



# Anthony Ashley Cooper (Earl of Shaftesbury)

1801 – 1885

“There are not two hours in the day but I think of the second advent of our Lord. That is the hope of the Church, for Israel, and the world. Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.”

Like many who eagerly anticipate the day of our Lord’s appearing Shaftesbury was riveted to *this* world and its relentless suffering. Haunted by the barbarous exploitation of children, the formally attired, forty-two year old politician was seen stepping into the unprotected bucket at the end of a single cable which lowered him 450 feet to the mine floor. Only weeks earlier a child assigned to apply the brake had left his post to chase a mouse; the bucket had plummeted and crashed, killing the miners descending in it. Once in the mine Shaftesbury found children hunched over on all fours, struggling to push loaded coal-carts. Some coal-seams were so narrow that only a small boy, lying on his back and wielding an undersized pick, could extract coal from the face. Most of these boys grew up deformed.

Shaftesbury was born to the aristocracy and was never without the privileges belonging to it. Nonetheless one incident in particular impelled him to spend himself on behalf of those who would never appear in his social class. Walking through a shabby area of London he came upon several intoxicated men who were carrying the crude sort of coffin used by the poorest. As they lurched toward the ceme-

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tery one fellow stumbled; the rest fumbled the casket, swearing uproariously. Shaftesbury was appalled that the remains of anyone could be subject to such indignity. On the spot he vowed to give himself to living wretches whose indignity was worse.

Following an Oxford University degree in classics he was elected to the House of Commons. Soon the young Member of Parliament was assigned to a sub-committee charged with investigating "Pauper Lunatics" and "Lunatic Asylums." He found deranged people incontinent, confined to "crib-rooms" consisting of large wooden boxes stuffed with straw. (It was easier to replace straw than to change adults' diapers.) Winter and summer the ill were taken outside and swabbed by an attendant wielding a long-handled mop.

For Shaftesbury the only consideration was what was *right*. If upholding the right resulting in social disruption, then disruption there had to be. When British officials excused their silence (lest riots ensue) about the Indian custom of a widow throwing herself on the fire consuming her dead husband's body, he denounced the custom as "a most outrageous cruelty and wrong." (When the British abolished the practice in 1829 there were no riots!) He alienated his father by supporting Catholic Emancipation in England, convinced that Roman Catholics should not remain politically disadvantaged.

Horrified at the fifteen-hour days children spent in factories Shaftesbury laboured to implement the ten-hour day. (He knew that six-hour shifts would find employers bringing back children for a second shift, as well as lengthening the work-day for the adults whom they assisted.) He announced publicly that primitive tribes which sacrificed their children were merciful compared to the nineteenth-century English. Industrialists who opposed the ten-hour day complained that British industry would not be able to compete with the continent. He was accused of undercutting industry in north England in order to favour agriculture in the south. Whereupon he organized a huge demonstration of filthily-clad children from Manchester's factories.

While his newly-implemented laws protected children in factories, no law protected the "climbing-boys" who were the virtual slaves of chimney-sweeps. Each sweep retained several boys to climb up and down flues to dislodge soot. Their skin was painfully rubbed with salt to toughen it; even so, knees and elbows were chronically raw from abrasions. Not infrequently a climbing-boy became stuck in a chim-

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ney; some suffocated; many died miserably of cancers spawned through the workday environment. The Climbing-Boy bill became law in 1840, but the fury of fastidious housewives kept it unenforced until the Shaftesbury Act of 1875.

The Factory Acts had not protected children in the mines. When a parliamentary sub-committee concluded its findings the government attempted to suppress the report. By a “mistake” the report found its way into the hands of every Member of Parliament—and newspaper office. Those who had dismissed Shaftesbury as a cranky do-gooder could not bear to read of young girls, nearly naked in hot mines, working alongside naked men who tormented them sexually; five-year olds who worked trap doors in total darkness fourteen hours per day, six days per week. When Shaftesbury brought forward the Colliery Bill the government opposed it. (It became law in 1842.)

Nonetheless Shaftesbury always knew that freeing children from servitude was incomplete without education. Soon his dearest project was the Ragged School Union where children, barred through social class from the nation’s schools, were taught Thursday and Sunday evenings.

For years he campaigned for better public health. Underground sewers should replace street-level gutters. Flushing these gutters into the Thames—from which Londoners drew their drinking water—would only perpetuate the cholera which claimed 14,000 Londoners in 1849 alone. Cities should have piped water. Overcrowded cemeteries with fetid graves dug much too shallow should be closed. Yet it was years before Shaftesbury was heard.

Still, Shaftesbury never became a social reformer devoid of the gospel. In the face of the “wine-into-water” drift of the Church of England, he strenuously contended for the faith. Justification by faith he pronounced “the great saving truth without which no other truth in scripture would be worth knowing. . . .” Having wrestled with social wretchedness all his life he never thought its origin to be merely social, insisting rather on every individual’s innermost depravity: “We have to struggle . . . for the very atonement itself, the sole hope of fallen men. . . .”

On his death-bed he likened himself to the menorrhagic woman in the gospels: now at the feet of Jesus, soon to look up into the Master’s face and know himself healed.

