

PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

COMMISSIONER McCLAVE'S PLAN.

HE SUGGESTS A WOMEN'S PROTECTIVE BUREAU SUPPORTED BY THE STATE—HOUSEWORK.

Police Commissioner John McClave said he had read the articles on "Prisoners of Poverty" in THE TRIBUNE with much interest. "I think," he said, "every intelligent man who reads these papers must see that something ought to be done soon for the protection of the working women in this city. It is easier to see the need of protection than to devise a plan for securing it. I have been thinking over the subject and am convinced that the Legislature could furnish some relief, but not all that is needed. It is plain that the law at present does not prevent crafty and unscrupulous men from robbing women of their just wages. Suppose that a manufacturer advertises for help to make up some plain articles, such as neckties, and a poor woman or girl answers the advertisement in person. She is told that the manufacturer is willing to engage her a week on trial, that it probably will take her a week to learn how to do the work properly, and that she will not receive any pay for the first week's work. At the same time she is led to expect that if her work is acceptable she will receive fair wages in following weeks. Now, if the manufacturer discharges her at the end of the week she has no claim against him, although she probably learned how to do the work well in a few hours and deserved a full week's wages. It seems almost incredible that enough work is stolen in such a manner to affect seriously the price of manufactured articles in this city, and yet the proof of such robbery is found on the bargain counters in many big dry-goods stores. Suppose the Legislature should pass a law making such a robbery of women's work a crime—how could such a law be enforced? The poor woman who was cheated out of her week's wages could not afford to spend her time, which to her is money, in prosecuting the rich offender.

"The more I think of the matter, the more I believe that help must come to the women through a special bureau or through an incorporated society like those provided over by Mr. Gerry and Mr. Bergh. Of course, some help must be given by the Legislature. I would have, if you please, a Working Women's Protective Bureau established by law and supported by the State, and at the head of the bureau I would have a capable and practical woman. Officers of such a bureau should have the right to enter any shop or manufactory where women are employed and to inspect the work. In case of a refusal on the part of any employer to pay for work performed, the employe could make a complaint to the bureau and could have her case investigated without charge. The law ought to be amended so as to punish by fine or imprisonment, or both, any employer who keeps back the wages fairly earned. I believe that all the reputable business men of the city would be glad to have the law so amended. They would have all the more security in their business if the men engaged in stealing work under cover of the law were suppressed.

"It is my belief that much of the ruinous competition in the work of women would be avoided if more young women who are obliged to support themselves would engage in domestic service. There is no doubt that intelligent girls who are willing and careful in the performance of housework are treated much better than factory girls. Their mistresses as a rule are quick to recognize neatness and dispatch in their work and are ready to grant many indulgences in return for the faithful performance of duty. The notion that domestic service is more degrading than work in a factory probably leads many young women to ruin. They think it is better to work in crowded rooms where the light is bad and the ventilation is imperfect and to sleep in mean rooms in tenement houses, exposing themselves day and night to sickness, than to work where they would receive free board and fair wages and be subject to good influences. Many wives and mothers in the city, good women, too, who have much trouble with stupid and careless servants and find it a difficult matter to get any other kind of help at good wages, are unable to understand that so much misery and starvation exists among working-women. There would be less trouble if the foolish prejudice against domestic service were removed."