PRISONERS OF POVERTY

WOMEN WORKERS TELL THEIR TRADES' SECRETS AGAIN

BY HELEN CAMPBELL.

I.

BETWEEN THE RIVERS.

"The nearer the river the nearer to hell."

It was a strong word, and the big chest from which it issued held more of the same sort—a tall worker, carpenter apparently, hurrying on with his box of tools and talking as he went, with a concession half his size, but with quite his power of expression, interjecting strange German oaths as he listened to the story poured out to him. With that story we have at present nothing to do. But the first words lingered and they linger still as the summary of such life as is lived by many workers on east and west sides alike.

Were the laws governing a series of this nature rigidly observed, the present phase of this investigation could hardly be the point at which to stop for any detail of how these workers live from day to day. But as the search has gone on, through those hours when Christmas joy is in the air, when the smallest shop hangs out its Christmas token, and the great stores are thronged with buyers far into the evening, I think of the lives in which Christmas has no place, of the women for whom all days are alike, each one the synonyme of relentless, unending toil; of the children who have never known a childhood and for whom Christmas is but a name. For even when mission and refuge have done their utmost, there is still the army unreached by any effort and in great part unreachable, no method recorded in any system of the day having power to drag them to the light and thus make known to us, what manner of creature it is that cowers in shadowy places and has no foothold in the path we call progress. That their own ignorance holds them in these shadows, bound as with chains that even a little more knowledge would break the bonds, in part at least, has no present bearing on the fact that thousands are alive among us to whom existence has brought only pain, and that fresh thousands join this dumb throng of martyrs with every added year. If they had learned in any degree how to use to the best advantage the pittance earned, there would be less need of these papers, yet as I read the assurances of our political economists, that a wage of $4 per week is sufficient, if intelligently used, to supply all the actual necessities of the worker, the question pushes itself between the lines, "Why should they be forced to know only necessities, and is this statement made of any save those too ignorant to define their wants and needs, too helpless to dare any protestation, even if more knowledge had come?"

The professional political economist of the old school, the school to which all but a handful belong, takes refuge in the census returns as the one reply to any arraignment of the present. Blind as a bat to any figures save his own, he answers all complaint with the formula: "In 1860 the property of this country equally divided would have given every man, woman and child $514 each. In 1870 the share would have been $624; in 1880, $814. In 1886, returns are not in, but $900 and more would be the division per capita. What madness to talk of suffering when this flood of wealth pours through the land. Admitting that the lowest class suffer, it is chiefly crime, drunkenness, etc., that bring suffering. The majority are perfectly comfortable."

Having read this statement in many letters and heard it in interviews as well, it seems plain that the conviction embodied in both has fastened itself upon that portion of the public whose thinking is done for them and who range themselves by choice with that order who would not be convinced "even though one rose from the dead." "The majority are perfectly comfortable." Let us see how comfortable.

I turn first to the pair, a mother and daughter, a portion of whose experience found place in the sixth number of this series. Here, as in so many cases, there had been better days, and when these suddenly ended a period of bewildered helplessness, in which the widow felt that respectability like hers must know no compromise, and that any step that would involve her "being talked about," was a step toward destruction. She must live on a decent street, in a house where she need not be ashamed to have the relations come, and she did, till brought face to face with the fact that there were no more dollars to spend upon respectability, and that her quarters must hereafter conform to her earnings. She had been a dweller in that curious triangle, the remnant of "Greenwich village," the stronghold still of old New-York, and she went at once to a region as unfamiliar to her conservative feet as Baxter or Hester, or any other street given over to evil. Far over toward the North River, in the first floor of a great tenement house inhabited by the better class of Irish chiefly, she took two rooms, one a mere closet where the bed could stand, bestowed in them such furniture as remained, and at fifty, with no clew left that any friend could trace, began the fight for bread.

"It might have been better to go to the country," she said. "But you see, I wasn't used to the country, and then any work I could get to do was right here. I'd always liked to sew, and so had Emeline, and we found we could get regular work on children's suits with skirts and such things in the dull seasons. It was good pay and we were comfortable till prices began to fall. We made $15 a week sometimes and could have got ahead if it hadn't been for a little debt of my husband's that I wanted to pay, for we'd never owed anybody a penny and I couldn't let even that debt stand against his name. But when it was paid, somehow I came down with rheumatic fever, and I've never got back my full strength yet. And the prices kept going down. Emmy is an expert. I never know her make a mistake, but working twelve and fourteen hours a day—and it's most often fourteen—the most she has made for more than a year and a half is 85 cents a day, and on that we've managed. I suppose we couldn't if I ever went out, but I've had no shoes in two years. I patch the ones I got then with one of my husband's old coats and keep along, but we never get ahead enough for me to have shoes, and Emmy too, and she's the one that has to go out. How we live? It's all in this little book. It's foolish to put it down, and yet I always somehow liked to see how the money went, even when I had plenty, and it's second nature to put down every cent. Take last month. It had twenty-seven working days; $22 95. Out of that we took first the $11 for rent. I've been here eleven years, and they've raised a dollar on me twice. That leaves $12 95 for provisions and coal and light and clothes. 'Tisn't much for two people, is it? You wouldn't think it could be done, would you? Well, it is, and here's the expense for one week for what we eat:

Sugar, 23; Tomatoes, 7; Potatoes, 5	$0 35
Tea, 15; Butter, 30; Bread, 10	0 57
Coal, 12; Milk, 16; Cheese, 10	0 38
Oil, 15; Paper, 1; Clams, 10; Potatoes, 5	0 31
Cabbage, 5; Bread, 7; Honey, 15; Hominy, 3	0 30
Total	$1 90

"This week was an expensive one, for I got a pound of butter at once, but it will last into next week. And we had to have the scissors sharpened; that was 5 cents. There would have been 5 cents for wood, but you see they're building down the street, and one of the boys up-stairs brought me a basketful of bits. You see there's no meat. We like it, but we only get it a bit for Sundays sometimes. Emmy never wants much. Running a machine all day seems to take your appetite. But she likes clams; you see we had them twice, and I happened to read in the paper a good while ago that you could make soup of the water the cabbage was boiled in; a quart of the water and a cup of milk and a bit of butter and some flour to thicken. You wouldn't think it could be good, but it is, and it goes a good way. The coal ought not to be in with the food, ought it, unless it stays because I have to run it cooking? We ought to spend so much on food, but I don't seem to make it less. Sundays, when you take out the coal and oil and the rent—and we do want to see a proper sometimes—it's only $1 89 for six days; 31 cents apiece; almost 5½ cents a day, but I don't well seem to make it less. I sell in 12 cents a day before. For that much that makes $7 44 a month, and so you see there's $8 51 left. Then there are Emmy's earnings. When she was sick, for weeks she went down-town and only averaged at home, [illegible] 70 for the month, and that is $17 50. Out of that we pay $11 rent, and so of that week we came for month. The month before, my dear, she was sick and I walked a good deal so we earned $26 70, and she got two remnants for $1 80 at Ehrich's and I made her a dress that looks very well. But she's nothing but patchwork underneath, and I'm the same only worse. The coal is the trouble. By the scuttle it costs so much, and I try to get ahead and have a quarter of a ton at once, for there are places here to lose coal, but I never can. If it weren't for Emmy's missing me, it would be better for me to die, for I'm no use, you see, and times get no better but worse. But I can't, and we must get along somehow. Lord help us all."

"How could 12 cents' worth of coal do a week's cooking?"

"It couldn't. It didn't. I've a little oil stove that just boils the kettle, and tea and bread and butter are what we have mostly. A gallon of oil goes a long way, and I can cook small things over it, too. The washing takes coal, and you see I must have soap and all that. I don't see how we could spend less. I've learned to manage even with what we get now, but there's a woman next door that I know better than anybody in this house, for here it always seemed to me best to keep quite to myself for many reasons, but the chief that I'm always hoping for a change and a chance for Emmy. But this woman is a nice German woman that fell on the ice and sprained her ankle last winter, and we saw to her well as we could till she got better. She won't mind telling how she manages, but she's in the top of the house. She's a widow and everybody dead belonging to her."

This house was a grade below the last in cleanliness, and children swarmed on stairs and in hall. Up to the fourth floor back, a ten-feet-square room, with one window, where, in spite of a defective sink in the hall, the odor from which seemed to penetrate and saturate everything, spotless cleanliness was the expression of every inch of space.

"Vy not?" the old woman said, when she understood my desire. "I tells you mine an' more, too, for down de stairs I buy every day for the girl that is sick and goes out no more. If I quick were as girl I could save much, but I have sixty-five year. How shall I be quick? I earn forty-five, fifty cents sometime, but forty-five for day's work when I go as I can. 'An' so for week dat is $2 70; I can $10 a month; sometimes $12, and I pays $3 for this room. To eat I will buy tea and our bread—rye, for dat is stronger as your fine wheat. Tea is American, but I will not beer any more, since I see how women drinks it and de kinder, and it not like our beer but more tipsy. So I makes tea, and de cheese and de wurst, is all not so much. It is de coal that is most. Vat I vill eat, he cost not so more as 50 cent; sometimes 60, but I eat not ever all I could, for I must be warm a little, and dere is light and to wash, and some shoe. It is bad to be big as I, for shoe not last. But a loaf of bread, 5 cents, do all day and some in next, and cheese a pound is 10, if I have him, and wurst is 15, for sometime he is best, and a pound stay a week if I not greedy. Tea will be 30 cents, but he is good a month, and sugar a pound—two pound sometime, but butter no, and milk a cent for Sunday. So I live, and I beg not. Can I more? I thank the good God only that there is no more Haus or Lies or any to be hungry with me. It is good they go."

"And you buy for some one else?"

"Oh ja, but she will die soon and care not. It is de kinder that care. Two and one six and one eight and cannot earn. She sew all day on machine. It is babies' cloaks—so vite and nice. In two days she will make dree, for see, dere is two linings and cape and cuff is all scallop, and she must stitch first and then bind and hem. All is hem, all over inside, so nice, and she make dem so nice. But $8 a dozen is all, and it is a week for nice, and so she get not more as $5 because she is sick and must stop. And there is the grandvater that is old, and de kinder and she and all must live. Rent is $5 50, dat I know, and I pay for her dis week $1 60 for bread and tea and potatoes and some milk and molasses for de kinder on bread, and butter a little, and milk, but not meat. It is de grandvater eat too much, but how shall one help it? De rest is clothes for all, but dere is no shoe for de kinder, and I see not if dere vill be shoe. How shall it be?"

One after another the cases on the West Side gave in their testimony. Save in the first one there were no formal accounts. But a little thinking brought out the items, for many baker's bread, tea, sugar, a little milk and butter and a bit of meat once or twice a week, the average cost of food per head for the majority of cases being 90 cents per week. All coal was bought by the scuttle, a scuttle of medium size counting as 12 cents' worth, thus much more than doubling the cost per ton. In the same way wood by the bundle and oil by the quart gave the utmost margin of profit to the seller, and the same fact applied to all provisions sold. In no case save the one first mentioned where the mother had learned that cabbage water can form the basis for a nourishing and very palatable soup, was there the faintest gleam of understanding that the same amount of money could furnish a more varied, more savory and more nourishing regimen.

"Beans!" said one indignant soul. "What time have I to think of beans, or what money to buy coal to cook 'em? What you'd want if you sat over a machine fourteen hours a day would be tea like lye to put a back-bone in you. That's why we have tea always in the pot, and it don't make much odds what's with it. A slice of bread is about all. Once in a while you get ragin' tearin' hungry. Seems as if you'd swallow teapot or anything handy to fill up like, but that ain't often—lucky for us!"

"If you all clubbed together, couldn't one cook for you? Make good soup and oatmeal and things that are nourishing. You would be stronger then?"

"Stronger for what? More hours at the machine? More grinding your own flesh and bones into flour for them that's over us. Ma'am, it's easy to see you mean well, an' I won't say but what you know more than some that comes around what you're talkin' about. Climb we might. I'm not denying it could be done, if there was time, but who of us has the time even if she'd the will. I was never much hand for cookin'. We'd our tea an' bread an' a good bit of fried beef or pork maybe when my husband was alive an' at work. He cared naught for fancy things like beans an' such. It's the tea that keeps you up, an' as long as I can get that I'll not bother about beans."

In the same house an old Swiss woman, who had fallen from her first estate as lady's maid, through one grade and another of service, was ending her days on a wage of $2 per week, earned in a suspender factory, where she sewed on buckles. In her case marriage with a drinking husband had eaten up both her savings and her earnings, and age now prevented her taking up household service, which she ranked as most comfortable and most profitable. But she had been taught while almost a child to cook, and though her expenditure for food was a little below a dollar per week, the savory smell from a saucepan on her tiny stove showed that she had something more nearly like nourishment than her neighbors.

"I try sometimes to teach," she said. "I give some of my soup and they eat it and say it is good; but they cannot stop to do so much that is fine. All this in the saucepan is 7 cents, 8 cents for bones and some bits the kind butcher throw in, and the rest vegetable and barley. But it makes me two days. I have lentils, too, yes, and beans, and plenty things to flavor, and I buy rye bread and coffee to Sunday. Never tea, oh, no! Tea is so vicked! It make hand shake and head dy all round. Good soup is best and more when one can. Vegetable is many and salad, and when I make more dollar I buy some eggs. But not tea; not big leaf of white bread dat swell and swell inside and yet it is gone leave one all so empty. I would teach many but they like it not. They want only de tea; always de tea."

"Do tea" and the sewing machine are naturally inseparable allies, and so long as the sewing women must work fourteen hours daily they will remain so, the rank food retarding digestion and then revivifying friendly as did so the "bone" which the half-fed Irish peasant demands in his potato. For the Jew, Side the story was quite plain, but for such reasons as the Kaw, has to other another people will be no mercy, the reason including the order of labor as well as the daily living of the worker.