

# PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

## HOW THE WAGE-WORKERS, THEIR TRADES AND THEIR LIVES.

BY HENRY CARVER.  
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### VII.

From the 24 last years, it would seem as if a portion of the original error accompanying it had passed on to each variation or amplification of that method, its heaviest weight falling always on the weak shoulders, that, if endurance could make strong, should belong to-day to a race of giants. Of the ninety trades not open to women, thirty-eight involve some phase of this question of clothing, about which centre some of the worst wrongs of modern civilization. It is work that has legitimate place. It must be done by some one, since the exigencies of this same civilization have abolished old methods and made home manufactures seem a poor and most unsatisfactory substitute for the dainty stitching and ornamentation of the cheaper shop-work. It is work that many women love, and, if living wages could be had, would do contentedly from year to year. Of their ignorance and blindness, and the mysterious possession they call pride, and the many stupidities on which their small lives are founded, there is much to be said, when these papers have done their first and most essential work of showing conditions as they are. As they are, and not as the disciples of labor's faith would have us to believe they are.

The story of the working woman in one great city is, with slight variations in conditions, the story of the working woman in all, and when we have once settled conclusively what monopoly or competition has done and is doing for New-York, we know sufficiently well what Boston and Philadelphia and Chicago and all the host of lesser cities could easily tell us in detail. With the mass of poor who work chiefly to obtain money for drink and who, with their progeny, are filling the institutions in which we delight, we have absolutely nothing to do. It is seldom from their ranks that workers are recruited. A small proportion, reared by societies or mission schools, may be numbered among them; but the greater part are a grade above, and while perhaps well nigh as ignorant, have an inheritance of better instincts and could under any reasonable conditions of living, find their fate by no means intolerable.

I have chosen to-day, instead of passing on to another form of the clothing trade, to return to that of underwear, and this because it is the record most crowded with cases in which the subjects could not enter household service and have not been reduced to poverty by intemperance. Nor is the selection made with a view to working up as startling a case as possible. On the contrary, it has been made almost at random from the many recorded, any separate mention of which would be impossible in the space at command. First on the long list comes Catherine E., an "expert" in underwear, and living on the top floor of a large, old-fashioned house in Clinton place; the lower part stores and offices, the upper a tenement. She earned three years ago \$1 50 a day; at times \$1 75. The same work now brings her 85 cents, and now and then but 75. The husband was a "base painter," and they were comfortable, even prosperous, till the fate of his calling came upon him, and first the "drop hand," and later blood poisoning and heart disease followed. He is just enough alive to care a little for the children and to oversee the pitiful household affairs, the eldest girl, a child of seven, doing the marketing, boiling the kettle, etc., and this season going to school. They are fair-faced, wuntie children, and this is their mother's story:

"I can run the machine and I did with every one of them, when they were two weeks old, for I've always been strong. Nothing that happens is odd enough to kill me and I'm lucky it's so, for it's two years and over since William there could earn a dollar. He helps me, but you see for yourself he's half dead and no getting well, because we've nothing to buy food with or medicine, or anything that could help him. We were both brought up here in the city. We don't know anything about the country, but sometimes I wish we did, and that I could take the children and live somehow. But I don't know how people live there. I'm certain of work here, and I'd be afraid to go anywhere else. I'm making babies' slips now; three tucks and a hem and your own cotton, and it takes sixteen hours to make a dozen, and these are seventy five cents a dozen. I can buy cotton at eighteen cents a dozen, but we have to take it from the manufacturer at twenty cents—sometimes twenty-five cents. Last week I was on corset covers; I make whatever they send up, for I'm an old hand, and always sure of work. They were plain corset covers, and I got 40 cents a dozen without the button-holes. If I did them it would be five cents on every dozen, and sometimes I do. That pile in the corner is extra-size chemises. I get \$1 50 a dozen for making them, and if I cord the bands 50 cents a dozen for them. I can do seven or eight a day, but there are no more just now they say. I work fourteen hours a day; yes, I've often worked sixteen, but you see there are six of us, and we must be clothed and fed. William is handy, but poor soul, he's only a man, and he's sick past cure, and nobody but me for us all. God help us! I wouldn't mind if wages were steady, but they cut and cut, and always some excuse for making them lower, and here am I, that can do anything, private orders and all, down to 85 cents a day. I could earn more by family sewing, but I can't leave William or the children for he's likely to go any minute the doctors say, if he over-exerts himself, and suppose it came and I not here, and the baby and Willie and all. I've tried all ways. I think and think as I sit here, and there's no help in God or man. It's all wrong somehow, but we don't know why nor how, and the only way I can see is just to die. There's no place for honesty or hard work. You must lie and cheat if you want standing room. God help us, if there is a God, but I've my doubts. Why don't he help if there is one?"

Here the average earnings were \$25 a month; the rent of the room they occupied \$7, leaving \$18 for food, fire, light, and clothing. Another disabled husband, recovering, but for many months unable to work, was found in a tenement house in East Eleventh-st. In this case work and earnings were almost identical with the last, but there were but two children, and thus less demand for food, etc. For a year and a-half the wife, though also an "expert," had never exceeded 85 cents a day and had sometimes fallen as low as seventy. She had sometimes gone to the factory instead of working at home, and the last firm employing her in this way had charged ten cents on the dollar for the steam used in running the machine which she operated.

"It didn't pay," the little woman said with a laugh that ended as a sob, checked instantly. "I could earn \$8 a week, but there was the steam, ten cents on the dollar, and my car fare, for there was no time to walk, sixty cents for them; \$1 40 you see altogether. I might as well work at home and have the comfort of seeing that the children were all right. There's plenty of work, it seems. It's wages that's the trouble, and do you know how they cut them? If I could work any other way I would, but I like to sew, and I don't know any other trade. I'm not strong, but somehow I can run the machine, and there's nothing else. But we're clean discouraged, it isn't living, and we don't know what way to turn."

In East Sixth-st., near the Bowery, Mrs. W., a widow still young and with a nervously energetic face and manner, gave her experience. She had been a workwoman in a factory before her husband's death, having supported him through his last year of life, working all day and nursing him at night. In this way her own health broke down, and she was at last taken to the hospital, where she remained nearly six months, coming out to find her place filled, but a comfortable one open to her.

"I had to wait for that," she said, "and I had to learn. I knew a sewing-machine place where often you could get nothing for skirts to do, and I went up there one morning. It was the three tucks and a hem making, and I did 122 yards from 8 to the morning till half past 8, and they paid me 25 cents. 'We could get it done, and that by steam power,' they said, 'so we can't give more. It's a better way to give it out of all.' That was our last day's work. The next I was down to my place on Broadway. They don't get out of it, and I don't know what way to turn."

a dollar for making them. I can make two dozen a day sometimes, but less than not over a dozen, though they pay 50 cents. You wonder how they make anything. I've been forewoman and I know the price. Way even at 40 cents a pair they make on them. Twenty-one yards of cloth at 8 cents makes a dozen; that's \$1 05, and eighteen yards of edge at 4 cents, that's 81 cents, and the making 35 cents; that's \$2 21. Thread and all, they won't cost over \$2 25, and they sell at wholesale at \$3 a dozen and retail at \$4 80. There's profit even when you think a cent couldn't be made. Take skirts, three yards of cloth in each at 8 cents. They pay 30 cents a dozen for tucking; 25 cents a dozen for ruffling, and 30 cents for sewing; 85 cents a dozen for the entire skirt and the cloth makes it at 18 cents a piece, \$3 01 for the dozen. Those skirts retail at 60 cents a piece, and wholesale at 50 cents. There's profit on them all, no matter what they say, for I've figured every penny over and over, down to the tape and thread. But they swear to you they are ruined by competition, and so the wages go down and down and down. Leave the city? I don't know how to live anywhere else. I've never learned. It's something to be sure of your work, even if it is starvation wages. But there's distress all around me. I don't see what it means. There's a girl in the room next to me, with an invalid mother. She does flannel shirts, but before she got them she nearly starved on underwear. Now she earns a dollar a day, but she works fourteen hours for it, seven cents an hour. That's nice pay in a Christian land. Christian! Bah! I used to believe there was Christianity, but I've given it up, like many another. There's just one religion left, and that is the worship of money. The Golden Calf is God, and every man sells his soul for a chance to bow to it. I don't know but what I would myself. So far I've kept decent. I came of decent folks, but it's no fault of many a man that I've worked for that I can say so still. I've had to leave three places because they wouldn't let me alone, and I stay where I am now because they're quiet, respectable people, and no outrageousness. But if you know what it all means I wish you'd tell me, for I'm dazed, and I can't make out the reason of anything any more."

In the same house a widow with three children, the father killed by falling from a scaffolding, earns 80 cents a day by making buttonholes, and above her is another well past sixty, whose trade and wages are the same. How they live, what they can wear, how they are fed, on this amount, is yet to be told, but every detail waits, and having gathered them from these and other women in like case, I am not yet prepared to believe that they live at ease, or that the "bun and cry about so much destitution and misery, and the unscrupulous greed of employers, is groundless."