PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

WOMEN WAGE-WORKERS—THEIR TRADES AND THEIR LIVES.

BY HELEN CAMPBELL.

IX.

THE EVOLUTION OF A JACKET.

"IF underwear, whether for men or women, has proven itself a most excellent medium for starvation; if suits and dresses in general rank but a grade above; if shirts, whether of cotton or woollen, are a despair, and in each and all competition has cheapened material and manufacture and brought labor to the 'life limit' and below, at least it cannot be so bad with cloaks and jackets. Here are single garments, often of the most expensive material and put together in the most finished and perfect manner. Skilled labor is demanded, careful handling, spotless neatness. Here is one industry which must give not only a living wage, but a surplus. These women must be on the way to at least semi-prosperity."

This was the thought in the days in which one phase after another of the underwear problem presented itself, each one more bewildering, more heart-sickening than the last. Here and there had been the encounter with one who had always been sure of work and who had never failed to receive a fair return. But the summary had been inevitably, as it stands recorded, overwork, underpay; a fruitless struggle against overwhelming odds.

With this thought the quest began anew. The manufacturers of cloaks and jackets reported "piece work" as the rule. The great dry-goods establishments had the same word. Here and there was one where work was done on the premises, and where skilled hands held the same places year after year, the wages ranging from six to ten dollars, hardly varying. But for most of them the same causes stated in the third number of this series, "The Methods of a Prosperous Firm," have operated, and it has been found expedient to settle upon "piece work" and let rent be paid and space be furnished by the workers themselves.

"They like it better," said the business manager of the great firm against whom there have never been charges of dishonesty or unkindness in their treatment of employes. "It would be impossible to do all our work on the premises. We should want the entire block if we even half did it. But we know some of the women, and we pay as high as anybody; perhaps higher. It saves them car fares and going out in all weathers, and a great many other inconveniences when they work at home, and I don't see why there should be any objections made. The amount of it is, there are too many women. The best thing to be done is to ship them West. They say they're wanted there, and there is certainly not room enough for them here. Machinery will soon take their place anyway. I have one in mind now that ought to do the work of ten women perfectly and require simply a tender and finisher. We shall get the thing down to a fine point very soon. Hard on the women? Why, no. We always hold on to first-class workers, and there's nothing much to be done with second and third class except to use them through the busy season and let them go in the dull."

"Go where?"

The manager paused and looked reflectively at his well-kept finger nails.

"My dear madam, that's a question I have no time to consider. I dare say they earn a living somehow. Indeed, I'm told they go into cigar factories. There's always plenty of work."

"Plenty of work." A form of words so familiar that I looked for it now from both employer and employed. But for the last was an addition finding no place on the lips of the first. "Plenty of work? Oh, yes! I can always get plenty of work. The trouble is to get the wages for it."

A block or so below, and further west, one great window of a cheaper establishment held jackets and wraps large and small, marked down for the holidays, their advertisement in a morning paper having read, "Jackets from $4 up." Still further over another window displayed numbers as great, and a placard at one side announced: "These elegant jackets from $2 87 up." The cloth might be shoddy, but here was a garment, fashionably cut, well finished to all appearance, and unexceptionable in pattern and color. All along the crowded avenue the story was the same, and as east took the place of west, and Grand-st. and the Bowery and Third-ave. gave in their returns, "These elegant jackets from $2 35 up" gave the final depth to which cheapness could descend.

If this was retail what could be the wholesale price, and what was likely to be the story of the worker from whose hands they had come? It is worth while to follow these jackets as they emerge from the cutting room, and in packages holding such number of dozens as has been agreed upon, pass to the express wagon which distributes them among the workers, the firm in mind at present, like many others, preferring this arrangement to any which involves dealing directly with the women.

First on the list stands the name of a woman a little over fifty years old, whose husband is a painter and who left Germany eight years ago, urged to come over by a daughter more adventurous than the rest, who had married and emigrated at once. Work was plentiful when they arrived and the husband found immediate employment at his trade, with wages so high that the wife had no occasion for any employment outside her own rooms. The youngest child, a girl of nine, went to school. They lived in comfortable rooms on a decent street, put money in a savings bank, and felt that America held more good even than the name had always seemed to promise. Then came the financial troubles of '79 and '81, the gradual fall of wages, the long seasons when there was no work, and last, the fate that overtakes the worker in lead, whether painter or in any other branch. First painter's colic, and the long train of symptoms preceding the paralysis which came at last, the stroke, a light one, but leaving the patient with the "drop hand" and all the other complications, testifying that the working days were over. Strength enough returned for an odd job now and then, and the little man accepted his fate cheerily and congratulated himself that the bank held a little fund and that thus the lowering wages could be pieced out. The bank settled this question by almost immediate failure; a long and expensive illness for the wife followed, and when it ended furniture and small valuables of every sort had been pawned and they left the empty rooms for narrower quarters and sought for work in which all could share. To add to the complication, the daughter, who had had good sense enough to take a place as child's nurse, broke her leg, and became, even when able to walk again, too disabled to return to this work. She could run the machine and her mother was an expert button-hole maker and had already learned various forms of work on cloth, both in cheap coats and pantaloons, and in jackets and cloaks. The jackets seemed to promise most, for in 1884 each one brought to the maker sixty cents, button-holes being $1 50 per hundred, the presser receiving ten cents each and the finisher six cents, these amounts being deducted from the price paid on each. To save this amount the husband learned how to press, and though his crippled hands can barely grasp the iron, and often his wife must help him place the cramped fingers in position, he stands there smiling and well content to add this mite to the fund. For a year their home has been in a deep basement, where, save at noonday, it is impossible to run the machines without artificial light. A dark room opens from the one in which they work, itself dark, unventilated save from the hall, and chosen as abiding place because it represents but $4 a month in rent. Two machines run by mother and daughter stand as near the window as possible and close by is the press-board and the pale but optimistic little man who looks proudly at each seam as he lays it open. Jackets are everywhere; piled on chairs and scattered over the floor, waiting the various "operations" necessary before they can at last be bundled [illegible]

he has saved the expensive [illegible] What are the reasons? Lise will give them—the wife whose English is still uncertain and whose gentle, anxious eyes grow eager and bright as she talks, the husband nodding confirmation, or shaking his head as he sees they bear some suddenly, with a "Not so, not so, Lise."

"I know not if we shall live at all," she says. For see. We two, my Gretchen and I, we make but ten for a day. Tree dollar? Yes, but you must take from it de button-hole an' finish and much else, and it is so short—so short that we can work on them. The season, that is it—six weeks—two months, maybe, and then pantaloon till spring jacket come. See. It is early that we begin; seven, maybe, and all day we shall sew and sew. We eat no warm essen. On table dere is bread and beer in pitcher and cheese to-day. We sit not down, for time goes away so. No, we stand and eat as we must, and sew more and more. Ten jackets to one day—so Gretchen and me can make; ten jackets to one day, but we sit always—we go not out. It is fourteen hours efery day—yes many times sixteen, we work and work. Then we fall on bed and sleep and when we wake again it is work always. And I must stop a leetle; not much but a leetle, for my back have such pain that I fell on the bed to say, 'Ach Gott! is it living to work so in this rich, free America?' But he is sick always, my man, even if he will laugh. He say he must laugh alway for two because I cannot. For when this work is past it is only pantaloons, and sew so hard as we may it is five, six pair maybe, for Gretchen and me all day and that not always." Many day we do nothing because they say work is dull, and then goes away all we save before. But we need not to ask help. So much is good that we work and earn, but I think I die soon of my pain, and who then helps his fingers so stiff to press or thinks how he will ache even when he will laugh? It is because America is best that we come, but how is it best to die because it is always work and no joy, no hope, never one so small stop?"

"Never one so small stop." For the attic had the same story, and the white-faced, hollow-eyed woman who tried to smile as she spoke turned also from the waiting pile of jackets and drew one or two back to the sheet spread for them on the floor to which they had slipped. A table and two chairs, a small stove in which burned a bare handful of coals, the two machines at one of which a girl of twenty still sewed on, and in the corner a bed on which lay another girl, of the same age, but with the crimson spot on her cheeks and the shining eyes of advanced consumption. It had been one of the faces so often seen behind the counters of the great stores, delicate in features and coloring, with soft dark eyes and fair masses of hair loose on the pillow.

"I try to keep her tidy," the mother said, "but she can't bear her hair up a minute, it's so heavy on her head, an' I've no time to tend to it but the minute I take in the morning. It's jackets now that I'm on. I thought maybe there'd be less task in them than cloaks. Cloaks seem to give 'em so much chance to cheat. I wouldn't work at all at home. I'd be out doing by the day, for I had a good run of work, but there's Maggie, and I can't leave her, though God knows she gets little good of me but the knowing I'm here. I'll tell you what they did to me on the cloaks. I work for S— & Co., far down on Broadway, and they give out the most expensive kind of cloaks, and $9 a dozen for the making; other kinds, too, but I'd been on them a good while and knew just how. The pay was regular, but before I'd had work from them a month I saw they were bound to make complaints and dock pay whether there was any fault in the work or not. One and another took their turn and no help for it, for if they complained the foreman just said: 'You needn't take any work unless you like. There are plenty waiting to fill your place.' Poor souls! What could they do but go on?

"At last came my turn. He tossed them all over. 'It's poor work,' he said. They're not finished properly. You can't be paid for botching. There's $3 and that's too much.' 'The work is the same it's always been. There's no botching,' I said, but he held out the $3. 'No,' I said. 'If you won't pay fair I'll go to the Woman's Protective Union and see what they'll do.' His face was black as thunder. 'Take your money,' he says, holding out the rest, 'but you may sing for more work from this establishment,' and he flung the money on the floor. That didn't trouble me, because I knew I could get work just below, and I did that same day; twenty cloaks, ten to be made at sixty cents apiece and ten at fifty-five cents. I had Angie here to help, and when they were done I carried them down. This man was a Jew, but there's small difference. If the Jew knew best how to cheat in the beginning the Christian caught up with him long ago. 'The buttons are all on wrong,' he said. I told you to set them an inch further back. We'll have to alter them every one and charge you for the time.' 'I can take oath they are on as I was told to put them on,' I said, 'but if they must be changed I'll change them myself and save the money.'

"It took long talking to make him agree, but at last he said I could come next morning but one and he'd let me alter them as a great favor. I did come down, but he said they couldn't wait and had made the change, and he charged me $6 for what he said was my mistake. It was no use to complain. He could swear I had done the job wrong, and so I went home with $5 50 instead of $11 for nearly a fortnight's work. I changed the place, and so far nobody has docked me, but doing my best and Angie working as steady as I do we can't make more than twenty cents on a jacket, and it's a short season. When it's over I do coats, but it's less pay than jackets, and there's living and Maggie's medicine and the doctor, though he won't take anything. I'd feel better if he did, but he won't. Angie used to be in a factory, but there's the baby now, and she doesn't know what way to turn but this. See, he's here by Maggie." The sick girl lifted a corner of the quilt and something stirred—a baby of seven or eight months whose great eyes looked out from a face weazened and sharpened, deep experience seeming graven in every line.

"He's a wise one," the sick girl said. "He's found it's no use to cry, and he likes to be by me because it's warm. But he frightens me sometimes, for he just lies and looks at me as if he knew a million things and could tell them every one. He's always hungry and maybe that makes him wiser. I'm sure I could tell some things that people don't know."

The words came with gasps between. It was plain that what she had to tell must find speedy listener if it were to be heard at all, but for that day at least the story must wait. Here as in other places the cloakmaker was earning from sixty to seventy cents a day, but even this was comfort and profusion compared with the facts that waited in a Fourth Ward street, and in a rookery not yet reached by any sanitary laws the city may count as in operation. Here and there still remains one of the old wooden houses with dormer windows, a remnant of the city's early days and given over to the lowest uses; a saloon below and tenements above. In one of these, in a room ten feet square, low-ceiled and lighted by but one window, whose panes were crusted with the dirt of a generation, seven women sat at work. Three machines were the principal furniture. A small stove burned fiercely, the close smell of red-hot iron hardly dominating the fouler one of sinks and reeking sewer-gas. Piles of cloaks were on the floor, and the women, white and wan, with cavernous eyes and hands more akin to a skeleton's than to flesh and blood, bent over the garments that would pass from this loathsome place saturated with the invisible filth furnished as air. They were handsome cloaks, lined with quilted silk or satin, trimmed with fur or sealskin and retailing at prices from $30 to $75. A teapot stood at the back of the stove; some cups and a loaf of bread with a lump of streaky butter were on a small table absorbing their portion also of filth. An inner room, a mere closet, dark and even fouler than the outer one, held the bed; a mattress, black with age, lying on the floor. Here such rest as might be had was taken when the sixteen hours of work ended. Sixteen hours of toil unrelieved by one gleam of hope or cheer, the net result of this accumulated and [illegible]

[illegible] "sweater" [illegible] fifty cents each for a toil unrelieved by any form of labor under the sun, unless it be that of the haggard wretches dressed in men's clothes but enlisted as female laborers in Belgian mines. They cannot stop, they dare not stop to think of other methods of earning. They have no clothing in which they could obtain even entrance to an intelligence office. They have no knowledge that could make them servants of even the meanest order. They are what is left of untrained, hopelessly ignorant lives, clinging to these lives with a tenacity hardly higher in intelligence than that of the limpet on the rock, but turning to one with lustreless eyes and blank faces, holding only the one question, "Lord, how long?" They are one product of nineteenth century civilization and these seven are but types, hundreds of their kind confronting the searcher who looks on aghast and who, as the list lengthens and case after case gives in its unutterable miserable details, turns away in a despair only matched by that of the worker. Yet they are here, this army of incompetents. Marching through torture to their graves, and till we have found some method by which torture may lessen, these lives as they vanish pass on to the army of avengers and will face us bye and bye, when excuses fall away and Justice comes face to face with the weak souls that failed in the flesh, to know its nature or its demand.