



The Grumbling Hive Revisited

A Free- Market Fable

(apologies to Bernard de Mandeville, whose “The Grumbling Hive: or Knaves Turn’d Honest,” first separated virtue from prosperity.)

By James Munves

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One summers day, drowsy and warm
My apple orchard all aswarm
With busy bees that cast a spell
(Or else into a sleep I fell),
For humming into words did cleave
While alighted on my sleeve
A yellow bee, a unique sight
In pantaloons and stockings white,
Frock coat all ruffles, gold-head cane,
Undulant wig and serious mien.
"Perhaps you've heard something of me,"
Said this dapper gentlebee,
"Bernard Mandeville is my name,
Whose Bee Fable brought him fame,
Insects that 'lived like men, and all
Our actions they performed in small,'
Griped at vice while eating its fruit.
I showed how all would rue it,

Were virtue, honesty to reign.
Indeed, I made it very plain
That av'rice turns the wheels of trade,
That we prosper by being bad.
Three centuries have nearly gone
Since there issued from my pen,
'Without great vices, is a vain
Utopia seated in the brain.
Fraud, luxury, and pride must live,
While we the benefit receive.'
Alas," sighed this bee Mandeville,
"Nothing here stays at a standstill,
My words, followed to the letter,
Have not made things any better,
Alas, I find them now much worse,
Greed less a blessing, more a curse.
Yes, a la mode did I then bless,
Shifting tastes in coiffure and dress
Made fingers fly and looms unfold
While lust traded perfume and gold,
Bringing wages to those that wrought,
Carted, processed or wholesale bought.
'Twas viciousness that opened gates
Through which lucre circulates
From priv'ledged rich to starving brute
From minister to prostitute.
But to this Hive I have returned
To find this lesson too well learned.
And bees, I fear, I did ill use
As proxy men; better I choose
To learn from them; to see their ways
With less anthropomorphic gaze.
Yes, my friend, I've been a fool
To bottle life in single rule.
Permit me now to make amends
With other poem, to other ends."

The New Fable

When nothing mattered but the Hive

No bee would on his own survive,
But each performed a destined role,
Each but a part of greater whole.
Except for the great Queen Mother,
One bee could be any other,
Foraging, plying building arts,
Inter-interchangeable parts
Tending the fecund machine
Worshipful egg-laying Queen.
Thus were all their hours spent,
Duty bound, not pleasure bent,
Minding eggs and waxing cells,
Buzzing blossoms in downs and dells,
Honey from the nectar brewing,
While in sipping, pollen strewing,
Incidentally copulating
Plants with no other means of mating.
In browsing where the myrtle lies,
They're nature's way to fertilize
Pippin, peach, and pear and cherry,
Medlar, grape, persimmon, berry,
Fertilizing all creation,
A United polliNation.
Thus their honey manufacture
Kept a whole green world on track, sure
That each new spring would burst and more,
Rain blossoms, fruit and flowers galore.
So daisies, trees and buzzing bees
Sang everlasting harmonies,
A drowsing song, with us-ness fraught
That dreamily excluded thought,
That sang to them of Kingdom Come,
Their minds asleep, immersed in hum.
In every season thus did thrive
This self-sufficient one-souled Hive,
No sleepless nights, no unemployment
No lonely gloom, no high enjoyment,
From birth to grave each want supplied,
No green envy, no puffed-up pride,
Here All was all and Each was naught,

No 'would,' no 'should,' but only 'ought.'
A world of work devoid of sin
And everything performed by women
Bees. Males waited on and waiting,
Kept just for a Queenly mating,
Or surplus, like the lame and old,
Swept out to perish in the cold.

2.

Swept from the Hive, the male bees
Disappeared, so much debris,
Mold'ring in the forest floor,
Tomorrows lost as pasts before.
But once upon a fall clearance,
Was a drone with perseverance,
Pushed from the Hive, his home on high.
This certain drone refused to die.
Handsome, long, with gleaming bristles,
Favored with pollen of thistles
By doting nurse-bees, he was strong
Enough to fly high, far and long,
Far from the birch and maple wood,
Wherein holed spruce the old Hive stood,
A rare drone this, a mutant sport
With urgings never to bee taught,
His fellow bees programmed to give,
This odd-ball drone programmed to live.
He flew beyond the River Nigh
Where worker bees would never fly,
High over golden fields of hay
O'er length'ning shades of dying day,
O'er sheep agraze on meadows green
O'er violet vetch and golden corn,
Wild carrot, worts and daisies white
As snow. Unprecedented flight,
On and on, on wafting breeze
O'er larch, and oak and poplar trees
Beyond all ken of native Hive
Past memory of any bee alive,

Up up he's soared, so high he's got
An ambling cow is but a dot;
Escaping place, escaping beedom
Eternity achieved, and freedom.
Except so high, a chill pervades,
While below the lengthening shades
Cast by a swollen, redding sun
Whose swelling gives our bee a turn,
Who descends now in deep'ning gloom
To settle in some swaying broom,
Blossoms unseeable, and worse,
No helping hand, no kindly nurse.

3-

Hungry, cold, and prospects nil;
But hark! a sudden cheerful trill.
The threeping, cheeping casts a spell
On voyager bee, saying "All is Well!"
Who, seeking source of healing sound
Bumbles swiftly to the ground
And finds beneath a twisted thicket
A throng 'round Cheep, the fiddling cricket;
Moth and beetle, thrip and gnat,
Relishing every sharp and flat.
Our bee joins sustained applause,
Clapping all four forward paws;
But afterward, stopped by cricket,
Can't produce his season ticket.
"Understand, my wayward bee,
These evening concerts are not free,
"I would have starved today
Did I fiddle without pay."
"Pay?" our bee asks, "and 'I?'"
These words just pass us by,
'Pay' you need to stay alive?
What is 'pay?' some kind of Hive?
And this 'I?' we never heard,
'Us,' we say, 'we' is the word.
Together we all stand or fall,
No sense in being less than all."

Said Cheep, "you're telling me
You're not an 'I,' but merely 'we'?
Just look inside, you'll surely find
A 'me,' knitting up your mind,
Not a single memory
Without a certain bee, your 'me.'
Now this same 'me' becomes an 'I'
When saying what 'me' wants or why,
And it follows that the who,
The 'I' addresses, is one you."
Rolling six eyes in delight
Bee exclaimed, "You're right, you're right.
Yes, I do have memories
Yes! of bee, and not of bees.
These from today, in flight alone
The 'we' became a single drone.
And I want food, and drink as well
And what I want I'll take, I shall!
Give me some of those seeds you gulp
Or I'll beat you to a bloody pulp!"
"Hah," said Cheep, "you've got the 'I,'
Now you've got to get the 'buy.'
If bugs grabbed instead of bought
Life would be nasty, brutish, short.
Recall, I said that you must pay
If you want to hear me play.
'Pay' means give for what you yearn
So what you get is what you earn.
No one loses, it seems a riddle,
You gather seed, I play my fiddle,
We're both pleased, I know it's strange,
Such is the magic of Exchange!
Its called Market, its divine!
Easily keeps each bug in line."
"This pay and stuff sounds very well,"
Said Bee, "But what have I to sell?
I have never done a thing,
No pollen bag, don't have a sting.
We drones are pretty useless wrecks
Coddled, only good for sex,

And that just once, with a princess.
Market ain't for the likes of us."
"Forget that 'us' stuff, you're a 'me'
No limit on what you can be,
Just as in web one can be caught,
You are Hivebound in your thought.
Don't look back on those old bees,
Assess your opportunities.
You're big and strong, you're mean enough
What you can sell is that you're tough.
Security guards, that's a need.
Look, I've all this grain and seed,
You keep a watch that no bug steals,
For that I'll pay you all your meals,
At my concerts, you'll earn your grub
By checking every ticket stub."
So working for the cricket, Cheep,
Our bee hero earned his keep.
As a sign of his new station
He received an appellation,
The first bee ever signified
With a name, the seed of pride.
'Strong' could have been 'Royal Highness'
For what it did to his sense of 'T'ness.

4.

Such luck to find, Strong realizes,
These bugs of private enterprises!
Bugs on self-starter missions,
Without those Hiveful inhibitions!
Eating tasseled corn and flower,
Bugs improving every hour,
Devouring leaves on apple trees,
Planting tenting colonies!
Mining roots and itches making,
Nature's bounty for the taking,
Leaving eggs in bark or dung,
Freed from wearing care of young,
Savouring wind and sun and skies,
Lives of wonder and surprise!

Now, to Strong, the Hive routine
Appears narrow, sad and mean.
And everything apiary
Calls for zeal missionary.
"Farewell, Cheep, old mentor, boss,
Bee enlightenment, my cause,
My message shall light a spark, it
Propagates the magic Market."

5.

Long the journey, Strong was tired,
But persevered, a bee inspired,
And reaching Hive and central comb
Looked down upon the humming throng,
Upon the old depressing scene
The abject servicing of Queen,
Endless eggs and mindless feeding
In the interest of good breeding.
Swelling with his purpose mystic,
Counter bees somnambulistic,
Strong from his perch began to shout
Bringing guards with stingers out;
But shouting also struck dumb
Teeming bumble, silenced hum
That had held in boundless thrall
Each bee from time primordial.
Torrentlike, Strong's words outflew,
An intoxicating brew.
"Strong is my name, I'm not a 'we,'
And each 'us' is a single bee.
You're each different, none the same,
And each of you deserves a name
And whatever can be taken.
Wake up, bees! Awake! Awaken!"
To these bees so long sedated,
Never once differentiated,
Their minds numbed by constant humming,
Strong's voice was a Second Coming.
His single voice went through the swarm

Like a five-bell fire alarm,
Following which each bee found tongue
That she or he was alone among
A crowd of strangers, a lone 'I'
Who against all else must vie,
Grabbing everything in reach
'All for all' now 'each for each.'
From honey pot and pollen store
It's none for you and for me more,
Honey-making is the game
Everything done in profit's name.
All look to Strong, no bee wiser
Than this financial adviser
The bee Ludwig von Mises,
Preaching private enterprises.
"When feed," says Strong, "and shelter came
Rationed, all bees got the same,
The hardest worker nothing got
More than the lazy bumbling sot.
So predictable and dull
We remained, stoned out of skull,
Hummed in on every side,
In quiet oblivion we abiding.
Hive unchanging as a stone;
But the mode I've just begun,
Will transform this stagnant Hive,
For you'll get more, the more you strive;
And even unsuccessful tries
Will get reward, their enter prize,
For just as tide on rising floats
Simultaneous all boats
Our economic growth likewise,
The fruit of private enterprise,
Shall elevate to wealth all bees
In endless prosperities."

6.

Busy bees now leave in lurch who-
Ever can't hold greed a virtue.

Flowers scoured, goods multiply
Not for food; but for what they buy.
More and more cells does each wax,
One thought only, to max-
imize holdings; new comb sections
Building out in all directions.
Honey is king, other meaning naught
If for honey it cannot be bought.
Whether loving gift or artifice,
Nothing valued that has not price,
Forgotten Queen left to starve, why
Nurses fail even larvae.
Young and old alike neglected,
Only those with wealth respected,
Piles of honey make one wise
And virtuous in all bees eyes.
So grows the Hive by leaps and bounds,
As forests and fields for miles around
Are stripped of propolis and nectar,
No plant too small to neglect; or
Speck of pollen 'wasted'; forsooth
None left for fruit or flowers growth.
Green fells turning brown and barren.
So for more nectar and pollen
The bees must ever further seek,
A hardship for those old and weak
Who have gathered only meagre store
And begin to see themselves as poor,
While on every side there swells
Private honey in private cells.
Never selfish, the norm as 'we,'
Bees had lived in harmony,
Now each harm another wishes,
No bee content, all suspicious,
'My,' and 'thine' an invitation
To larceny and defalcation.
Streets unsafe, and untaught young
Take what they don't know how to earn.
Strong, upset by this debacle
Has one thing in mind, to tackle

His guru, no rest nor sleep
Until he finds the prophet Cheep.

7.

"Your words," says Strong, "I took to heart,
Our Hive achieved a racing start."
Says Cheep, "Credit's due to us both
For Hive's economic growth."
"Yes," says Strong, "the pace was dizzy,
Never were there bees so busy,"
Strong sobbed, wiping tear away,
Then clearing throat, so he could say,
"Hustling bees like no tomorrow."
"Great," says Cheep, "so why the sorrow?"
"But one bee, these days, has enough
For a Hive; 'nother finds it tough
To survive." "Of course," says Cheep,
Some bugs fly and some bugs creep,
Some have brains, some laze, some lame,
Can't expect all to fare the same."
"I didn't know some bees would starve,"
Says Strong, "I thought all would improve.
Where's the tide on which would rise
All bees to bee paradise?"
"Instant cure you can't expect,"
Says Cheep, "to ages of neglect.
You've already come a long way,
Heaven isn't built in a day.
Now to your Hive you must return,
Another lesson they must learn,
Their ardor, they've got to trim it,
To selfishness there is a limit.
If bugs devoured every seed
We'd have no more plants on which to feed,
If Market's to gain its right end
Self-interest must be enlightened."

8.

But the message arrived too late,
For Strong on reaching the Hive gate
Found looting, all hell breaking loose.
The Hive itself began to ooze
Downward, to disintegrate
So gross it was, so overweight;
Honey pouring down the trunk,
Combs collapsing chunk by chunk
Scattering o'er the forest loam,
A million bees without a home,
In roiling carpet ever move,
Not to eat and not for love,
Crawling now to single holes
In trees, or joining moles
In tunnels dank where leaves decay
And never enters light of day;
A race of blind forgotten bees
Who once roamed high above the trees,
And above all insects reigned supreme
In palace white of waxen gleam.

9.

The Moral

Moral to this story tragic?
Failure of the Market Magic?
Post centuries of slow decay
It seemed to me as clear as day
That thrift, kindness made stagnation,
That debt, luxury made expansion;
I had no use for who complained;
But must own, it's out of hand,
Buzziness an end itself,
Hearts aflame to nought but pelf.
Asleep, ahum, each bee had rations,
'Me first' made accumulations.
Rashly they applied my fable
Inviting all to groaning table,
All to covet comfort royal,

None to follow honest toil.
A game, then, for profligate class
Now sways a demoralized mass
Exercising contrived passion
Just for what they're told is fashion.
For food or drink or wear or arts
They follow others, not their hearts.
Not a life so mean, so hard
Won't reach for frill with credit card.
This little tale was meant for folk
Restrained by customary yoke
Of kinship, honor, sense of place,
Whose lives could not endure disgrace
That tempered vicious appetite.
Does any now know wrong from right?
When money is the sole prize sought,
Guilt means only being caught.
Once deeds were measured, good or bad,
Now av'rice is its own reward.
Goods, save 'worldly,' hard to find,
Trust for funds, not kith nor kind.
All market curbs I'd thought to be
Great dampers on prosperity;
But unchained, markets overween.
'Twixt rule and greed no happy mean?
No way to live? no way to thrive?
Except subject to Market Drive?
Those the questions. What's the answer?
Growth for growth's sake is a cancer.
All the zombies, scarcely livin'
Poor souls only Market Driven.