

PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

HOW THE WAGE WORKERS, THEIR TRADES AND THEIR LIVES.

BY MELBA CAMPBELL.

IV. THE BARGAIN COUNTER.

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The problem of a week ago, is, if not plain, at least far plainer than then, 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 then 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 unscrupulous 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 synonym 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 find 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 snakes, 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 whoever 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 heading 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 rage, 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 transmits 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 side 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 for 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 would 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 kind complaints with the threat of a charge of theft. But there is always a multitude ready to be snared, 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 perfectly business in the fraud. She is a woman of good presence and address, and one to whom

credit should be given, and to whom there is no doubt 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 completion, 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 cheap 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 \$1 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 80 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 80 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 dashes 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 other 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 glutts 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 superfluous, 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. 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 90 cents—to 85. For a year the best that I can do I have earned not over 80 cents a day—sometimes only 75. 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 greedy 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 a sea of tears that these men sail on. It's our life-blood they drink and our teeth that they eat. God help them if the storm comes, for there'll be no help in man."

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