

## PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

## WOMEN WAGE-WORKERS, THEIR TRADES AND THEIR LIVES.

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XIII.

## SOME DIFFICULTIES OF AN EMPLOYER WHO EXPERIMENTED.

The business race in the great cities is assimilating to such degree that all men are brothers in sense and to an extent unrealized by themselves. Competition has deepened lines, till one type of the employer in his first estate, while the struggle is still active and success uncertain, loses not only youth and freshness, but with them, too often, any token of owning a soul capable of looking beyond the muck-rake by which money is drawn in. If he acquires calm and graciousness, it is the richness of subtlety and the graciousness of the determined schemer, who, finding every man's hand practically against him, arranges his own life on the same basis, and wages war against the small trader or manufacturer below, and the monopolist above, his one passionate desire being to escape from the ranks of the first and find his name enrolled among the last. He retains a number of negative virtues. He is, as a rule, "an excellent provider," where his own family is concerned, and he is kind beyond these limits if he has time for it. He would not deliberately harm man or woman who serves him, but to keep even with his competitors—if possible to get beyond them—demands and exhausts every energy, leaving none to spare for other purposes. Such knowledge as comes from perpetual contact with the grasping, scheming side of humanity is his in full. As the fortune grows and ease becomes certain, a well-fed, well-groomed look replaces the eager sharpness of the early days. He may at this stage turn to horses as the most positive source of happiness. He is likely also, with or without this tendency, to acquire a taste for art, measuring its value by what it costs, and to plan for himself a house representing the utmost that money can buy. But the house and its treasures is, after all, but mummery, and the grave it covers holds the man that might have been. Life in its larger meanings has remained a sealed book, and the gold counted as chief good becomes at last an impenetrable barrier between him and any knowledge of what might have been his portion. He is content, and remains content till the end, and that new beginning, in which the starved soul comes to the first consciousness of its own most desperate and pitiful poverty.

This for one type, and a type more and more common with every year of the system in which competition is king. But here and there one finds another; that of the man whose conscience remains sensitive, no matter what familiarity with legalized knavery may come, and who ponders the question of what he owes to those by whose aid his fortune is made. Nor is he the employer who evades the real issue by a series of what he calls benefactions, and who organizes colonies for his work people, in which may be found all the charm of the feudal system, and an underlying despotism no less feudal. He would gladly make his workers partners with him were intelligence enough developed among them to admit such action, and he experiments faithfully and patiently.

It is such an employer whose own words best give the story he has to tell. It is not an American that speaks, but a German Jew, a title often the synonyme for depths of trickery, but more often than is known meaning its opposite in all points. Keen sagacity rules, it is true, but there is also a large and tender nature, sorrowing with the sorrow of humanity and seeking anxiously some means by which that sorrow may lessen. A small manufacturer, fighting his way against monopoly; determinedly honest in every thread put into his goods; in every method of his trade; his face shrewd yet gentle and wise, a face that could be trusted, and the business man by certain he could impose upon, until some sudden turn brought out the shrewdness and the calm assurance of absolute knowledge in his own lines. For thirty years and more his work has held its own, and he has made for himself a place in the trade that no crisis can affect. His own view of the situation is distinctly serious, but even for him there was a flickering smile as he recalled some passages of the experience given here in part. His English limps slightly at moments of excitement, but his mastery of its shades of meaning never, and this is his version of the present relation between employer and employed:

"In me always are two peoples, one that loves work well, that must work ever to be happy; and one that will think and think ever how hard life even with work that is good and with much to love. In village or in city, for I begin with one and go on to the other. In both alike it is work always that is too much; long hours when strength is gone and there should be rest, but when always man and woman, yes, and child, must go on for the little more that more hours will earn. For myself I want not what is called pleasure when the day is done. A book that is good contents me, and is friend and amusement in one. But as I love a book more and more, and desire more time to be with them, I begin first to think, why should so many hours be given to work that there are none in which men have strength or time or desire left for something that is better? These things I think much of before I come to America. I have my trade from my father and his father, we are silk weavers from the time silk is known but for myself I have chosen ribbons, and it is ribbons I make all my life, and that my son will make after me.

"At first when I come here to this country that for years I hope for and must not reach, because I am held to my father who is old,—at first I have little money and can only be with another who manufactures. But already some dishonesties have come in. The colors are not firm; the silk has weight given it, so that more body than is belongs to the ribbon; there is an inch maybe cut short in the lengths. There is every way to make the most and give the least. And there is something that from the days I begin to think at all seems ever injustice and wrong. Side by side it may be, men and women work together at the looms, but for the women it is half, sometimes two-thirds, what the man can earn, yet the work is the same. This is something to alter when time is ripe, and at last it is come. I have saved as I earned and added to what I bring with me, and I buy for myself the plant of a man who retires and get me a place, this place where I am, and that changes little. His workers come with me; a few, for I begin with four looms only, but soon have seven, and so go on. At first I think only of how I may shorten hours and make time for them to rest and learn what they will, but a good friend of mine from the beginning is doctor, and as I go on he speaks to me much of things I should do for health. And then I think of them and study, and I see that there is much I have never learned and that they must learn also with me.

"There is one thing that Americans will, more than all peoples of the earth. They will have a place so hot that breath is nowhere, and women more even than men. I begin to think how I shall keep them warm yet give them to breathe. The place is old, as you see. No builder thought ever of air in such time as this was built, and if they think to-day it is chiefly wrong, for in all places I go one breathes the breath of all others; never true air of heaven. At first I open windows from top and before they come, but when they see it they cry out and say: 'Oh, Mr. H—! You want to freeze us!' 'Not so,' I say; 'I would make you healthy.' And they say: 'We're healthy enough. We don't want draughts.' It is true. There were draughts, and I begin to think how this shall be changed and try many things, and all of them they pull down or push out or see up tight, whichever way will most surely abolish air. At last I bring up my doctor who is wise and can explain better than I, and I say that work may stop and all listen and learn. They listen, but they laugh, all but one, and say: 'How funny! What is this of so much fuss?'

"While I do these things which I hear on and on, and see nothing but as last a shirt and a pair of trousers they cannot pull out or reach to their feet, and then they say: 'They cut us down'

what they bring; no that is dear to Americans and small cakes, many of them, but good bread that has nourishment or good drink like soup or coffee—no. They stand many hours and are faint and weak. So I say there must be good coffee for them and I tell them: 'Girls, I will buy a big urn and there shall be coffee and milk, and for two cents you can have a big cup so sweet as you will, or if you like better it shall be hot soup.' Above in a room was a Swiss that knew good soup and that would, if I pay her a little, buy all that is wanted and make big pot, so that each could have a bowl. This also I would have them pay for; three cents a bowl, and they like this best, and it is done for three weeks. They go up there and have full bowls, and I have a long table made before a bench where sometimes they rest, with oil-cloth, and here they eat and are comfortable. Three days soup, three days hot coffee, and I have a place where the men can heat what is in their pails.

"But they do such things! They pick out vegetable from soup and throw on the floor. They pour away coffee. They make the place like a home of animals, and when I say, 'Girls, I want much that all should be clean and nice, and that you never waste,' they laugh again. I find that difficult, for what answer can be made to laugh? I go on, but they break bowls and insult the Swiss that makes the soup and tell her I buy dog-meat and sun, and she say she will no more of it. Then I call the doctor again and say to them: 'Listen while he tells you what is good to eat.' They were not all so fools, but the fool ones rule, and they listen, but they laugh always. That is American. To laugh and think everything joke and not see what earnest must be for any good living. I give the coffee urn to the best girl and tell her to have care of it, but do what we will they think somehow I am silly, and like best to eat their pie and then talk. A small pie at the corner is three cents and they buy one—sometimes two—and it is sweet and fills and they are content. It is only men that think, that will change a habit. I find for the worker always till thought begins they are conservative, and an experiment, a change is distress to them. So I say, 'Let them do as they will. Air is here and that they cannot stop, but for food I will do no more.'

"These all were small things, and as I went on I said as in the beginning that for those who did the same work must be the same wage. My men had always \$10 and sometimes \$12 or \$15 a week, but the best woman had \$10 and she had worked five years and knew all. It is a law, unwritten but still a law, that women shall not have what men earn, and when I say one is good as another, the brother of the woman I make equal with him said first this should never be, and when I said, 'It must,' he talk to all the men at noon, and before the looms begin again they come and tell me that if I do so they will work no more. I talk to them all: 'This is a country where men boast always that woman has much honor, but I see not that she has more justice than where there is less honor. Shuns on men that will let women work all the hours and as well as they—yes, many times better—and then threaten strike if they are paid the same!' But it was all no good. For that time I must yield, because I had much work that was promised; but I said: 'For now I do as you will. With January that is but a month away it shall be as I will.'

"Well, I have tried. Many changes have been made, much time lost, much money. I call them to my house in the evening. I talk with them and try to teach them justice, and some are willing but most not. New men spoil my work, and I lose much profit and take the old ones again. But this, too, is a small thing. My own mind goes on and I see that they should share with me. I read of co-operation and to me it is truer than profit-sharing. I have seventy men and girls at work. I say they must understand this business. I will try to teach them. Two evenings a week I meet them all and talk and listen to them. One or two feel it plain. For most they say, 'Old B— wants to get a rise out of us somehow.' At last I see that they are too foolish to understand co-operation, but it may be they will let profit-sharing be a step. Over and over, many times over and over, I tell it all and in the end some agree, and for a year it does well. But the next year was bad. Silk was high and my ribbons honest ribbons and profit small, and when they saw how small, they cried that they were cheated and that I kept all for myself. I read them the books. I said, 'Here, you may see with your eyes. This year I make not enough to live if there were not other years in which I saved. I am almost failed. The business might stop, but I will go on for our names' sake.' 'All a dodge,' they said. No words were plain enough to make them know. They even called me cheat and liar, there in the place where I had tried to work for them.

"And so I share profits no more. I give large wage. I never cut down, do the market what it will. But some things are plain. It is not alone oppression and greed from above that do what you call grind the worker. No, I am not alone. There are men like me with a wish for humanity and wiser than I, and alike they are not heard when they speak—alike their wish is naught and their effort vain. It is ignorance that rules. There is no knowledge, no understanding. In my trade and in all trades I know it is the same. A man will not believe a fact, and he will believe that to cheat is all one over him can wish. Even my workers that care for me, a few of them, they laugh no more to my face, but they say: 'Oh, he has notions, that man! He will never get very rich, he has so many notions.' They listen and they think a little. One man said yesterday: 'If this had been put in my head when I was a growing lad it would have straightened many a thing. Why ain't we taught?' And I said to him: 'Jacob, teachers are not taught. There is only one here, one here, that thinks what only it is well to learn—justice for all the world. I who would do justice am made to wait, but the aim is with you, not with me.'

"So to-day I wait for such time as wisdom may come. My son is one with me in this. He has a plan and soon he will try, and where I failed his more knowledge may do better. But for me, I think that this generation must suffer much, and in pain and want learn it may be what is life. To-day it knows not and cares not, save a few. How shall the many be made to know?"