

HELEN CAMPBELL

PRISONERS OF
POVERTY: WOMEN
WAGE-WORKERS, THEIR
TRADES AND THEIR
LIVES

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Prisoners of Poverty: Women Wage-Workers, Their Trades and Their Lives

PRISONERS OF POVERTY

“Make no more giants, God,
But elevate the race at once. We ask
To put forth just our strength, our human strength.
All starting fairly, all equipped alike,
Gifted alike, all eagle-eyed, true-hearted, —
See if we cannot beat Thy angels yet.”

“Light, light, and light! to break and melt in sunder
All clouds and chains that in one bondage bind
Eyes, hands, and spirits, forged by fear and wonder
And sleek fierce fraud with hidden knife behind;
There goes no fire from heaven before their thunder,
Nor are the links not malleable that wind
Round the snared limbs and souls that ache thereunder;
The hands are mighty were the head not blind.
Priest is the staff of king,
And chains and clouds one thing,
And fettered flesh with devastated mind.
Open thy soul to see,
Slave, and thy feet are free.
Thy bonds and thy beliefs are one in kind,
And of thy fears thine irons wrought,
Hang weights upon thee fashioned out of thine own thought.”

PREFACE

The chapters making up the present volume were prepared originally as a series of papers for the Sunday edition of “The New York Tribune,” and were based upon minutest personal research into the conditions described. Sketchy as the record may seem at points, it is a photograph from life; and the various characters, whether employers or employed, were all registered in case corroboration were needed. While research was limited to New York, the facts given are much the same for any large city, and thus have a value beyond their immediate application. No attempt at an understanding of the labor question as it faces us to-day can be successful till knowledge of its underlying conditions is assured.

It is such knowledge that the writer has aimed to present; and it takes more permanent form, not only for the many readers whose steady interest has been an added demand for faithful work, but, it is hoped, for a circle yet unreached, who, whether agreeing or disagreeing with the conclusions, still know that to learn the struggle and sorrow of the workers is the first step toward any genuine help.

Orange, New Jersey, *March*, 1887.

CHAPTER FIRST. WORKER AND TRADE

In that antiquity which we who only are the real ancients look back upon as the elder world, counting those days as old which were but the beginning of the time we reckon, there were certain methods with workers that centuries ago ceased to have visible form. The Roman matron, whose susceptibilities from long wear and tear in the observation of fighting gladiators and the other mild amusements of the period, were a trifle blunted, felt no compunction in ordering a disobedient or otherwise objectionable slave into chains, and thereafter claiming the same portion of work as had been given untrammelled. The routine of the day demanded certain offices; but how these offices should be most easily fulfilled was no concern of master or mistress, who required simply fulfilment, and wasted no time on consideration of methods. In the homes of Pompeii, once more open to the sun, are the underground rooms where wretched men and women bowed under the weight of fetters, whose corrosion was not only in weary flesh, but in the no less weary soul; and Rome itself can still show the same remnants of long-forgotten wrong and oppression.

That day is over, and well over, we say. Only for a few barbarians still unreached by the march of civilization is any hint of such conditions possible, and even for them the days of darkness are numbered. And so the century moves on; and the few who question if indeed the bonds are quite broken, if civilization has civilized, and if men and women may claim in full their birthright of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” are set down as hopeless carpers, – unpleasant, pragmatic, generally disagreeable objectors to things as they are. Or if it is admitted that there are defects here and there, and that much remains to be remedied, we are pointed with pride to the magnificent institutions of modern charity, where every possible want of all sorts and conditions of men is met and fulfilled.

“What more would you have?” cries the believer in things as they are. “What is higher or finer than the beautiful spirit that has taken permanent form in brick and mortar? Never since time began has charity been on so magnificent a scale; never has it been so intelligent, so far-seeing. No saints of the past were ever more vowed to good works than these uncanonized saints of to-day who give their lives to the poor and count them well lost. Shame on man or woman who questions the beautiful work or dares hint that under this fair surface rottenness and all foulness still seethe and simmer!”

It is not easy in the face of such feeling to affirm that, perfect as the modern system may be, beautiful as is much of the work accomplished, it still is wanting in one element, the lack of which has power to vitiate the whole. No good-will, no charity, however splendid, fills or can fill the place owned by that need which is forever first and most vital between man and man, – justice. No love, no labor, no self-sacrifice even, can balance that scale in which justice has no place. No knowledge nor wisdom nor any understanding that can come to man counts as force in the universe of God till that one word heads the list of all that must be known and loved and lived before ever the kingdom of heaven can begin upon earth.

It is because this is felt and believed by a few as a compelling power, by many as a dimly comprehended need, so far in the shadow that its form is still unknown, that I begin to-day the search for the real presence. What I write will be no fanciful picture of the hedged-in lives the conditions of which I began, many years ago, to study. If names are withheld, and localities not always indicated, it is not because they are not recorded in full, ready for reference or any required corroboration. Where the facts make against the worker, they are given with as minute detail as where they make against the employer. The one aim in the investigation has been and is to tell the truth simply, directly, and in full, leaving it for the reader to determine what share is his or hers in the evil or in the good that the methods of to-day may hold. That our system of charities and corrections is unsurpassable does not

touch the case of the worker who wants no charity and needs no correction. It is something beyond either that must be understood. Till the methods of the day are analyzed, till one has defined justice, asked what claim it makes upon the personal life of man and woman, and mastered every detail that render definition more possible, the questions that perplex even the most conservative can have no solution for this generation or for any generation to come. To help toward such solution is the one purpose of all that will follow.

In the admirable report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor for 1885, made under the direction of Mr. Charles Peck, whose name is already the synonyme for careful and intelligent work, the number of working-women in New York is given as very nearly two hundred thousand. Investigations of the same nature have been made at other points, notably Boston, in the work of Mr. Carroll D. Wright, one of the most widely known of our statisticians. But neither Boston nor any other city of the United States offers the same facilities or gives as varied a range of employment as is to be found in New York, where grinding poverty and fabulous wealth walk side by side, and where the “life limit” in wages was established long before modern political economy had made the phrase current. This number does not include domestic servants, but is limited to actual handicrafts. Ninety-two trades are given as standing open to women to-day, and several have been added since the report was made. A lifetime would hardly be sufficient for a detailed examination of every industry in the great city, but it is quite possible to form a just judgment of the quality and character of all those which give employment to women. The city which affords the largest percentage of habitual drunkards, as well as the largest number of liquor saloons to the mile, is naturally that in which most women are forced to seek such means of subsistence may be had.

The better-paying trades are filled with women who have had some form of training in school or home, or have passed from one occupation to another, till that for which they had most aptitude has been determined. That, however, to which all the more helpless turn at once, as the one thing about the doing of which there can be no doubt or difficulty, is the one most overcrowded, most underpaid, and with its scale of payments lessening year by year. The girl too ignorant to reckon figures, too dull-witted to learn by observation, takes refuge in sewing in some of its many forms as the one thing possible to all grades of intelligence; and the woman with drunken or otherwise vicious husband, more helpless often than the widow who turns in the same direction, seeks the same sources of employment. If respectably dressed and able to furnish some reference, employment is often found by her in factory or some large establishments where regular workers have place. But if, as is often the case, the need for work arises from the death or the evil habits of the natural head of the family, fortunes have sunk to so low an ebb that often the only clothing left is on the back of the worker, in the last stages of demoralization; and the sole method of securing work is through the middle-men or “sweaters,” who ask no questions and require no reference, but make as large a profit for themselves as can be wrung from the helplessness and the bitter need of those with whom they reckon.

The difficulties to be faced by the woman whose only way of self-support is limited to the needle, whether in machine or hand work, fourfold. (1) Her own incompetency must very often head the list and prevent her from securing first-class work; (2) middle-men or sweaters lower the price to starvation point; (3) contract work done in prisons or reformatories brings about the same result; and (4) she is underbid from still another quarter, that of the country woman who takes the work at any price offered.

These conditions govern the character and quality of the work obtained, even the best firms being somewhat affected by the last two clauses. And in every trade there may always be found three distinct classes of employers: the west-side firms, which in many cases care for their workmen, in degree at least, and where the work is done under conditions that must be called favorable; the east-side firms, representing generally cheaper material and lower rates; and last, the slop-work, which may be either east or west, most often the former, and includes every form of outrage and oppression that workers can know.

Clothing in all its multiplied forms takes the first place in the ninety-two trades, and the workers on what is known as “white wear” form the large majority of the always increasing army. For many reasons, the shirt-makers naturally head the list, – the shirt-makers about whom has hung a certain sentimental interest since the day when poor Tom Hood’s impassioned plea in their behalf first saw the light. Yet to-day, in spite of popular belief that they are the class most grossly wronged, the shirt-maker fares far better than the majority of the workers on any other form of clothing. This always, however, if she is fortunate enough to have direct relation with some large factory, or with an establishment which gives out the work directly into the hands of the women themselves. Given these conditions, it is possible for a first-class operator to make from seven to twelve dollars per week, the latter sum being certain only in the factories where steam is the motive power and where experience has given the utmost facility in handling the work. In one factory on the west side, employing some one hundred and fifty girls, and where everything had been brought to almost mathematical accuracy, the price paid per dozen for shirts was \$2.40. But one of the operatives was able to make a dozen a day, her usual average being about nine, or five dozen per week of sixty hours. Here every condition was exceptionally favorable. The building occupied the centre of a small square, and thus had light on all sides; ventilation was good; and the forewoman, on whose intelligence and good disposition much of the comfort of the operatives depends, was far beyond the average woman in this position. The working day was ten hours, with half an hour for dinner, and the sanitary conditions more favorable than in any other establishment of the same size. Many of the operatives had been there for years, and the dull season, common to all phases of the clothing trade, was never marked enough here to produce discharges or materially lessen production. The wages averaged seven dollars per week, though the laundry women and finishers seldom exceeded five. No middle-men were employed, and none of the customary exactions in the way of fines and other impositions were practised. Piece-work was regarded as the only secure method for both employer and employed, as in such case it rested with the girl herself to make the highest or the lowest rate at pleasure. There were no holidays beyond the legal ones, but all the freedom possible to constant labor was given, the place representing the best conditions of this special industry. Another firm quite as well known and employing equal number of workers had found it more expedient to give up the factory system, and simply retained rooms for cutting and general handling of the completed work, giving it out in packages to workers at home. One woman employed by them for seven years had never made anything but the button-holes in the small piece attached to the bosom, and such fine lettering as was ordered for custom shirts, her wages in the busy season being often twelve dollars a week, the year’s average, however, bringing them to seven. She worked exclusively at home, and represented the best paid and most comfortable phase of the industry.

Descending a step, and turning to establishments on the east side, one found every phase of sanitary condition, including under this head bad ventilation, offensive odors, facilities for washing, quality of drinking water, position of water-closets, length of time allowed for lunch, length of working day, etc. Here the quality of the work was lower, material, thread, and sewing being all of an order to be expected from the price of the completed garment, ranging from forty to sixty cents. The wages, however, did not fall so far below the average as might be expected, the operator earning from five to eight dollars a week during the busy season. But the greater number of manufacturers on both east and west sides of the city turn over the work to middle-men, or send it to the country, many factories being run in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where rents are merely nominal. This proved to be the case with several firms whose names represent a large business, but who find less trouble and more profit in the contract system.

Still another method has gone far toward reducing the rates of payment to the city worker, and this is the giving out the work in packages to the wives and daughters of farmers in the outlying country. These women, having homes, and thus no rent or general expenses to meet, take the work at rates which for the city operators mean simply starvation, and thus prices are kept down, and one more

stumbling-block put in the way of the unprotected worker. Careful examination of this phase shows that the applicants, many of whom give assumed names, work simply for the sake of pin-money, which is expended in dress. Now and then it is a case of want, and often that of a woman who, failing to make her husband see that she has any right to an actual cash share in what the work of her own hands has helped to earn, turns to this as the only method of securing some slight personal income. But for the most part, it is only for pin-money; and no argument could convince these earners that their work is in any degree illegitimate or fraught with saddest consequences to those who, because of it, receive just so much the less. Nor would it be possible to bring such argument to bear. To earn seems the inalienable right of any who are willing to work, and the result of methods will never be questioned by employer or employed, unless they are forced to it by more powerful considerations than any at present brought forward.

I have chosen to give these details minutely because they are, practically, the summing up, not only for shirt-making, but for every trade which can be said to come under the head of clothing, whether for men, women, or children, – this including every form of trimming or other adornment used in dress from artificial flowers to gimps, fringes, and buttons. And now, having given this general outline, we may pass to the stories of the units that make up this army, – stories chosen from quarters where doubt is impossible, and confirmed often by the unwilling testimony of those from whom the work has come, giving with them also the necessary details of the trades they may represent, and seeking first, last, and always, only the actual facts that make up the life of the worker.

CHAPTER SECOND. THE CASE OF ROSE HAGGERTY

“The case of Rose Haggerty.” So it stands on the little record-book in which long ago certain facts began to have place, each one a count in the indictment of the civilization of to-day, and each one the story not only of Rose but of many another in like case. For the student of conditions among working-women soon discovers that workers divide themselves naturally into four classes: (1) those who have made deliberate choice of a trade, fitted themselves carefully for it, and in time become experts, certain of employment and often of becoming themselves employers; (2) those who by death of relatives or other accident of fortune have been thrown upon their own resources and accept blindly the first means of support that offers, sometimes developing unexpected power and meeting with the same success as the first class; (3) those who have known no other life but that of work, and who accept that to which they most incline with neither energy nor ability enough to rise beyond a certain level; and (4) those who would not work at all save for the pressure of poverty, and who make no effort to gain more knowledge or to improve conditions. But the ebb and flow in this great sea of toiling humanity wipes out all dividing lines, and each class so shades into the next that formal division becomes impossible, but is rather a series of interchanges with no confinement to fixed limits. Often in passing from one trade to another, chance brings about much the same result for each class, and no energy or patience of effort is sufficient to check the inevitable descent into the valley of the shadow, where despair walks forever hand in hand with endeavor.

This time had by no means come for Rose, with just enough of her happy-go-lucky father’s nature to make her essentially optimistic. Born in a Cherry Street tenement-house, she had refused to be killed by semi-starvation or foul smells, or dirt of any nature whatsoever. Dennis Haggerty, longshoreman professionally, and doer of all odd jobs in the intervals of his discharges and re-engagements, explained the situation to his own satisfaction, if not to that of Rose and the five other small Haggertys remaining from the brood of twelve.

“If a man wants his dhrink that bad that no matter what he’s said overnight he’d sell his soul by the time mornin’ comes for even a thimbleful, he’s got jist to go to destruction, an’ there’s no sthoppin’ him. An’ I’ve small call to be blamin’ Norah whin she comforts herself a bit in the same manner of way, nor will I so long’s me name’s Dennis Haggerty. But you, Rose, you look out an’ get any money you’ll find in me pockets, an’ keep the children straight, an’ all the saints’ll see you through the job.”

Rose listened, the laugh in her blue eyes shadowed by the sense of responsibility that by seven was fully developed. She did not wonder that her mother drank. Why not, when there was no fire in the stove, and nothing to cook if there had been, and the children counted it a day when they had a scraping of butter on the bread? But, as often happens in these cases, the disgust at smell and taste of liquor grew with every month of her life, and two at least of the children shared it. They were never beaten; for Haggerty at his worst remained good-natured, and when sober wept maudlin tears over his flock and swore that no drop should ever pass his lips again; and Norah echoed every word, and for days perhaps washed and scrubbed and scoured, earning fair wages, and gradually redeeming the clothes or furniture pledged round the corner. Rose went to school when she had anything to wear, and learned in time, when she saw the first symptoms of another debauch, to bundle every wearable thing together and take them and all small properties to the old shoemaker on the first floor, where they remained in hiding till it was safe to produce them again. She had learned this and many another method before the fever which suddenly appeared in early spring took not only her father and mother, but the small Dennis whose career as newsboy had been her pride and delight, and who had been relied upon as half at least of their future dependence. There remained, then, Norah, hopelessly incurable of spinal disease and helpless to move save as Rose lifted her, and the three little ones, as to

whose special gifts there was as yet no definite knowledge. In the mean time they were simply three very clamorous mouths to be stopped with such food as might be; and Rose entered a bag-factory a block away, leaving bread and knife and molasses-pitcher by Norah's bed, and trusting the saints to avert disaster from the three experimenting babies. She earned the first month ten dollars, or two and a half a week, but being exceptionally quick, was promoted in the second to four dollars weekly. The rent was six dollars a month; and during the first one the old shoemaker came to the rescue, had an occasional eye to the children, and himself paid the rent, telling Rose to return it when she could. When the ten hours' labor ended, the child, barely fourteen, rushed home to cook something warm for supper, and when the children were comforted and tucked away in the wretched old bed, that still was clean and decent, washed and mended their rags of clothes, and brought such order as she could into the forlorn room.

It was the old shoemaker, a patient, sad-eyed old Scotchman, who also had his story, who settled for her at last that a machine must be had in order that she might work at home. The woman in the room back of his took in shirts from a manufacturer on Division Street, and made often seven and eight dollars a week. She was ready to teach, and in two or three evenings Rose had practically mastered details, and settled that, as she was so young, she would not apply for work in person, but take it through Mrs. Moloney, who would be supposed to have gone into business on her own account as a "sweater." Whatever temptations Mrs. Moloney may have had to make a little profit as "middle-man," she resisted and herself saw that the machine selected was a good one; that no advantage was taken of Rose's inexperience; and that the agent had no opportunity to follow out what had now and then been his method, and hint to the girl that her pretty face entitled her to concessions that would be best made in a private interview. Shame in every possible form and phase had been part of the girl's knowledge since babyhood, but it had slipped away from her, as a foul garment might fall from the fair statue over which it had chanced to be thrown. It was not the innocence of ignorance, — a poor possession at best. It was an ingrained repulsion, born Heaven knows how, and growing as mysteriously with her growth, an invisible yet most potent armor, recognized by every dweller in the swarming tenement. She had her father's quick tongue and laughing eyes, but they could flash as well, and the few who tried a coarse jest shrunk back from both look and scorching word.

Thus far all went well with the poor little fortunes. She worked always ten and twelve, sometimes fourteen, hours a day, yet her strength did not fail, and there was no dearth of work. It was in 1880, and prices were nearly double the present rates. To-day work from the same establishment means not over \$4.50 per week, and has even fallen as low as \$3.50. In 1880 the shirts were given out by the dozen as at present, going back to the factory to pass through the hands of the finisher and buttonhole maker. The machine operator could make nine of the best class of shirts in a day of ten hours, being paid for them at the rate of \$1.75 per dozen. Four spools of cotton, two hundred yards each, were required for a dozen, the price of which must be deducted from the receipts; but the firm preferred to supply twenty-four-hundred-yard spools, at fifty cents for six-cord cotton used for the upper thread, and thirty cents for the three-cord cotton used as under thread, the present prices for same quality and size being respectively forty-five and twenty-five cents. Making nine a day, the week's wages would be for the four dozen and a half \$7.87, or \$7.50 deducting thread; but Rose averaged five dozen weekly, and for nearly two years counted herself as certain of not less than thirty dollars per month and often thirty-five. The machine had been paid for. The room took on as comfortable a look as its dingy walls and narrow windows would allow; and Bridget, age five, had developed distinct genius for housekeeping, and washed dishes and faces with equal energy and enthusiasm. She did all errands also, and could not be cheated in the matter of change. She knew where the largest loaves were to be had, and sniffed suspiciously at the packets of tea.

"By the time she's seven, she'll do all but the washing," Rose said with pride, and Bridget reverted to childhood for an instant, and spun round on one foot as she made answer: —

"Shure, I could now, if you'd only be lettin' me."

“There’s women on the west side that’ll earn \$2.50 a dozen, for work no better than you’re doing now,” some one who had come from that quarter said to her one day, but Rose shook her head. There is a curious conservatism among these workers, who cling to familiar haunts and regard unknown regions with suspicion and even terror.

“I’ve no time for change,” Rose said. “It might not be as certain when I’d got it. I’ll run no risks;” and she tugged her great bundle of work up the stairs, rejoicing that living so near saved just so much on expressage, a charge paid by the workers themselves.

There were signs well known to the old hands of a probable reduction of prices, weeks before the first cut came. More fault was found. A slipped stitch or a break in the thread was pounced upon with even more promptness than had been their usual portion. Some hands were discharged, and at last came the general cut, resented by some, wailed over by all, but accepted as inevitable. Another, and another, and another followed. Too much production; too many Jew firms competing and under-bidding; more and more foreigners coming in ready to take the work at half price. These reasons and a dozen others of the same order were given glibly, and at first with a certain show of kindness and attempt to soften harsh facts as much as possible. But the patience of diplomacy soon failed, and questioners of all orders were told that if they did not like it they had nothing to do but to leave and allow a crowd of waiting substitutes to take their places at half rates. The shirt that had sold for seventy-five cents and one dollar had gone down to forty-five and sixty cents respectively, and as cottons and linens had fallen in the same proportion, there was still profit for all but the worker. Here and there were places on Grand or Division Streets where they might even be bought for thirty and forty cents, the price per dozen to the worker being at last from fifty to sixty cents. In the factories it was still possible to earn some approximation to the old rate, but employers had found that it was far cheaper to give out the work; some choosing to give the entire shirt at so much per dozen; others preferring to send out what is known as “team work,” flaps being done by one, bosoms by another, and so on.

For a time Rose hemmed shirt-flaps at four cents a dozen, then took first one form and then another of underclothing, the rates on which had fallen in the same proportion, to find each as sure a means of starvation as the last. She had no knowledge of ordinary family sewing, and no means of obtaining such work, had any training fitted her for it; domestic service was equally impossible for the same reason, and she added one that the children must not be left, and she struggled on, growing a little more haggard and worn with every week, but the pretty eyes still holding a gleam of the old merriment. Even that went at last. It was a hard winter. The steadiest work could not give them food enough or warmth enough. The children cried with hunger and shivered with cold. There was no refuge save in Norah’s bed, under the ragged quilts; and they cowered there till late in the day, watching Rose as she sat silent at the sewing-machine. There was small help for them in the house. The workers were all in like case, and for the most part drowned their troubles in stale beer from the bucket-shop below.

“Put the children in an asylum, and then you can marry Mike Rooney and be comfortable enough,” they said to her, but Rose shook her head.

“I’ve mothered ’em so far, and I’ll see ’em through,” she said, “but the saints only knows how. If I can’t do it by honest work, there’s one way left that’s sure, an’ I’ll try that.”

There came a Saturday night when she took her bundle of work, shirts again, and now eighty-five cents a dozen. There were five dozen, and when the \$1.50 was laid aside for rent it was easy to see what remained for food, coal, and light. Clothing had ceased to be part of the question. The children were barefoot. They had a bit of meat on Sundays, but for the rest, bread, potatoes, and tea were the diet, with a cabbage and bit of pork now and then for luxuries. Norah had been failing, and to-night Rose planned to buy her “something with a taste to it,” and looked at the sausages hanging in long links with a sudden reckless determination to get enough for all. She was faint with hunger, and staggered as she passed a basement restaurant, from which came savory smells, snuffed longingly by

some half-starved children. Her turn was long in coming, and as she laid her bundle on the counter she saw suddenly that her needle had “jumped,” and that half an inch or so of a band required resewing. As she looked the foreman’s knife slipped under the place, and in a moment half the band had been ripped.

“That’s no good,” he said. “You’re getting botchier all the time.”

“Give it to me,” Rose pleaded. “I’ll do it over.”

“Take it if you like,” he said indifferently, “but there’s no pay for that kind o’ work.”

He had counted her money as he spoke, and Rose cried out as she saw the sum.

“Do you mean you’ll cheat me of the whole dozen because half an inch on one is gone wrong?”

“Call it what you like,” he said. “R. & Co. ain’t going to send out anything but first-class work. Stand out of the way and let the next have a chance. There’s your three dollars and forty cents.”

Rose went out silently, choking down rash words that would have lost her work altogether, but as she left the dark stairs and felt again the cutting wind from the river, she stood still, something more than despair on her face. The children could hardly fare worse without her than with her. The river could not be colder than this cold world that gave her no chance, and that had no place for anything but rascals. She turned toward it as the thought came, but some one had her arm, and she cried out suddenly and tried to wrench away.

“Easy now,” a voice said. “You’re breakin’ your heart for trouble, an’ here I am in the nick o’ time. Come with me an’ you’ll have no more of it, for my pocket’s full to-night, an’ that’s more ’n it’ll be in the mornin’ if you don’t take me in tow.”

It was a sailor from a merchantman just in, and Rose looked at him for a moment. Then she took his arm and walked with him toward Roosevelt Street.

It might be dishonor, but it was certainly food and warmth for the children, and what did it matter? She had fought her fight for twenty years, and it had been a vain struggle. She took his money when morning came, and went home with the look that is on her face to-day.

“I’ll marry you out of hand,” the sailor said to her; but Rose answered, “No man alive’ll ever marry me after this night,” and she has kept her word. She has her trade, and it is a prosperous one, in which wages never fail. The children are warm and have no need to cry for hunger any more.

“It’s not a long life we live,” Rose says quietly. “My kind die early, but the children will be well along, an’ all the better when the time comes that they’ve full sense for not having to know what way the living comes. But let God Almighty judge who’s to blame most – I that was driven, or them that drove me to the pass I’m in.”

CHAPTER THIRD. SOME METHODS OF A PROSPEROUS FIRM

“The emancipation of women is certainly well under way, when all underwear can be bought more cheaply than it is possible to make it up at home, and simple suits of very good material make it hardly more difficult for a woman to clothe herself without thought or worry, than it has long been for a man.”

This was the word heard at a woman’s club not long ago, and reinforced within the week by two well-known journals edited in the interests of women at large. The editorial page of one held a fervid appeal for greater simplicity of dress and living in general, followed by half a column of entreaty to women to buy ready-made clothing, and thus save time for higher pursuits and the attainment of broader views. With feebler pipe, but in the same key, sounded the second advocate of simplification, adding: —

“Never was there a time when women could dress with as much real elegance on as small an expenditure of money. Bargains abound, and there is small excuse for dowdiness. The American woman is fast taking her place as the best-dressed woman in the civilized world.”

Believing very ardently that the right of every woman born includes not only “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but beauty also, it being one chief end of woman to include in her own personality all beauty attainable by reasonable means, I am in heartiest agreement with one side of the views quoted. But in this quest we have undertaken, and from which, once begun, there is no retreat, strange questions arise; and in this new dawn of larger liberty and wider outlook is seen the little cloud which, if no larger than a man’s hand, holds the seed of as wild a storm as has ever swept over humanity.

For emancipation on the one side has meant no corresponding emancipation for the other; and as one woman selects, well pleased, garment after garment, daintily tucked and trimmed and finished beyond any capacity of ordinary home sewing, marvelling a little that a few dollars can give such lavish return, there arises, from narrow attic and dark, foul basement, and crowded factory, the cry of the women whose life-blood is on these garments. Through burning, scorching days of summer; through marrow-piercing cold of winter, in hunger and rags, with white-faced children at their knees, crying for more bread, or, silent from long weakness, looking with blank eyes at the flying needle, these women toil on, twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours even, before the fixed task is done. The slice of baker’s bread and the bowl of rank black tea, boiled to extract every possibility of strength, are taken, still at the machine. It is easier to sit there than in rising and movement to find what weariness is in every limb. There is always a child old enough to boil the kettle and run for a loaf of bread; and all share the tea, which gives a fictitious strength, laying thus the foundation for the fragile, anæmic faces and figures to be found among the workers in the bag-factories, paper-box manufactories, etc.

“Why don’t they go into the country?” is often asked. “Why do they starve in the city when good homes and ample pay are waiting for them?”

It is not with the class to whom this question is applicable that we deal to-day. Of the army of two hundred thousand who battle for bread, nearly a third have no resource but the needle, and of this third many thousands are widows with children, to whom they cling with a devotion as strong as wiser mothers feel, and who labor night and day to prevent the scattering into asylums, and consequent destruction of the family as a family. They are widows through many causes that can hardly be said to come under the head of “natural.” Drunkenness leads, and the thousand accidents that are born of drunkenness, but there are other methods arising from the same greed that underlies most modern civilization. The enormous proportion of accidents, which, if not killing instantly, imply long disability and often death as the final result, come nine tenths of the time from criminal disregard of

any ordinary means of protecting machinery. One great corporation, owning thousands of miles of railroad, saw eight hundred men disabled in greater or less degree in one year, and still refused to adopt a method of coupling cars which would have saved the lives of the sixty-eight brakemen who were sacrificed to the instinct of economy dominating the superintendent. The same man refused to roof over a spot where a number of freight-handlers were employed during a stormy season, rheumatism and asthma being the consequences for many, and his reason had at least the merit of frankness, – a merit often lacking in explanations that, even when most plausible, cover as essential a brutality of nature.

“Men are cheaper than shingles,” he said. “There’s a dozen waiting to fill the place of one that drops out.”

In another case, in a great saw-mill, the owner had been urged to protect a lath-saw, swearing at the persistent request, even after the day when one of his best men was led out to the ambulance, his right hand hanging by a bit of skin, his death from lockjaw presently leaving one more widow to swell the number. It is of such men that a sturdy thinker wrote last year, “Man is a self-damnable animal,” and it is on such men that the curse of the worker lies heaviest. That they exist at all is hardly credited by the multitude who believe that, for this country at least, oppression and outrage are only names. That they exist in numbers will be instantly denied; yet to one who has heard the testimony given by weeping women, and confirmed by the reluctant admissions of employers themselves, there comes belief that no words can fully tell what wrong is still possible from man to man in this America, the hope of nations.

Is this a digression hardly to be pardoned in a paper on the trades and lives of women, – a deliberate turning toward an issue which has neither place nor right in such limits? On the contrary, it is all part of the same wretched story. The chain that binds humanity in one has not one set of links for men and another for women; and the blow aimed at one is felt also not only by those nearest, but by successive ranks to whom the shock, though only by indirect transmission, is none the less deadly in effect. And thus the wrong done on the huge scale appropriate to a great corporation finds its counterpart in a lesser but quite as well organized a wrong, born also of the spirit of greed, and working its will as pitilessly.

“If you employed on a large scale you would soon find that you ceased to look at your men as men,” said an impatient iron-worker not long ago. “They are simply so much producing power. I don’t propose to abuse them, but I’ve no time even to remember their faces, much less their names.”

Precisely on this principle reasons the employer of women, who are even less to be regarded as personalities than men. For the latter, once a year at least the employer becomes conscious of the fact that these masses of “so much producing power” are resolvable into votes, and on election day, if on no other, worthy of analysis. There is no such necessity in the case of women. The swarming crowd of applicants are absolutely at the mercy of the manager or foreman, who, unless there is a sudden pressure of work, makes the selections according to fancy, youth and any gleam of prettiness being unfailing recommendations. There are many firms of which this could not be said with any justice. There are many more in which it is the law, tacitly laid down, but none the less a fact. With such methods of selection go other methods supposed to be confined to the lowest grade of work and the lowest type of employer, both being referred to regions like Baxter or Division Streets. But they are to be found east or west indifferently, the illustration at present in mind being on Canal Street, within sound of Broadway. It is a prosperous firm, one whose trade-mark can be trusted; and here are a few of the methods by which this prosperity has been attained, and goes on in always-increasing ratio.

In the early years of their existence as a firm they manufactured on the premises, but, like many other firms, found that it was a very unnecessary expense. A roof over the heads of a hundred or more women, with space for their machines, meant not less than twenty-five hundred dollars a year to be deducted from the profits. Even floors in some cheaper quarter were still an expense to be avoided if possible. The easy way out of the difficulty was to make the women themselves pay

the rent, not in any tangible imposition of tax, but none the less certainly in fact. Nothing could be simpler. Manufacturing on the premises had only to cease, and it could even be put as a favor to the women that they were allowed to work at home. The rule established itself at once, and the firm, smiling serenely at the stoppage of this most damaging and most unnecessary leak, proceeded to make fresh discoveries of equally satisfactory possibilities. To each woman who applied for work it was stated: —

“We send all packages from the cutting-room by express, the charges to be paid by you. It’s a small charge, only fifteen cents, to be paid when the bundle comes in.”

“We can come for ours. We live close by. We don’t want to lose the fifteen cents,” a few objected, but the answer was invariable: —

“It suits us best to make up the packages in the cutting-room, and if you don’t like the arrangement there are plenty waiting that it will suit well enough.”

Plenty waiting! How well they knew it, and always more and more as the ships came in, and the great tide of “producing power” flowed through Castle Garden, and stood, always at high-water mark, in the wards where cheap labor may be found. Plenty waiting; and these women who could not wait went home and turned over their small store of pennies for the fifteen cents, the payment of which meant either a little less bread or an hour or two longer at the sewing-machine, defined as the emancipator of women.

In the mean time the enterprising firm had made arrangements with a small express company to deliver the packages at twelve cents each, and could thus add to the weekly receipts a clear gain of three cents per head. It is unnecessary to add that they played into each other’s hands, and that the wagon-drivers had no knowledge of anything beyond the fact that they were to collect the fifteen cents and turn it over to their superiors. But in some manner it leaked out; and a driver whose feelings had been stirred by the sad face of a little widow on Sixth Street told her that the fifteen cents was “a gouge,” and they had all better put their heads together and refuse to pay more than twelve cents.

“If we had any heads, it might do to talk about putting them together,” the little widow said bitterly. “For my part, I begin to believe women are born fools, but I’ll see what I can do.”

This “seeing” involved earning a dollar or two less for the week, but the cheat seemed so despicable a one that indignation made her reckless, and she went to the woman who had first directed her to the firm and had been in its employ almost from the beginning.

“It’s like ’em; oh, yes, it’s like ’em!” she said, “but we’ve no time to spend in stirring up things, and you know well enough what would be the end of it if we did, — discharged, and somebody else getting our wages. You’d better not talk too much if you want to keep your place.”

“That isn’t any worse than the thread dodge,” another woman said. “I know from a clerk in the house where they buy their thread, that they charge us five cents a dozen more than it costs them, though they make a great point of giving it to us at cost and cheaper than we could buy it ourselves.”

“Why don’t you club together and buy, then?” the little widow asked, to hear again the formula, “And get your walking-ticket next day? We know a little better than that.”

A few weeks later a new system of payment forced each worker to sacrifice from half an hour to an hour of precious time, her only capital. Hitherto payments had been made at the desk when work was brought in, but now checks were given on a Bowery bank, and the women must walk over in heat and storm alike, and wait their turn in the long line on the benches. If paid by the week this would make little difference, as any loss of time would be the employers’, but this form of payment is practically abolished, piece-work done at home meaning the utmost amount of profit to the employer, every loss in time being paid by the workers themselves. When questioned as to why the check system of payment had been adopted by this and various other firms, the reply was simply: —

“It saves trouble. The bank has more time to count out money than we have.”

“But the women? Does it seem quite fair that they should be the losers?”

“Fair? Anything’s fair in business. You’d find that out if you undertook to do it.”

As the case then at present stands, for this firm, and for many which have adopted the same methods, the working-woman not only pays the rent that would be required for a factory, but gives them a profit on expressage, thread, time lost in going to bank, and often the price on a dozen of garments, payment for the dozen being deducted by many foremen if there is a flaw in one. This foreman becomes the scapegoat if unpleasant questions are asked by any whose investigation might bring discredit on the firm. In some cases they refuse positively to give any information, but in most, questions are answered with suspicious glibness, and if reference is made to any difficulties encountered by the women in their employ, they take instant refuge in the statement: —

“Oh, that was before the last foreman left. We discharged him as soon as we found out how he had served the women.”

“Do you see those goods?” another asked, pointing to a counter filled with piles of chemises. “How do you suppose we make a cent when you can buy a chemise like that for fifty cents? We don’t. The competition is ruining us, and we’re talking of giving up the business.”

“That’s so. It’s really more in charity to the women than anything else that we go on,” his partner remarked, with a look toward him which seemed to hold a million condensed winks. “That price is just ruin; that’s what it is.”

Undoubtedly, but not for the firm, as the following figures will show, – figures given by a competent forewoman in a large establishment where she had had eleven years’ experience: twenty-seven yards and three-quarters are required for one dozen chemises, the price paid for such cotton as is used in one selling at fifty cents being five cents per yard, or \$1.40 for the whole amount; thirty yards of edging at 4½ cents a yard furnishes trimming for the dozen, at \$1.35; and four two-hundred-yard spools of cotton are required, at twenty-five cents per dozen, or eight cents per dozen garments. The seamer who sews up and hems the bodies of the garments receives thirty cents a dozen, and the “maker” – this being the technical term for the more experienced worker who puts on band and sleeves – receives from ninety cents to one dollar a dozen, though at present the rates run from seventy-five to ninety cents. Our table, then, stands as follows: —

Cloth for one dozen chemises	\$1.40
Edging " "	1.35
Thread " "	.08
Seamer " "	.30
Maker " "	.90
Total cost of dozen	\$4.03
Wholesale price per dozen	5.25
Profit per dozen	1.22

The chemise which sells at seven dollars per dozen has the additional value in quality of cloth and edging, the same price being paid the work-women, this price varying only in very slight degree till the excessively elaborate work demanded by special orders. One class of women in New York, whose trade has been a prosperous one since ever time began, pay often one hundred dollars a dozen for the garments, which are simply a mass of lace and cobweb cambric, tucked and puffed, and demanding the highest skill of the machine operator, who even in such case counts herself happy if she can make eight or nine dollars a week. And if any youth and comeliness remain to her, why need there be wonder if the question frame itself: “Why am I the maker of this thing, earning barest living, when, if I choose, I, too, can be buyer and wearer and live at ease?”

Wonder rather that one remains honest when the only thing that pays is vice.

For the garments of lowest grade to be found in the cheapest quarters of the city the price ranges from twenty-five to thirty cents, the maker receiving only thirty cents a dozen, and cloth, trimming, and thread being of the lowest quality. The profit in such case is wellnigh imperceptible; but for the class of employer who secures it, content to grovel in foul streets, and know no joy of living save the one delight of seeing the sordid gains roll up into hundreds of thousands, it is still profit, and he is content. As I write, an evening paper containing the advertisement of a leading dry-goods firm is

placed before me, and I read: “Chemises, from 12½ cents up.” Here imagination stops. No list of cost prices within my reach tells me how this is practicable. But one thing is certain. Even here it is not the employer who loses; and if it is a question of but a third of a cent profit, be sure that that profit is on his side, never on the side of the worker.

CHAPTER FOURTH. THE BARGAIN COUNTER

The problem of the last chapter is, if not plain, at least far plainer than when it left the pen, and it has become possible to understand how the garment sold at twelve and a half cents may still afford its margin of profit. It has also been made plain that that profit is, as there stated, “never on the side of the worker,” but that it is wrung from her by the sharpest and most pitiless of all the methods known to unscrupulous men and the women who have chosen to emulate them. For it has been my evil fortune in this quest to find women not only as filled with greed and as tricky and uncertain in their methods as the worst class of male employers, but even more ingenious in specific modes of imposition. Without exception, so far as I can discover, they have been workers themselves, released for a time it may be by marriage, but taking up the trade again, either from choice or necessity. They have learned every possibility of cheating. They know also far better than men every possibility of nagging, and as they usually own a few machines they employ women on their own premises and keep a watchful eye lest the smallest advantage be gained. The majority prefer to act as “sweaters,” this releasing them from the uncertainties attending the wholesale manufacturer, and as the work is given to them at prices at or even below the “life limit,” it is not surprising that those to whom they in turn pass it on find their percentage to mean something much nearer death than life.

“Only blind eyes could have failed to see all this before,” some reader is certain to say. “How is it possible that any one dealing directly with the question could doubt for a moment the existence of this and a thousand-fold worse fraud?”

Only possible from the same fact that makes these papers a necessity. They hold only new phases of the old story. The grain has had not one threshing alone, but many, and yet for the most patient and persistent of searchers after truth is ever fresh surprise at its nature and extent. Given one or a dozen exposures of a fraud, and we settle instinctively into the conviction that its power has ended. It is barely conceivable to the honest mind that cheating has wonderful staying power, and that not one nor a thousand exposures will turn into straight paths feet used to crooked ones. And when a business man, born to all good things and owning a name known as the synonyme of the best the Republic offers to-day, states calmly, “There is no such thing as business without lying,” what room remains for honor or justice or humanity among men whose theory is the same, and who can gild it with no advantage of birth or training? It is a wonderful century, and we are civilizing with a speed that takes away the breath and dims the vision, but there are dark corners still, and in the shadow Greed and Corruption and Shame hold high carnival, with nameless shapes, before which even civilization cowers. Their trace is found at every turn, but we deal with only one to-day, helpless, even when face to face, to say what method will most surely mean destruction.

We settle so easily into the certainty that nothing can be as bad as it seems, that moments of despair come to all who would rouse men to action. Not one generation nor many can answer the call sounding forever in the ears of every son of man; but he who has heeded has at least made heeding more possible for those that follow; and the time comes at last when the way must be plain for all. To make it plainer many a popular conviction must be laid aside, and among them the one that follows.

It is a deeply rooted belief that the poor understand and feel for the poor beyond any possibility in those who have never known cold and hunger and rags save as uncomfortable terms used too freely by injudicious agitators. Like many another popular belief the groundwork is in the believer’s own mind, and has its most tangible existence in story-books. There are isolated cases always of self-sacrifice and compassion and all gentle virtues, but long experience goes to show that if too great comfort is deadening, too little is brutalizing, and that pity dies in the soul of man or woman to whom no pity has been shown. It is easy to see, then, how the woman who has found injustice and

oppression the law of life, deals in the same fashion when her own time comes, and tyrannizes with the comfortable conviction that she is by this means getting even with the world. She knows every sore spot, and how best to make the galled jade wince, and lightens her own task by the methods practised in the past upon herself. This is one species to be dealt with, and a far less dangerous one than the craftier and less outspokenly brutal order, just above her in grade. It is by these last that some of the chief frauds on women are perpetrated, and here we find one source of the supplies that furnish the bargain counters.

We read periodically of firms detected in imposing upon women, and are likely to feel that such exposure has ended their career as firms once for all. In every trade will be found one or more of these, whose methods of obtaining hands are fraudulent, and who advertise for “girls to learn the trade,” with no intention of retaining them beyond the time in which they remain content to work without pay. There are a thousand methods of evasion, even when the law faces them and the victim has made formal complaint. As a rule she is too ignorant and too timid for complaint or anything but abject submission, and this fact is relied upon as certain foundation for success. But, if determined enough, the woman has some redress in her power. Within a few years, after long and often defeated attempts, the Woman’s Protective Union has brought about legislation against such fraud, and any employer deliberately withholding wages is liable to fifteen days’ imprisonment and the costs of the suit brought against him, a fact of which most of them seem to be still quite unaware. This law, so far as imprisonment is concerned, has no application to women, and they have learned how to evade the points which might be made to bear upon them, by hiring rooms, machines, etc., and swearing that they have no personal property that can be levied upon. Or, if they have any, they transfer it to some friend or relative, as in the case of Madame M – , a fashionable dressmaker notorious for escaping from payment seven times out of ten. She has accumulated money enough to become the owner of a large farm on Long Island, but so ingeniously have all her arrangements been made that it is impossible to make her responsible, and her case is used at the Union as a standing illustration of the difficulty of circumventing a woman bent upon cheating.

A firm, a large proportion of whose goods are manufactured in this manner, can well afford to stock the bargain counters of popular stores. They can afford also to lose slightly by work imperfectly done, though, even with learners, this is in smaller proportion than might be supposed. The girl who comes in answer to their advertisement is anxious to learn the trade at once, and gives her best intelligence to mastering every detail. Her first week is likely to hold an energy of effort that could hardly last, and she can often be beguiled by small payments and large promises to continue weeks and even months, always expecting the always delayed payment. Firms dealing in such fashion change their quarters often, unless in league with police captains who have been given sufficient reasons for obliviousness of their methods, and who have also been known to silence timid complaints with the threat of a charge of theft. But there is always a multitude ready to be duped, and no exposure seems sufficient to prevent this, and women who have once established a business on this system seem absolutely reckless as to any possible consequences.

There is at present on Third Avenue a Mrs. F – , who for eleven years has conducted a successful business built upon continuous fraud. She is a manufacturer of underwear, and the singular fact is that she has certain regular employees who have been with her from the beginning, and who, while apparently unconscious of her methods, are practically partners in the fraud. She is a woman of good presence and address, and one to whom girls submit unquestioningly, contending, even in court, that she never meant to cheat them; and it is still an open question with those who know her best how far she herself recognizes the fraud in her system. The old hands deny that it is her custom to cheat, and though innumerable complaints stand against her, she has usually paid on compulsion, and insisted that she always meant to. Her machines never lack operators, and the grade of work turned out is of the best quality. Her advertisement appears at irregular intervals, is answered by swarms of applicants, and there are always numbers waiting their turn. On a side street a few blocks distant is

a deep basement, crowded with machines and presided over by a woman with many of her personal characteristics. It is the lowest order of slop work that is done here, but it helps to fill the bargain counters of the poorer stores, and the workers are an always shifting quantity. It is certain that both places are practically the property of Mrs. F – , but no man has yet been cunning enough to determine once for all her responsibility, and no law yet framed covers any ground that she has chosen as her own. Her prototypes are to be found in every trade open to women, and their numbers grow with the growth of the great city and strengthen in like proportion. The story of one is practically the story of all. Popularly supposed to be a method of trickery confined chiefly to Jews, investigation shows that Americans must share the odium in almost as great degree, and that the long list includes every nationality known to trade.

We have dealt thus far with fraud as the first and chief procurer for bargain counters. Another method results from a fact that thus far must sum up as mainly Jewish. Till within very little more than a year, a large dry-goods firm on the west side employed many women in its underwear department. The work was piece-work, and done by the class of women who own their own machines and work at home. Prices were never high, but the work was steady and the pay prompt. The firm for a time made a specialty of “Mother Hubbard” night-gowns, for which they paid one dollar a dozen for “making,” this word covering the making and putting in of yoke and sleeves, the “seamer” having in some cases made the bodies at thirty cents a dozen. Many of the women, however, made the entire garment at \$1.30 per dozen, ten being the utmost number practicable in a day of fourteen hours. Suddenly the women were informed that their services would not be required longer. An east-side firm bearing a Jewish name had contracted to do the same work at eighty cents a dozen, and all other underwear in the same proportions. Steam had taken the place of foot-power, and the women must find employment with firms who were willing to keep to slower methods. Necessarily these are an always lessening minority. Competition in this race for wealth crushes out every possibility of thought for the worker save as so much producing power, and what hand and foot cannot do steam must. In several cases in this special manufacture the factories have been transferred to New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where rent is a mere song, and where girls flock in from the adjacent country, eager for the work that represents something higher than either ordinary mill work or the household service they despise.

“What can we do?” said one manufacturer lately, when asked how he thought the thing would end. “If there were any power quicker than steam, or any way of managing so that women could feed five or six machines, that would have to come next, else every one of us would go to the wall together, the pressure is so tremendous. Of course there’s no chance for the women, but then you must remember there’s precious little chance for the employer either. This competition is a sort of insanity. It gluts the market with cheap goods, and gives a sense of prosperity, but it is the death of all legitimate, reasonable business. It won’t surprise me if this whole trade of manufacturing underwear becomes a monopoly, and one man – like O’H – , for instance – swallows up the whole thing. Lord help the women then, for there’ll be no help in man!”

“Suppose co-operation were tried? What would be the effect?”

“No effect, because there isn’t confidence enough anywhere to make men dare a co-operative scheme. Even the workers would distrust it, and a sharp business man laughs in your face if you mention the word. It doesn’t suit American notions. It might be a good thing if there were any old-fashioned business men left, – men content with slow profits and honest dealing, – as my father was, for instance. But he wouldn’t have a ghost of a chance to-day. The whole system of business is rotten, and there will have to be a reconstruction clean from the bottom, though it’s the men that need it first. We’re the maddest nation for money on the face of the earth, and the race is a more killing one every year. I’m half inclined to think sometimes that mankind will soon be pretty much a superfluity, the machines are getting so intelligent; and it may be these conditions that seem to upset you so are simply means of killing off those that are not wanted, and giving place to a less sensitive order of beings. Lord help them, I say again, for there’s no help in man.”

The speaker nodded, as if this rather unexpected flight of imagination was an inspiration in which might lie the real solution of all difficulties, and hurried away to his waiting niche in the great competitive system. And as he went, there came to me words spoken by one of the workers, in whose life hope was dead, and who also had her theory of any future under to-day's conditions: —

“I’ve worked eleven years. I’ve tried five trades with my needle and machine. My shortest day has been fourteen hours, for I had the children and they had to be fed. There’s not one of these trades that I don’t know well. It isn’t work that I’ve any trouble in getting. It’s wages. Five years ago I could earn \$1.50 a day, and we were comfortable. Then it began to go down, — \$1.25, then \$1.00. There it stopped awhile, and I got used to that, and could even get some remains of comfort out of it. I had to plan to the last half cent. We went cold often, but we were never hungry. But then it fell again, — to ninety cents, to eighty-five. For a year the best that I can do I have earned not over eighty cents a day, — sometimes only seventy-five. I’m sixty-two years old. I can’t learn new ways. I am strong. I always was strong. I run the machine fourteen hours a day, with just the stoppings that have to be to get the work ready. I’ve never asked a man alive for a penny beyond what my own hands can earn, and I don’t want it. I suppose the Lord knows what it all means. It’s His world and His children in it, and I’ve kept myself from going crazy many a time by saying it was His world and that somehow it must all come right in the end. But I don’t believe it any more. He’s forgotten. There’s nothing left but men that live to grind the face of the poor; that chuckle when they find a new way of making a cent or two more a week out of starving women and children. I never thought I should feel so; I don’t know myself; but I tell you I’m ready for murder when I think of these men. If there’s no justice above, it isn’t quite dead below; and if men with money will not heed, the men and the women without money will rise some day. How? I don’t know. We’ve no time to plan, and we’re too tired to think, but it’s coming somehow, and I’m not ashamed to say I’ll join in if I live to see it come. It’s seas of tears that these men sail on. It’s our life-blood they drink and our flesh that they eat. God help them if the storm comes, for there’ll be no help in man.”

Employer and employed had ended in wellnigh the same words; but the gulf between no words have spanned, and it widens day by day.

CHAPTER FIFTH. A FASHIONABLE DRESSMAKER

“Come now, be reasonable, won’t you? You’ve got to move on, you know, and why don’t you do it?”

“I’m that reasonable that a bench of judges couldn’t be more so; and I’ll not move on for anything less than dynamite, and I ain’t sure I would for that. It’s only a choice between starvation and going into the next world in little bits, and I don’t suppose it makes much difference which way it’s done.”

The small, pale, dogged-looking little woman who announced this conviction did not even rise from the steps where she sat looking up to the big policeman, who faced her uneasily, half turning as if he would escape the consequences of rash action if he knew how. Nothing could be more mysterious. For it was within sight of Broadway, on one of the best-known side streets near Union Square, where business signs were few and of the most decorous order, and where before one door, bearing the name of one of the best-known fashionable dressmakers, a line of carriages stood each day during the busy season. A name hardly less known was on the door-plate of the great house before which she sat, and which still bore every mark of prosperous ownership, while from one of the windows looked the elaborately dressed head of Madame herself, the anxiety in her eyes contradicting the scornful smile on her thin lips. The door just beyond No. – opened, and a stout gentleman descended one step and stood eying the policeman belligerently. That official looked up the street as if wishing for cry of “murder” or “stop thief” around the corner, but hearing neither, concentrated again on the antagonist whose irregular methods defied precedent and gave him a painful sense of insecurity. If two could listen, why not three? – and I paused near the steps, eyed considerately by the stout gentleman, who was evidently on the outlook for allies. A look of intelligence passed between Madame and the policeman, and her head disappeared from the window, a blind on the second story moving slightly and announcing a moment later that she had taken a less conspicuous post of observation.

“Move on now, I tell you!” began the policeman again, but paused, for as he spoke a slender, bright-eyed girl came swiftly toward them, and paused on the first step with a glance of curiosity at the little group.

“Have you come to answer Madame M – ’s advertisement?” the little woman said, as she rose from the steps and laid her hand detainingly on the hurrying figure.

“Yes,” the girl answered hesitatingly, pulling away from the hand that held.

“Then, unless you’ve got anything else to do and like to give your time and strength for naught, keep away. You’ll get no wages, no matter what’s promised. I’ve been there six months, kept on by fair promises, and I know. I’ll let no girl go in there without warning.”

“It’s a good-looking place,” the girl said doubtfully.

“It’s a den of thieves all the same. If you don’t believe me, come down to the Woman’s Protective Union on Clinton Place, and you’ll see my case on the book there, and judgment against this woman, that’s no more mercy than a Hottentot and lies that smoothly that she’d humbug an angel of light. Ah! that’s good!” she added, for the girl had shaken off her hand and sped away as swiftly as she had come. “That’s seven since yesterday, and I wish it were seven hundred. It’s time somebody turned watchdog.”

“That ain’t your business. That’s a matter for the law,” said the big policeman, who had glanced anxiously up to the second-story window and then looked reassured and serene, as the stout gentleman made a significant movement, which indicated that bribery was as possible for one sex as for the other. “The law’ll straighten out anything that you’ve a mind to have it.”

“The law! Lord help them that think the law is going to see them through,” the small woman said, with a fierceness that made the big policeman start and lay his hand on his club. “What’s the law

worth when it can't give to you one dollar of two hundred and eight that's owed; and she that earned them gasping her life out with consumption? If it was my account alone do you suppose I'd care? Mine's eighty-five, and I went to law for it, to find she'd as long a head as she has smooth tongue, and had fixed things so that there wasn't a stick of furniture nor a dollar of property that could be levied on. If she'd been a man the new law that gives a cheating employer fifteen days' imprisonment might have worked with her as it's worked with many a rascal that never knew he could be brought up with a round turn. But she's a woman and she slides through, and a judgment against her isn't worth the paper it's written on. So as I can't take it out in money I take it out in being even with her. There are the papers that show I don't lie, and here I sit the time I've fixed to sit, and if she gets the three new hands she's after, it won't be because I haven't done what came to me to do to hinder it."

The policeman had moved away before the words ended, the stout gentleman having descended the steps for a moment, and stood in a position which rendered his little transaction feasible and almost invisible. He beckoned to me as the small woman sat down again on the steps, and I followed him into the vestibule.

"You're interested, my dear madam," he said. "You're interested, and you ought to be. I've stayed home from business to make sure she wasn't interfered with, and I'd do it again with the greatest pleasure. I'd like to post one like her before every establishment in New York where cheating goes on, and I'm going to see this thing through!"

There was no time for questions. My appointment must be kept, and with one pause to take the name and number of the small Nemesis I went my way. Three days later she sat there still, and on the following one, as the warm spring rain fell steadily, she kept her post, sheathed in a rubber cloak, and protected by an umbrella which, from its size and quality, I felt must be the stout gentleman's. With Saturday night her self-imposed siege ended, and she marched away, leaving the enemy badly discomfited and much more disposed to consider the rights of the individual, if not of the worker in general. As Madame's prices were never less than fifty dollars for the making of a suit, ranging from this to a hundred or more, and as her three children were still small and her husband an undiscoverable factor, it became an interesting question to know where she placed the profits which, even when lessened by non-paying customers, could never be anything but great. Madame, however, had been too keen even for the sharp-witted lawyer of the Protective Union, whose utmost efforts only disclosed the fact that she was the probable backer of a manufacturer whose factory and farm were on Long Island, and whose business capacity had till within a few years never insured him more than a bare living.

It is an old story, yet an always new one, and in this case Madame had quieted her conscience by providing a comfortable lunch for the workers and allowing them more space than is generally the portion in a busy establishment. Well housed and well fed through the day and paid at intervals enough to meet the demands of rent or board bill, it was easy to satisfy her hands by the promise of full and speedy settlement, and when this failed, to tell a pitiful tale of unpaid bills and conscienceless customers, who could not be forced. When these resources were exhausted discharge solved any further difficulties, and a new set came in, to undergo the same experience. In an establishment where honesty has any place, the wages are rather beyond the average, skirt-hands receiving from seven to nine dollars a week and waist-hands from ten to fifteen. In the case of stores this latter class make from eighteen to forty dollars per week, and often accumulate enough capital to start in business for themselves. But a skirt-hand like Mary M – seldom passes on to anything higher, and counts herself well paid if her week of sixty hours brings her nine dollars, not daring to grumble seriously if it falls to seven or even six. On the east side the same work must be done for from four to six dollars a week, the latter sum being considered high pay. But the work is an advance upon factory work and has a better sound, the dressmaker's assistant looking down upon the factory hand or even the seamstress as of an inferior order.

In time I learned the full story of the little woman, ordinarily reticent and shrinking, but brought by trouble and indignation to the fiercest protest against oppression. Born in a New-England village she had learned a milliner's trade, to which she presently added dressmaking, and succeeded in making a fair living, till bitten by the desire to see larger life and share all the good that the city seems to offer the shut-in country life, she came to New York with her small savings, expecting to find work easily, and did so, going at once into a store where a friend was at work. Sanitary conditions were all bad. Her hall bedroom on a fourth floor and the close confinement all did their work, and a long illness wasted strength and savings. When recovery came her place had been filled; and she wandered from store to store seeking employment, doing such odd jobs as were found at intervals, and powerless to recover the lost ground.

"It was like heaven to me," she said, "when my friend came back to the city and got me that place as skirt-hand at Madame M – 's. I was so far gone I had even thought of the river, and said to myself it might be the easiest way out. You can't help but like Madame, for she's smooth-tongued and easy, and praises your work, and she made me think I'd soon be advanced and get the place I ought to have. She paid regularly at first, and I began to pick up courage. It was over-hours always. Madame would come in smiling and say: 'Ah, dear girls! What trouble! It is an order that must be finished so soon. Who will be kind and stay so leetle longer?' Then we all stayed, and she'd have tea made and send it in, and sandwiches or something good, and they all said, 'She's an angel. You won't find anybody like Madame.' She was so plausible, too, that even when there was longer and longer time between the payments the girls didn't blame her, but borrowed of one another and put off their landladies and managed all ways to save her feelings. Jenny G – had been here longer than any of them, and she worshipped Madame and wouldn't hear a word even when one or another complained. But Jenny's feet were on the ground and she hadn't a stitch of warm underclothes, and she took a cold in December, and by January it had tight hold of her. I went to Madame myself then, and begged her to pay Jenny if it wasn't but a little, and she cried and said if she could only raise the money she would. She didn't; and by and by I went again, and then she turned ugly. I looked at her dumfounded when she spoke her real mind and said if we didn't like it we could leave; there were plenty of others. I wouldn't believe my ears even, and said to myself she was worn out with trouble and couldn't mean a word of it. I wanted money for myself, but I wouldn't ask even for anybody but Jenny.

"Next day Madame brought her ten dollars of the two hundred and twenty she owed her, and Jenny got shoes; but it was too late. I knew it well, for I'd seen my sister go the same way. Quick consumption ain't to be stopped with new shoes or anything but new lungs, and there's no patent for them yet that ever I've heard of. She was going last night when I went round, and sure as you live I'm going to put her death in the paper myself. I've been saving my money off lunches to do it, and I'll write it: 'Murdered by a fashionable dressmaker on – Street, in January, 1886, Jenny G – , age nineteen years and six months.' Maybe they won't put it in, but here it is, ready for any paper that's got feeling enough to care whether sewing-girls are cheated and starved and killed, or whether they get what they've earned. I've got work at home now. It don't matter so much to me; but I'm a committee to attend to this thing, and I'll find out every fraud in New York that I can. I've got nine names now, – three of 'em regular fashionables on the west side, and six of 'em following their example hard as they can on the east; and a friend of mine has printed, in large letters, 'Beware of' at the head of a slip, and I add names as fast as I get them, and every girl that comes in my way I warn against them. Do much good? No. They'll get all the girls they want, and more; but it's some satisfaction to be able to say they are cheats, making a living out of the flesh and blood of their dupes, and I'll say it till I die."

Here stands the experience of one woman with fearlessness enough to protest and energy enough to have at last secured a tolerable living. The report, for such it may be considered, might be made of many more names than those upon her black list, or found on the books of the Union. Happily for the worker, they form but a small proportion of the long list of dressmakers who deal fairly. But the life of the ordinary hand who has not ability enough to rise is, like that of the great majority who

depend on the needle, whether machine or hand, filled with hardship, uncertainty, overwork, under-pay. The large establishments have next to no dull season, but we deal in the present chapter only with private workers; and often, on the east side especially, where prices and wages are always at the lowest ebb, the girls who have used all their strength in overwork during the busy season of spring and fall must seek employment in cigar factories or in anything that offers in the intermediate time, the wages giving no margin for savings which might aid in tiding over such periods. The dressmaker herself is often a sufferer, conscienceless customers abounding, who pay for the work of one season only when anxious for that of the next. Often it is mere carelessness, – the recklessness which seems to make up the method of many women where money obligations are concerned; but often also they pass deliberately from one dressmaker to another, knowing that New York holds enough to provide for the lifetime of the most exacting customer. There is small redress for these cases, and the dressmaker probably argues the matter for herself and decides that she has every right, being cheated, to balance the scale by a little of the same order on her own account.

A final form of rascality referred to in a previous chapter is found here, as in every phase of the clothing trade, whether on small or large scale. Girls are advertised for “to learn the trade,” and the usual army of applicants appear, those who are selected being told that the first week or two will be without wages, and only the best workers will be kept. Each girl is thus on her mettle, and works beyond her strength and beyond any fair average, to find herself discharged at the end of the time and replaced by an equally eager and equally credulous substitute. There are other methods of fraud that will find place in a consideration of phases of the same work in the great establishments, some difficulties of the employer being reserved for the same occasion.

CHAPTER SIXTH.

MORE METHODS OF PROSPEROUS FIRMS

To do justice to employer as well as employed is the avowed object of our search, yet as it goes on, and the methods made necessary by competition become more and more clear, it is evident that back of every individual case of wrong and oppression lies a deeper wrong and a more systematized oppression. Master and servant alike are in the same bonds, and the employer is driven as mercilessly as he drives. He may deny it. He may even be quite unconscious of his own subjection, or, if he thinks at all of its extent, may look enviously at the man or the corporation that has had power to enslave him. The monopolist governs not only the market but the bodies and souls of all who provide wares for that market; yet the fascination of such power is so tremendous that to stand side by side with him is the dream of every young merchant, – the goal on which his eyes are set from the beginning. Only in like power is any satisfaction to be found. Any result below this high-water mark can be counted little else than failure.

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