

The Woman of the People

BY MRS. JOHN VAN VORST

MORE than half the people in the world are laborers. They have no money; they would starve if they did not work. Psychologically, they are practically and morally unknown to those of us who do not toil with our hands for a living. It is not during a brief visit to a tenement-house, it is not in a moment's outburst of generosity, it is not at a charity meeting, of a working-girl's club, however close may be the intercourse on these occasions, that the laborer's point of view can be realized, that the advantages and disadvantages of his position are made clear to his friends of fortune. To know something of these advantages and these disadvantages it is necessary to experience them. This for part of a winter and all of one spring I did, and if the notes which follow have any value it is because the truth in them was taken at its source. I lived, suffered, existed, as a factory girl; I shared in full her obligations, persisting in the effort until the first monstrous physical fatigue had subsided, until the first indiscriminate pity had ceased to be blinding, until I as one of them could judge my companions as individuals.

The observations I was able to make, the conclusions I draw, however incomplete, are offered here as a document prepared by probably the only woman of education who has stayed for so long a time as a laborer among laborers.

The working-women of the people in America I divide into four categories, considering in turn the problems of each and the circumstances that have determined their position. These four categories are the servant, the charwoman, the woman of a generation ago, and the factory girl. Generally speaking, the industrial aristocrat is the factory girl; the older woman has a rôle in the home only; and the units of a second order are the charwoman and the servant.

Since time immemorial it has been a tradition that certain things should not be given in exchange for money: honor, for example, virtue, hospitality, and liberty. The social grade of the servant is determined by the sacrifice of this last-mentioned privilege—she has sold her liberty.

When I first arrived in the Western city where my career as factory girl began, I was offered a place as servant. I could live in a comfortable home, have a room to myself, be materially protected, and receive for services rendered in the household fourteen dollars a month. At the factory, where I decided to apply, I could make from the first only seventy cents a day; my board, lodging, car fare, and washing amounted to fifteen dollars and forty cents a month; the balance left in my pocket at the end of thirty days was five dollars and sixty cents, instead of fourteen dollars. During the first week of prostrating fatigue, when it seemed as though, for lack of physical force, the whole experiment must prove a failure, I grew to look upon the situation of a servant in a well-disposed family as the most luxurious and desirable a working-woman could hold. To be provided for, to have a bed with sheets, clean food, and the possibility of sitting down occasionally, would, it seemed to me, more than compensate for attendant conveniences.

My chance came before long to prove the relative bitterness of moral and physical suffering. I was one day sent as scullery-maid to the factory kitchen; I had a free hot dinner in addition to my pay; I was through work at five instead of six; instead of being ten hours on my feet, I could sit or stand or move about as I pleased. But the nature of the occupation provided put me, in my own estimation, on an inferior grade. In the factory rooms we were busy for an anonymous master, who would become

possessor of the objects our hands were fashioning, the new, clean things we were helping to create, and which, once finished, would pass from us never to return again.

In the kitchen I was occupied with humanity's *débris*. When I arrived in the morning there were over a thousand dishes clean on the closet shelves. By one o'clock they were all dirtied. The superior employees had eaten or drunk and left their slops and scraps for us to dispose of. Among these superior employees there was not one who would do the work we were doing, whereas we would have taken their places gladly had we been capable of it. We washed and wiped their thousand dishes and set them away to be dirtied again the following day.

From my own experience as a kitchen-maid, I resume in a word my conclusions regarding the servant class. In America, where freedom is any man's to claim, the servant must of necessity be an inferior human being. Added to the futile nature of the servant's duties, there is a complete sacrifice of independence to which only the inferior will submit. No law regulates the number of hours a servant shall work; the will of a master passes before any requirements for existence as an individual. The servant belongs in the category with those who have abandoned or who ignore an ideal, who prefer relative material ease to relative moral freedom.

The second category, the woman who is neither a servant nor a factory girl, is in an altogether different plane. Whether she be a day scrubber, a washer and ironer, or a sweat-shop-hand, her point of departure is an ideal of some sort: she is working for a child, for a sick or good-for-nothing husband, some one weaker than she is who depends on her; she is working for a home, for the feeling of dignity she could not define, but which comes with liberty; the chance to offer hospitality to a neighbor, the owning of a door which she can shut upon what she calls her "own," if it be only misery and destitution. She could make more as a servant, but she would not live "out"—out of her home,—she would not abandon the blue, shrivelled baby nor the drunken husband, because they are her

share of ideal in the world. They are all she knows of heart's content.

There is no place for justice in our judgments of this woman of the people; it is compassion she awakens, mercy and tenderness; her lot is hard enough to merit all the charity we can afford to offer. No slightest effort is lost, I am convinced, after what I have seen, which brings her even for a moment a glimpse of beauty and ease. How many restless society women would find consolation for their troubles if they knew the joy and hubbub in a tenement over a few flowers brought in by a lady from outside. "When you've got somethin' pretty to look at," one of these tenement women said to me, "you feels much more like working."

The third category in the division I make, the older women, the mothers of grown families, have some of the charm that reminiscence lends to everything. They are already far enough in the past, sufficiently a part of conditions that can never be reproduced, to have about them the touch of romance in which the imagination envelops all our yesterdays. The differences between this type of woman and the working-girl of to-day are determined wholly by the invention of machinery. The starting of the factories in America created multiple tasks not requiring the strength or judgment of a man, needing no technical training, and providing fair wages for services rendered. At the same time the machines turned out so cheaply the materials it had been woman's work to prepare at home, that it was no longer an economy for her to be a producer; she was without occupation at the moment when the factories opened to her the chances of becoming a wage-earner. She embraced the chance, not only in the cases where it was necessary for her to make money, but in every case where her American energy rendered unbearable idleness in the parental household which sheltered her, but where she found no outlet for her forces. It is the revolution of conditions by machinery which has made the breach between generations, which has taken the women from their homes, denaturalized the nature of their occupations, unsettled them in their destiny as women. The older woman should be studied. She is the

friendly companion of man, his consolation; the younger woman is his rival, his torment.

I met, in the divers places where I boarded as a factory hand, a great many old couples. There existed between them invariably the sort of understanding which can arise only when the woman in marriage identifies herself with the home, accepts the protection of the man, materially and morally, and offers in return the devotion, the tenderness, that is recompense enough. To be happy is to be in harmony with one's destiny. The older woman I speak of, and her contemporaries, I found always in harmony with their destinies. The factory girl, who is not actually obliged to work from necessity, I found in discord with what fate willed every woman to be,—that is, an economic dependent, the physical inferior of man, a wife, a mother.

In our class, where brute force counts for nothing, it may seem reasonable to talk about the equality of man and woman; but when you work side by side in the factories with men and women, the crude truth about the woman question manifests itself. According to the feminist's idea *freedom* for a woman means the chance to do what men do. Given this chance to come in direct competition with man, let us suppose she takes advantage of it in the mechanical industries. An effort sustained, as man sustains it, in the employments of a man at a factory would, except perhaps in an exceptional case which proves the rule, result in exhaustion and death.

It is the woman's own physical inferiority which places this restraint upon her freedom of choice. There remain open to her innumerable tasks which can be accomplished by young boys, young girls, and in some cases by children. She is placed with those members of the race whose natural weakness demands at least partial protection. No assuming of responsibilities, no demonstration of ability on her part, can emancipate her from this level to which her physical make-up has irrevocably relegated her. The boy, as soon as he is *strong enough*, abandons this group, and goes into a class with men who are better paid because they have more force than women. And in mechanical

labor it is force that counts: certain enterprises will not employ even men over forty years old, or those who cannot pass a physical examination.

Thus we are obliged to admit that women, even those accustomed to a primitive exercise of their strength, must, for physical reasons, rank among the partially protected members of society; must, so long as they compete with men, form a second order of the industrial unit. And the same protection without which the child, the boy, and the woman would perish in the struggle, inevitably takes from them their independence as a class.

Now, a second condition, peculiar to America, complicates still further the problem for the woman. There is with us a class unlike any other in any country—a, so to speak, leisure class among the poor—a leisure class of women only. The material prosperity of the country is such that the laboring fathers can often afford to support their daughters wholly or in part. These daughters, owing to the reasons we have given above, find insufficient occupation to keep them contented at home. The parental purse does not provide enough for them to indulge certain tastes they have for dress and amusement. There is a slight distance placed between mother and daughter by the superior education of the latter. She knows that the justice of American society accords to any woman the position she is able to attain. These things she turns over and over in her brain; she feels that an opportunity alone is lacking for her to be something more than a farmer's daughter or a laborer's daughter; she longs to be free to express herself, to be surrounded by what represents her sentiments better than the homely interior where she was brought up; she wants independence in choosing friends that will be more "her sort" than the plain people who come to see her parents. Little by little, without any one of these reasons having formulated itself in her mind, she makes the decision to leave home, to go into a factory, to supplement a home allowance, perhaps even to earn by herself enough to make a life of her own according to her aspirations and understanding.

It is the factory which to-day engulfs the vast number of girls in the position

I describe. There they find employment, contemporaries of both sexes with interests like to their own; and in order to have these, and for lack of something better to do, they become slaves to mechanical labor, to the brutalizing work which can be done by the hands without the co-operation of the intelligence, work which aims to bear as little mark as possible of the person who does it. When the one thousand one hundred and sixty-six dozen shirts we turned out every week at the knitting-mills were done, the only gray garments that bore any individuality and trace of the human were those which the beginners had treated according to their own interpretation of how a shirt should be finished. They lay in a heap by themselves, waiting Monday morning, to be begun over again, and over, until they should look as though a machine had made them.

The factory girl of the type I name here is her own worst enemy; she is sacrificing herself, she is sacrificing the woman who works for bread, she is sacrificing the home and all that goes with it, she is sacrificing her womanhood, she is an enemy to society.

At the house where I boarded in Western New York there were eight girls. They had a wide circle of acquaintances who came often to see them, and we all participated in the socials and village festivities. Not one of the girls whom I met was working from absolute necessity. They paid their own board, to be sure, but this amounted to only to two dollars and seventy-five cents a week; three dollars with washing; and the least any one made was five dollars and forty cents in six days. The girl who taught me made forty-two dollars a month, and she "lived home." They had no obligations to meet when their own daily expenses were covered; the balance of their earnings they could dispose of as they wished; they received from their parents presents of all kinds, varying in value from a gold watch and chain to a chocolate cake.

However, among the thousand hands at the mill, there was one group of women who labored for their daily bread. Any casual visitor could have seen at a glance that they belonged in a category apart. They were all over thirty; some were fifty and white-haired. In the factory they

had as their work the most ungracious, the least paid of all the fifteen operations through which a shirt must pass from start to finish. To make one dollar they must inspect two hundred dozen garments. My own comrades worked gayly, hurrying or taking their ease as pleasure or the desire for extra pin-money, allured them from one hour to another.

The breadwinners were goaded: they had the look of those whom life has showed only its grave side; the harassed expression of those whose needs, together with the needs of those dependent on them, accumulate faster than they can be met; the resigned attitude of those who have long ago proved that, struggle as they may, they will only in the end wear themselves out against the iron barrier which poverty and inability create. Their very anxieties, their insufficient nourishment, ill-dispose them for work; their age and its incumbent responsibilities are depressing. If, at forty, they have a position in the factory, it is evidently either because they have no one to support them or because they must support others. Their rivals in the factory are of their own sex—girls whose very independence and youth make them desirable, whose material well-being gives them energy and courage. It is a case of the amateur's yacht, on pleasure bent, taking all the wind with her full free sails from the tiny freight-ship struggling to make for port. If we could induce the pleasure-boat to change its course, the smaller vessel would gain a wonderful headway.

Through circumstances, through the rapid change in conditions, through the possibilities offered by machine labor for earning "good money" without knowing a trade, we have a native type created, a woman who would rather eat cake all by herself than share a piece of bread with her family,—a *déclassé* whose tastes for luxury isolate her from her fellow-beings; a hybrid. It is direction only that she needs; the very faults that make her an egoist would become qualities if properly applied; the desire to progress, the wish to be something better than her parents, which now take the form of vanity, would be a power when coupled with the energy and adaptability she shows; and the restlessness that torments her because she is out of harmony with her

destiny becomes, when we see it given a proper outlet, the strength of the American nation.

For all of us whom the happiness of this unknown class, the poor, may concern, there is work to undertake.

Among the women of the people in the factories, we have, on one side, the breadwinner; on the other, the girl who works for freedom and fine clothes. They do not pull together; they must be separated before the younger of the team has crushed the older. The woman who labors for her daily bread must be in a class among women who are working with the same austerity of purpose; and the young native American girl must be promoted, through her own effort and

ours, to a superior level of industry, where not only she will cease to be a rival of man to her own detriment, and of woman to the detriment of her sex, but where she will supplant mechanical activity devoid of thought by hand-work which requires the co-operation of mind and taste. We must make, with this ready material, a class of *industrial art workers*, who will raise the æsthetic standard of the country, leave free the breadwinners on a footing of equality, and who themselves will revert to the duties of womanhood, wifehood, motherhood, when they consent to take up work which can be accomplished in the home, which does not demand physical strength, and which could not be done by men.

O Summer Moon

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

O MOURNFUL golden summer Moon,
Where are the nights that thou hast known?
Where are Love's vanished roses strewn?

Once pale Acantha's pensive tune,
So long ago, to thee was blown;
O mournful golden summer Moon!

And Hero, sorrowing all too soon,
To thee her passion once did moan;
Where are Love's vanished roses strewn?

Once Sappho some dear night in June
Sang all her love to thee alone,
O mournful golden summer Moon!

And once did sea-born Venus swoon
In tender love 'O times unknown!
Where are Love's vanished roses strewn?

But gone is each sad kisses' boon;
And all those lips—are now as stone!
Where are Love's vanished roses strewn,
O mournful golden summer Moon?