail is heard, coming from the lips of those who seem freest from hardship and are most plentifully provided with the things which minister to creature comfort.

The real explanation of the cynicism which asks, "Is life worth living?" will be found in the sacrifice of the dignity of life to the insolence of things. Life is not worth living to people who abuse it, squander it, destroy it, or even

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neglect it. It is not worth living to a man who thinks more of his clothes than himself. People who are wearing out life for pictures, vases, dinings, city houses and country places, wonder why they get so little out of life. They starve themselves near to death and are surprised that they are hungry. They make life cringe to an ignoble master, and wonder that it cuts so sorry a figure.

It were as easy to feed a starving man on scenery as life on a diet of clothes, equipage and establishment. The man who lives for his breakfast degrades life. The woman who lives for her wardrobe, shames life. Man must have a breakfast and woman some clothes, but "the life is more than meat and the body than raiment." There are aspirations which soar beyond the dining-room and the tailor's parlor, and to quench these is to make life not worth living. We need a fresh

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vision of the not only unsurpassed but unequalled dignity of unadorned, undecorated, ununiformed, unbadged, untitled human life. Wagner somewhere says that it is not wise to spend more on the frame than on the picture. Yet this is precisely what much of modern living amounts to. It is not making a picture, but adorning a frame. We are garnishing our surroundings. It is a question of furniture and styles, of diet and clothes, rather than of manhood. This is as far as much of our improved civilization goes. It is improved transportation, sanitation, education; but how about the man? The man is the picture, all the rest is frame. "The worth of a civilization is the worth of the man at its center," says the Paris preacher. The meanest man is a value before which all values represented in things fall into insignificance. In a recent issue of the *Inde-*

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pendent, Alfred Russel Wallace, the surviving member of that distinguished quintette of scientists, the other members of which were Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Tyndal, has a long and exceedingly interesting article, in which he argues, on purely scientific grounds, that our planet is the only one inhabited, and that all solar and stellar systems are arranged with reference to the production and existence of intelligent life on the planet Earth. If his argument be true, the Creator has expressed the value of a human life in terms of the universe. It is an amazing proposition. But whether the argument of Mr. Wallace be sound or not, God has expressed the value of a human life in even vaster terms. When He gave His Son to die for the least and meanest of men, God expressed the value of a human life, not in terms of His works, but in terms of Himself. He defined man in terms of

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God. What beggary to surrender to things!

Muretus, a distinguished Frenchman of the sixteenth century, was a man of homely and unimposing physical appearance. While on a journey, he was taken ill and carried to a hospital where he was unknown. His sickness was uncommon and the physicians determined to experiment. Supposing the patient could not understand him, one doctor said in Latin, "Surely we may venture to try an experiment on the body of so mean a man." "Mean, sirs!" cried Muretus, speaking to their great surprise in the Latin also. "How dare you call any man mean for whom the Savior of the world did not think it beneath Him to die?"

Let us respect the man. No matter what his food, drink, clothes, house, calling, station, let us respect the man rather than his baggage. This is getting back to the simplicity that is in

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Christ. Jesus was not interested in the frame. He cared nothing whether the man was rich or poor, whether he sat on a throne or lived in the streets. On one side of Jericho He met a blind beggar and on the other a rich publican. He was as gracious to Bartimæus as to Zaccheus. He saw in every man the image of the Father; and that vision made things trifles.

III

The third road to simplicity is faith. Believe in yourself and be natural. Believe in the dignity of life, in the worth of the race and quit adoring things. Then believe in something above you and beyond the race. Believe in God. Respect the infinite; seek the invisible. That beggars the baggage.

The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; it is not clothes and parlor furniture, palace cars and electric lights,

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predigested food and barbaric social functions. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. It is character, serenity of mind, communion with God. It is not baggage, but life. It is not chattels, but "treasures in heaven, where moth and rust doth not corrupt, and thieves do not break through nor steal." It should be no humiliation to bow in the presence of the infinite, and reverence the eternal. One should not decline to quench his thirst at a spring because he cannot drink it dry. He should not refuse to trust God because he cannot explain Him. The life of faith is the simple life. It takes no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.

This is the climax of Paul's message about simplicity. The simplicity of Christ was the result of His belief in spiritual verities and eternal realities.

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He dwelt in the constant presence of His Father in heaven, and life's complexities could not entangle Him.

Christ makes life worth living. He gives it the right location. The kingdom is within you. One is living, not as he piles higher his table, stuffs fuller his wardrobe, adds to his houses and lands a widening estate, but as he furnishes his soul with patience, calmness, serenity, purity, generosity, charity, unselfishness. Life is not measured by yardsticks nor weighed in scales. It is not what one has, but what he is that makes life. This emancipates from the drudgery of things and enthrones life above environment.

Then Christ gives to life its right vocation. The business of life is to share with others whatever you have that helps and whatever they have that hurts. This partnership multiplies the things which help and mini-

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mizes the things which hurt. It is the way Christ lived. He never tried to protect Himself against people. He was not afraid of their touching Him or crowding Him. He taught human brotherhood and kindled His joy at the fireside of the happiness of others. The true road to happiness is the road that leads into another life. The people are miserable who build barriers and dwell in barracks. Christianity is not separation but communion; not egoism but fraternity.

To a woman who was trying to tell her how to become an angel in heaven, a practical little lass said: "But I do not want to be an angel in heaven, I want to be an angel down here in the dirt." This is the truer vocation for life, and he who goes with a clean motive and a kind hand to the world's sin and want will no more soil his robes than Christ did His. The life of sacrifice is the finest expression of faith in

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the invisible. Whosoever will lose his life shall save it.

“Thy love shall chant its own beatitudes
After its own life-working. A child's kiss
Set on thy singing lips shall make thee
glad;
A poor man served by thee shall make thee
rich;
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee
strong;
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou renderest.”*

Having given life the right location and the right vocation, Christ gives it the right outlook. He opens the window on eternity. Man is a born hunter. He must ever be seeking something better than he has. For him to reach the limit of aspiration and feel there is no more beyond, is to enter the house of despair. One may have all the staples of the present,—money, genius, culture, art, but if he

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

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is without hope, he lives in the shadow. On the other hand, he may have plain fare and a low roof, but if his is the sky of hope, nothing can throw him down into despair.

These were the values represented by Christ's faith in the invisible,—character, service, and immortal hope. Each is a zone of the simple life, and to have this faith is to achieve the simplicity that is in Christ.

Therefore the call to the simple life is just a call back to Christ, or perhaps we should better say, on to Christ and up to Christ.

Prisoner, would you like to be free?
Captive, caught in the meshes of life's complexities, would you like to be free?
Man, harnessed to the truck of care loaded to the limit and creaking with its burden, driven under lash by day and by night, would you like to be free?
Woman, with nerves disordered and machinery of life going to pieces under

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the strain of trying to do all this shallow, artificial, hypocritical world expects of you, would you like to be free? Then, be free! Simplify your baggage. Go on to the simplicity that is in Christ. Shake off that which is artificial. Stamp on shams. Be yourself; respect life more than things; trust the God who, having made you, cannot desert you without dishonoring Himself, and be emancipated!