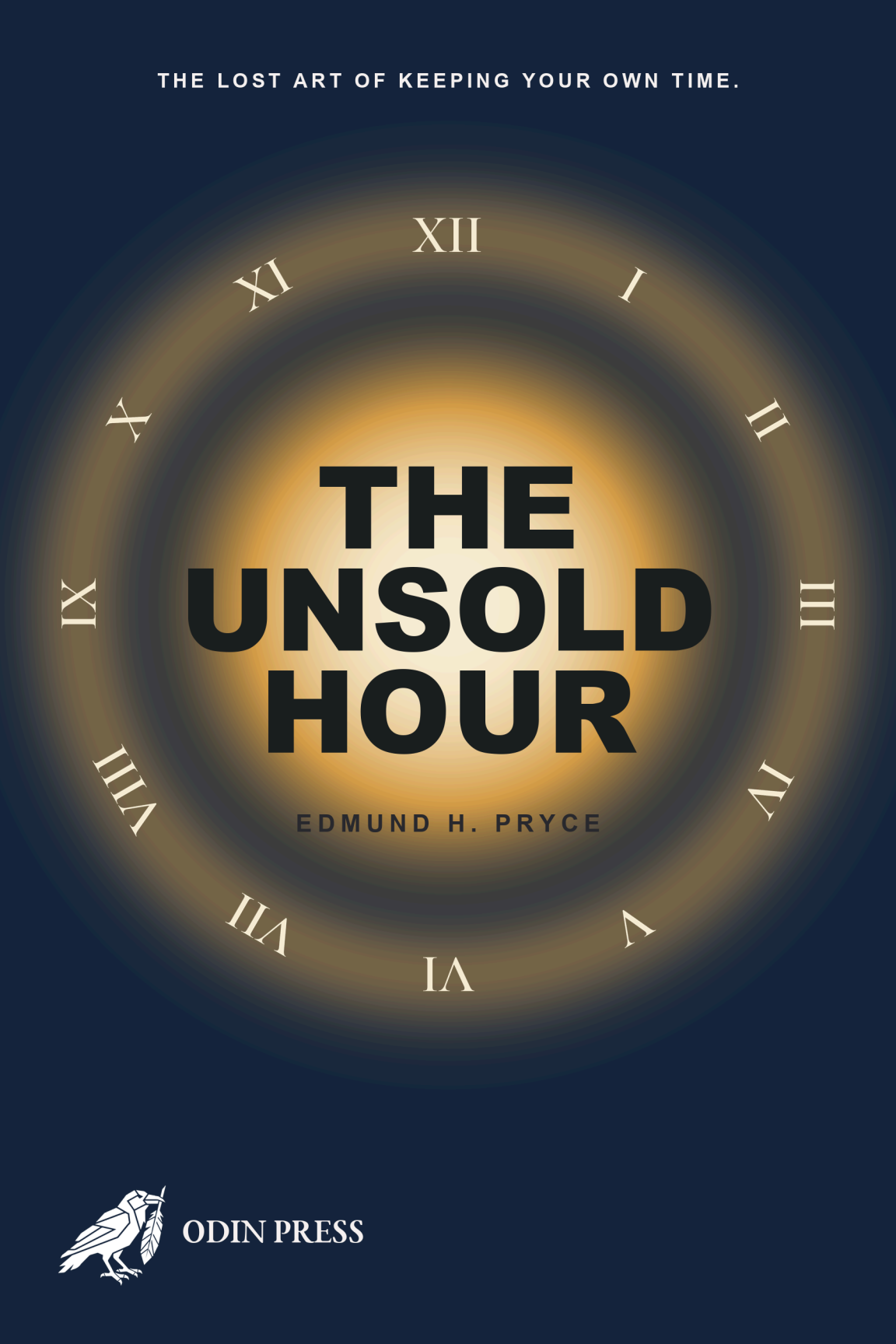
THE LOST ART OF KEEPING YOUR OWN TIME.



THE UNSOLD HOUR

EDMUND H. PRYCE

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The Unsold Hour

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Preface

I was a stationmaster, not a writer, and I came to this subject by watching rather than by reading. For thirty-eight years I kept a small junction on the Welsh borders, and the same people crossed my platform at the same hours for the length of their lives, and a man cannot watch that, morning and evening, decade on decade, without learning to read it. What I learned is the whole of this book: that the difference between a free life and an owned one has almost nothing to do with money and almost everything to do with how much of his own time a man manages to keep.

There is no shortage of books that promise to save you time. The shelves groan with them — systems, methods, the whole modern apparatus for the wringing of more work out of every hour. This is not one of them. I have no interest in saving you time; the men who saved the most of it seemed to me to have the least of their own. The question that interests me is older and harder, and the books that chase efficiency step cleanly over it: not how you fill your hours, but whose they are. A man may be superbly efficient and own not one hour of his day. That man, however much he gets done, is the subject of this book, and so are you, if you have ever reached the end of a full day unable to say where it went.

I did not arrive at any of this alone. There were a few thin books that came my way across the years — left in the waiting room, passed on by a schoolmaster, read between trains — and they said, in their different centuries and tongues, what I had been half-seeing on my platform for twenty years. An Englishman on the day's twenty-four hours; a Roman on the shortness of life; a Scot on the dignity of an idle afternoon; an American on the days that come to us like gods bearing gifts. I have braided their voices into mine throughout these pages, quoting them exactly where I quote them, because they earned the words and I did not. What I have added is only the platform — the vantage of a man who watched, for a working life, how people actually spend the hours

these wiser men wrote about.

A word on how to read this. It is not a system to be applied but an argument to be felt, and it moves the way a life moves — from the plain fact of the daily fund, through the long account of how that fund is sold and squandered and leaked away, toward the harder and more hopeful business of keeping some of it back. There are small practices scattered through it, things to actually do; take them or leave them as you please. But the practices are not the point. The point is the single question, pressed on you in a hundred forms until you cannot avoid it: at the end of the day, whose was it?

I sold a great many of my own hours before I learned to ask that question, and read the lease too late, and have only the second half of my life to show for the understanding the first half lacked. I tell you this so you will not mistake me for a man who got it right. I got it wrong for years, like nearly everyone, and learned late, and am writing now from the far end of a life that wasted much of its time and redeemed what it could. The redeeming is real. That is the one thing I am sure enough of to put in a book. A man who learns even at the end to keep his hours dies richer than he lived — and you, who may be reading this nearer the beginning, have more to keep than I had, and the whole of it still in your hand.

So here it is, such as it is: a stationmaster's account of the only ledger that ever told the truth. I am retired now, and keep a garden that runs to no timetable at all, and I am still interested, as I was on the platform, in whose time it is. Turn the page, and let us count it.

— E. H. P.

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1

The Two Travellers

Stand on the same railway platform at the same hour for thirty-eight years and you stop watching the trains. The trains are the one thing on the platform that always know exactly what they are doing with their time. It is the people you watch. They come up out of the booking office at the hours they have chosen or been forced to choose, and they wait, each in his own manner, and the manner tells you more than the man would ever tell you himself.

I kept a small junction on the Welsh borders, two platforms and a branch line that went up into the hills and carried mostly sheep and schoolboys. I had the same faces crossing the down platform decade on decade. The 7:42 took them in to the work that paid them; something brought them back at night. In between, the hours of the day went somewhere, and the chief thing I learned in thirty-eight years of watching is that almost nobody could afterward say where.

This is a book about that — about the hours that go somewhere and are never accounted for. It is not a book about saving time. I have no interest in saving you time; the men who saved the most of it seemed to me to have the least of their own. The question here is plainer and harder than that, and I will put it to you now so you know what you have bought. Not: how do you fill your day? But: when the day is done, whose was it? Two men can ride the same train into the same morning, and only one of them owns the day he is riding into. I watched them both for years. Let me show you the difference.

Two Men and the 7:42

There were two regulars on my down platform I will call Soame and Vaughan, and they caught the 7:42 within a yard of each other every

weekday morning for the better part of twenty years. You would not, at a glance, have told them apart. Both wore dark coats. Both worked in the town. Both paid the same fare and rode the same carriage and were carried into the same morning at the same speed by the same engine. The difference between them was not anything the railway could measure, and it was the only difference that mattered.

Soame was always early, and always spent the earliness as though it were a debt. He came up from the booking office with his watch already out of his waistcoat and lying open in his palm, and he read the morning paper standing up, folded to a quarter, the way a man reads who does not expect to be allowed to finish. He had the day half spent before the day had properly begun. You could see the next thing pulling at him, and the thing after that. He was a man being drawn forward by the clock rather than carrying it.

Vaughan was early too, but he wore the earliness loosely. He stood near the end of the platform where the rooks came over the cutting, and he watched the rooks. He had a watch — every man on that platform had a watch — but I never once saw it out of his pocket. When the 7:42 came up the line he stepped aboard on time, as Soame did, because the train left when it left for both of them. But he had spent the ten minutes before it as his own, and Soame had spent them as the railway's, and there began the whole of it. Same train. Same morning. One day owned, one day already sold before it started.

I watched them both, one particular morning, with nothing else to do but watch. The down distant was off, the road was clear, and I had four minutes in hand. In those four minutes Soame took his watch out of his palm and looked into it three separate times. Three times in four minutes, with the train not yet past the signal box and no power on earth that would make it come a second sooner for his looking. The first time he frowned at it. The second time he held it to his ear, as men do when a watch has disappointed them and they suspect it of lying. The third time he simply stared, as though the small face owed him an account it would not give. Vaughan, the same four minutes, never put his hand near his pocket. He watched a rook settle on the telegraph wire, work its feet along it, and lift off again toward the church. When the engine cleared the box and whistled, both men came forward to the platform edge together and boarded the same carriage at the same instant. The train did not know one of them had spent the morning and the other had kept it. But I knew, because I had watched, and it was always so.

The creed Soame lived by is an old one, and it has been written down in its sharpest form by men sharper than Soame. Benjamin Franklin gave it to the trades of a whole country in a single line, and the line is good, and I do not entirely quarrel with it. He had a poor man's character, Poor Richard, deliver it as a creed for the diligent:

> *"dost thou love life? then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of"*

It is true as far as it goes. Time is the stuff. A man who pours it out carelessly is pouring out his life, and Franklin was right to say so to a people who needed telling. But mark what the line teaches and what it does not. It teaches you not to *waste* the stuff. It says nothing whatever about whose stuff it is, or who, when the day is spent, is the richer for your not having wasted it. That is the question Franklin's busy creed steps cleanly over, and it is the question Soame stepped over every morning of his life.

I knew Soame's whole working life, in the way a stationmaster knows a man — not intimately, but completely, the way you know the timetable. He went in on the 7:42 and came out on the 6:10, two hours of railway a day, near enough, counting both ends and the walk. He did that for forty years. Forty years is something over twelve thousand working days, and something over twenty-four thousand hours given to the line that carried him to the hours he gave to his employer. He never missed a train that I recall. He was the most reliable man on my platform and one of the most prosperous men in the town, and he was, I came to think, the poorest, in the one currency a man cannot earn twice.

I saw him near the end. They gave him a supper when he retired, and a clock — they always give a man a clock, which has a cruelty in it nobody intends. He stopped me on the platform a week after, the down platform, out of habit, though he had no train to catch and never would again. He stood where he had always stood and he said the strangest thing to me. He said he could not, now, account for the time. He did not mean the money; the money he could account for to the penny, he was that kind of man. He meant the hours. Forty years of mornings on my platform, and he could not say where they had gone, only that they had gone, and that they had gone somewhere other than to him. He had not wasted a one of them. Franklin would have approved of him. He had simply never owned a single one, and at the end the not-owning was the

3

The Day You Sell

The 8:15 down was the fullest train of my morning, and the most silent. A hundred men and a few women packed into it, every weekday, and almost none of them spoke; they sat with their papers and their thoughts already at the far end of the line, being carried in to do the thing they were paid for. I used to watch them load, and I came to think of the 8:15 not as a train at all but as a daily transaction, a great quiet exchange repeated every morning under my lamps — a carriage of people going in to sell, for money, a stretch of their one short irreplaceable lives, and coming back at night with the money and without the stretch.

There is nothing wrong with the transaction. I made it myself for forty years. The corn wants paying for, and the wage wants earning, and the selling of some hours for a wage is the oldest honest bargain there is. But this chapter is about the part of the bargain that nobody reads — the part where a man who has agreed to sell eight hours quietly hands over sixteen, and calls the surrender his free time, and never once notices that the best of his day went out on the 8:15 with the part he was actually paid for. We counted the fund last chapter. Now we follow it onto the train, and watch where it goes when a portion of it is sold, and how the selling of a portion comes, by a trick of habit, to swallow the whole.

The Hours You Hand Over

You have the fund now — the equal twenty-four, issued whole each morning, yours before any claim is honoured. Follow it onto the 8:15. The moment a man sells a part of his day for a wage, something happens to the whole of it, and it is not the simple thing he thinks. He believes he has sold eight hours and kept sixteen. What actually happens to the

fund, the moment the selling starts, is stranger and costlier than that, and it is the business of this chapter to follow it.

Stand with me at the barrier as the 8:15 fills. Here they come up from the booking office, the same faces, near enough, as yesterday and tomorrow — the men who ride in to sell the same eight hours they sold the day before, at the same price, to the same buyer, and will sell again the day after until the railway gives them a clock and a supper and lets them stop. I knew their fares and their seasons and the look of them on a Monday and the different look on a Friday. What strikes a man who watches them year on year is the sheer repetition of the transaction — not the work at the far end, which I never saw, but the daily handing-over, the morning surrender of a fixed block of the one fund there is, made so regularly and so long that the men themselves had plainly stopped feeling it as a surrender at all. They did not look like men selling anything. They looked like men simply going to work, which is how the largest transactions of a life come to be made without anyone noticing they are transactions. Eight hours, this morning, sold — and tomorrow eight more, and the morning after that, the same eight, out of the same fund, at the same price, forever. I watched a hundred lives being spent eight hours at a time off my down platform, and the spenders, dozing over their papers, looked for all the world like men who thought the day cost them nothing.

What the selling does — and Bennett saw this with a clerk's exactness — is not merely take the eight hours. It poisons the man's regard for the other sixteen. The hours he sells have a price on them and a master watching them, so they feel like the real and weighty part of the day; and by the same stroke the unsold hours, having no price and no master, come to feel like the unweighty part, the off-cut, the bit that does not finally count. Bennett puts the damage precisely. The man's fixation on the sold hours, he says,

> *"kills his interest in the odd sixteen hours, with the result that, even if he does not waste them, he does not count them; he regards them simply as margin"*

Margin. There is the whole disaster in a word. Not that the man wastes the sixteen — he may fill them busily enough — but that he does not count them, regards them as the blank space round the edge of the page where the real writing is the eight he sold. And a thing you do not count, you do not guard, and do not spend on purpose, and will

surrender to anyone who asks, because in your own reckoning it was never quite real money to begin with. The sold hours, being watched and priced, get treated as the day. The unsold hours, being unwatched and unpriced, get treated as scrap. So the man defends fiercely the eight that already belong to someone else, and gives away freely the sixteen that are his, and has the entire value of his day precisely inverted — guarding the rented rooms and neglecting the freehold. That is what selling a part of the fund does to a man's regard for the rest of it, and it is the costliest trick in the whole economy of a life.

Put it to the test on your own day, and be exact, because vagueness is how the trick survives. Take yesterday. How many hours did you genuinely sell — were actually at the work, doing the thing you are paid for, the hours the wage truly names? Count them honestly; for most salaried people the true figure is smaller than the contract implies and far smaller than the day felt. And then count the other figure: how many hours of yesterday did you treat as margin — present but not counted, passed but not spent on anything you chose, surrendered to the day's drift without ever being entered in your own books as yours? Most people, doing this honestly for the first time, get a small shock. They find they sold, in the strict sense, perhaps seven or eight hours, and that of the remaining sixteen they can account, as genuinely owned and spent on purpose, for almost none — that the great bulk of the day they did not sell, they also did not keep, but let fall into the margin unread. The wage took eight. Habit took most of the rest, for nothing, and entered it nowhere. Run the count on yesterday and you will see the shape of the trade you are actually making, which is not the trade the contract describes.

The modern contract makes the trick easier, because it buys far more than the hours it names and trains you not to notice. You are hired, on paper, for a set of hours; you sell, in fact, a great deal more. The work follows you home in the lit window and lights up at supper; the calendar reaches into evenings the contract never mentioned; the standing expectation that you will answer, think, prepare, and worry outside the paid hours is so woven into the arrangement that no one writes it down, and so it is never counted as sold, though sold it is. You believe you are letting eight hours and keeping sixteen. You are letting eight by contract and several more by a habit the contract quietly relies on, and treating all the rest as margin besides. The old 8:15 at least had the decency to end; the man got off the train and the selling stopped. Your

You wake each morning with twenty-four hours in your pocket — the same sum handed to the billionaire and the clerk, free, before you have earned a thing. By nightfall it is gone, and you cannot say where. That is not a time-management problem. It is the oldest and most expensive mistake there is, and no productivity system on earth will fix it, because the question was never how to fill your hours faster. The question is whose they are.

In *The Unsold Hour* , a retired borders stationmaster who spent thirty-eight years watching the same people sell the best hours of every day takes you to the one place the truth comes out: the platform, where a life can be read off a face. Braiding four public-domain masters — Bennett, Seneca, Stevenson, Emerson — into a single bracing argument, he shows that a wage is rent on your own days, that busyness is a symptom and not a virtue, and that the only real wealth a person can hold is to own the hours still in his hand.

This is not a book about saving time. It is about refusing, at last, to keep selling it. Read it before you spend another day you will wish you had back.

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