

PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

WOMEN WAGE-WORKERS, THEIR TRADES AND THEIR LIVES.

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XVII.

CHILD-WORKERS IN NEW-YORK.

Political economists in general, with the additional number of those who for one purpose and another turn over statistics of labor, nodded approvingly as they gazed upon the figures of the last general census, which showed that among the myriad of workers in factory and other occupations, but twenty-four thousand children were included.

"Fifty-six million and more inhabitants, and all faring so well that only one fortieth part of one of those millions is employed too early. Civilization could hardly do more. See how America leads among all civilized countries as the protector of the feeble, the guarantee of strength for the weakest. No other country guards its children so well. There have been errors, of course. Such enlightenment is not reached at a bound, but the last Legislature made further ones impossible for it fixed the minimum limit at which a child may be employed in factories at thirteen years of age. By thirteen a child isn't likely to be stunted or hurt by overwork. We protect all classes and the weakest most."

Thus the political economist who stops at figures and considers any further dealing with the question unnecessary. And if the law were of stringent application; if parents told the truth as to age, and if the two inspectors who are supposed to suffice for the thousands of factories in the State of New-York were multiplied by fifty, there might be some chance of carrying out the provisions of this law. As it is, it is a mere form of words, evaded daily; a bit of legislation which, like much else bearing with it apparent benefit, proves when analyzed to be not much more than sham. The law applies to factories only. It does not touch mercantile establishments or trades that are carried on in tenement-houses, and it is with these two latter forms of labor that we deal to-day. In such labor in the city of New-York nine thousand children under twelve years of age are doing their part toward swelling the accumulation of wealth, each adding their tiny contribution to the great stream of what we call the prosperity of the nineteenth century. Thus far their share in the trades we have considered has been ignored. Let us see in what fashion they make part of the system.

For a large proportion of the women visited, among whom all forms of the clothing industry were the occupation, children under ten, and more often from four to eight, were valuable assistants. In a small room on Hester-st. a woman on work on overalls—for the making of which she received one dollar a dozen—said:

"I couldn't do as well if it wasn't for Jinny and Mame there. Mame has learned to sew on buttons first-rate, and Jinny is just beginning to learn. I'm alone to-day, but most days three of us sew together here and Jinny keeps right along. We'll do better yet when Mame gets a bit older."

As she spoke the door opened and a woman with an enormous bundle of overalls entered and sat down on the nearest chair with a gasp.

"Them stairs is killin'," she said. "It's lucky I've not to climb 'em often."

Something crept forward as the bundle slid to the floor and busted itself with the string that bound it.

"Here you, Jinny," said the woman, "don't you be foolin'. What do you want anyhow?"

The something shook back a mat of thick hair and rose to its feet, a tiny child who in size seemed no more than three, but whose countenance indicated the experience of three hundred.

"It's the string I want," the small voice said.

"Me an' Mame was goin' to play with it."

"There's small time for play," said the mother: "there'll be two pair more in a minute or two, an' you're to see that Mame does one an' does it good too, or I'll find out why not."

Mame had come forward and stood holding to the one thin garment which but partly covered Jinny's little bones. She too looked out from a wild tangle of black hair, and with the same expression of deep experience, the pallid, hungry little faces lighting suddenly as some cheap cakes were produced. Both of them sat down on the floor and ate their portion silently.

"Jinny's seven and Mame's going on six," said the mother, "but Jinny's the smartest. She could sew on buttons when she wasn't but much over four. I had five then, but the Lord's took 'em all but these two. I couldn't get on if it wasn't for Jinny."

Jinny looked up but said no word, and as I left the room settled herself with her back against the wall, Mame at her side, laying the coveted string near at hand for use if any minute for play arrived. In the next room, half-lighted like the last, and if possible even dimmer, a Jewish tailor sat at work on a coat, and by him on the floor a child of five picking threads from another.

"Netts is good help," he said after a word or two. "So fast as I finish, she pick all the threads. She care not to go away—she stay by me always to help."

"Is she the only one?"

"But one that sells papers. Last year is five, but mother and three are gone with fever. It is many that die. What will you? It is the will of God."

On the floor below two children of seven and eight were found also sewing on buttons—in this case for four women who had their machines in one room and were making the cheapest order of corset-cover, for which they received fifty cents a dozen, each one having five buttons. It could not be called oppressive work, yet the children were held there to be ready for each one as completed, and sat as such children most often do, silent and half asleep waiting for the next demand.

"It's hard on 'em," one of the women said.

"We work till 10 and sometimes later, but then they sleep between and we can't; and they get the change of running out for a loaf of bread or whatever's wanted, and we don't stir from the machine from morning till night. I've got two 'o' me own, but they're out peddling matches."

On the lower floor back of the small grocery in which the people of the house bought their food supply, wilted or half-decayed vegetables, meat of the cheapest order, broken eggs and stalo fish, a tailor and two helpers were at work. A girl of nine or ten sat among them and picked threads or sewed on buttons as needed; a haggard, wretched-looking child who did not look up as the door opened. A woman who had come down the stairs behind me stopped a moment, and as I passed out said:

"If there was a law for him I'd have him up. It's his own sister's child, and he workin' her ten hours a day an' many a day into the night, an' she with an open sore on her neck, an' cryin' out many's the time when she draws out a long needleful an' so gives it a jerk. She's sewed on millions of buttons that child has, an' she but a little past ten. May there be a hot plate waitin' for him!"

A block or two beyond, the house entered proved to be given over chiefly to cigar-making. It is to this trade that women and girls turn during the dull season, and one finds in it representatives from every trade in which women are engaged. The sewing-women employed in suit and clothing manufactories during the busy season have no recourse save this, and thus prices are kept down and the regular cigar-makers constantly reinforced by the irregular. In the present case it was chiefly with regular makers that the house was filled, one room a little less than twelve by fourteen feet holding a family of seven persons, three of them children under ten, all sick. Tobacco lay in piles on the floor and under the benches at the end, and where the cigars were made, the air was so thick with the smoke that the

sinks and from the general filth, not only of this room but of the house as a whole. Two of the children sat on the floor stripping the leaves, and another on a small stool. A girl of twenty sat near them, and all alike had sores on lips and cheeks and on the hands. Children from five or six years up can be taught to strip and thus add to the week's income, which is far less for the tenement-house manufacture than for regular factory work, the latter averaging from eight to twelve dollars a week. But the work if done at home can be made to include the entire family and some 4,000 women are engaged in it, an almost equal but unregistered number of young children sharing it with them. As in sewing, a number of women often club together, using one room, and in such case their babies crawl about in the filth on the wet floors, playing with the damp tobacco and breathing the poison with which the room is saturated.

Here as in tobacco factories women and girls of every age become speedily the victims of nervous and hysterical complaints the direct result of nicotine poisoning, while succeeding these come consumption and throat diseases resulting from the dust. Canker is one of the most frequent difficulties, and sores of many orders, the trade involving more dangers than any that can be chosen. Yet because an entire family can find occupation in it, with no necessity for leaving home, it is often preferred to easier employment. It is the children who suffer most, growth being stunted, nervous disease developed and ending often in St. Vitus's dance, and skin diseases of every order being the rule, the causes being not only tobacco but the filth in which they live.

It is doubtful if the most inveterate smoker would feel much relish for the cigar manufactured under such conditions, yet hundreds of thousands go out yearly from these houses, bearing in every leaf the poison of their preparation. In this one house nearly thirty children of all ages and sizes, babies predominating, rolled in the tobacco which covered the floor and was piled in every direction, and of these children under ten thirteen were strippers and did their day's work of ten hours and more. Physical degeneration in its worst forms becomes inevitable. Even the factory child-worker fares better, for in the factory there is exercise and the going to and from work, while in the tenement-house cigar-making the worn-out little creatures crawl to the bed, often only a pile of rags in the corner, or lie down on a heap of the tobacco itself, breathing this poison day and night uninterrupted. Vices of every order flourish in such air, and morally in this trade is at lowest ebb. Nervous excitement is so intense that necessarily nothing but immorality can result, and the child of eight or ten is as gross and confirmed an offender as the full grown man or woman. Diligent search discovers few exceptions to this rule, and the whole matter has reached a stage where legislative interference is absolutely indispensable. Only in forbidding tenement-house manufacture absolutely can there be any safety for either consumer or producer.

Following in the same line of inquiry I take here the facts furnished to Professor Adler by a lady physician whose work has long lain among the poor. During the eighteen months prior to February 1, 1886, she found among the people with whom she came in contact 535 children under twelve years old, most of them between ten and twelve, who either worked in shops or stores or helped their mothers in some kind of work at home. Of these 535 children but 60 were healthy. In one family a child at three years old had infantile paralysis, easily curable. The mother had no time to attend to it. At five years old the child was taught to sew buttons on trousers. She is now at thirteen a hopeless cripple, but she finishes a dozen pair of trousers a day and her family are thus twenty cents the richer. In another family she found twin girls four and a half years old sewing on buttons from 6 in the morning till 10 at night, and near them was a family of three, a woman who did the same work and whose old father of eighty had little girl of six were her co-workers.

There is a compulsory education law, but it demands only fourteen weeks of the year, and the poorer class work from early morning till 8 a. m., and after school hours from 4 till late in the night. With such energy as is left they take their fourteen weeks of education, but even in these many methods of evasion are practiced. It is easy to swear that the child is over fourteen, but small of its age, and this is constantly done. It is sometimes done deliberately by thinking workmen, who deny that the common school as it at present exists can give any training that he desires for his children, or that they will ever do so till manual training forms part of their course. But for most it is not intelligent dissatisfaction but the absorbing press of getting a living that compels the employment of child-labor, and thus brings physical and moral degeneration, not only for this generation but for many to come. It is not alone the 9,000 in factories that we must deal with, but many hundred thousands uncounted and unrecognized, the same spirit dominating all.

In one of the better class of tenement-houses a woman, a polisher in a jewelry manufactory, said the other day:

"I'm willing to work hard, I don't care how hard; but it's awful to me to see my little boy and the way he goes on. He's a cash-boy at 11—s, and they don't pay by the week, they pay by checks, so every cash-boy is on the keen jump after a call. They're so worried and anxious and afraid they won't get enough, and Johnny cries and says: 'Oh, mamma, I do try, but there's one boy that always gets ahead of me.' I think it's an awful system even if it does make them smart."

An awful system, yeb in its ranks march more and more thousands every year. It would seem as if every force in modern civilization bent toward this one end of money-getting, and the child of days and the old man of years alike shared the passion and ran the same mad race. It is the passion itself that has outgrown all bounds and that faces us to-day—the modern Medusa on which he who looks has no more heart of flesh and blood but forever heart of stone, insensible to any sorrow, unmoved by any cry of child or woman. It is with this shape that the battle must be, and no man has yet told us its issue. Nay, save here and there one, who counts that battle is needed, or sees the shadow of the terror walking not only in darkness but before all men's eyes, who is there that has not chosen blindness and will not hear the voice that pleads: "Let my people go free."