

THE METHODS OF PROGRESSIVE FIRMS.

To be taken in charge of a girl as an employee, is the general object of these papers, not as the general object, and the methods made necessary by competition become more and more clear. It is evident that each of every individual case of wrong and oppression has a deeper wrong and a more systematic oppression. Master and servant alike are in the same hands, and the employer is driven as inevitably as he drives. He may deny it. He may even be quite unconscious of his own subsistence, or, if he thinks at all of the extent, may look nervously at the man or the corporation that has had power to ensnare him. The monopolist governs not only the market but the bodies and souls of all who provide wares for that market, yet the fascination of such power is so tremendous that he stands side by side with him is the dream of every young merchant; the goal on which his eyes are set from the beginning. Only unlike power is any satisfaction to be found. Any result below this high-water mark can be counted little else than failure.

To this end, then, tells the employer of every grade, bringing every faculty to bear on the lessening of waste, whether in material or time; the conservation of every force working in line with his purpose. Naturally, the same effect is produced as that mentioned in a previous paper. The employee comes to represent "so much producing power," and are driven as full speed or shut off suddenly like the machines of which they are the necessary but still more or less accidental associates. Certain formulas are used, evolved apparently from experience, and carrying with them an assurance of so-much-gained-but-inevitable conviction that it is so difficult to penetrate below the surface and realize that while in degree true, they are in greater degree false. In various establishments, large and small, beginning with one, the payroll of which carries 1,462 employees, and ending with one having a 1/3 a third this number, the business manager made invariably the same statement: "We make our money from incidentals rather than from any given department. You are asking particularly about suits. If suppose you'll think it incredible, but in suits we work at a dead loss. It is only an accommodation to our customers that makes us keep that department open. The work should be put out to make any profit, but we can't do that with the choicest materials, and so we make it up in other directions. You would have to go into business yourself to understand just how we are driven."

"Suppose you refused to be driven? A firm of your standing must have matters a good deal in its own hands. Suppose?"  
"Suppose?" The manager threw out his hands in a gesture more full of disclaimer than any words. "There is no room for suppose in business, madams. We do what we must. How are we to compete with a factory turning out suits by steam power? Not that we would compete. There is really no occasion," he added hastily. "But their methods certainly have an unpleasant influence, and we are obliged to take them into account slightly."

"Then your statement would be, that no matter how expensive the suit made up, you can make no profit on it?"  
"Absolutely none. It is a concession to customers' whims. We could buy the same thing and sell to her at half the price, but she prefers to select materials and have them put together in our work-rooms, and we must humor her. But rents are so enormous that the space for every woman employed by us in these departments may be said to represent simply so many cubic feet in good coin, bringing us no return. Our profits are dwindling with every year."

"Might not co-operation?"  
"Again the manager threw out his hands.  
"Simply another form of robbery. We have investigated the history of co-operation and it does not appear to affiliate with our institutions. The lamentable is here of the Co-operative Dress Association ought to be the answer to that suggestion. He, indeed. There is no profit in suits, or in any form of make-up clothing for ladies' wear, if it is done on the premises. You have to turn it over to the wholesale manufacturer if you want profit."

Having heard this statement in many forms, and recognizing the fact that increase in rents as well as in systematic competition, might well have reduced profits, it still appeared incredible that the rates above mentioned were the fact. Little by little it has become possible to supplement each statement by others of a different order. Nothing is more difficult than to obtain trustworthy information regarding the methods of a firm whose standing is such that to have served it is always a passport to other employment; whose payments are regular, and where every detail of work is beyond criticism. It is no question of bare-faced robbery as in that of many cited, yet even here the old story tells itself in different forms, and with an element which, in many a less pretentious establishment, has not yet been found to exist.

The work done here is piece work. French entries and Bitters, receiving from \$30 to \$50 a week, give that guarantee of style and elegance which is inherent in everything bearing the stamp of the firm. Experts run the machines in the sewing machine-room, being paid by the day at the rate of from \$6 to \$8 per week in the busy season. The button holes are made by women who do nothing else and who are paid by the dozen, earning from \$5 to \$7 weekly. All attached seams are done in the machine-room, and the dress passes from there to the sewing-room, into the hands of the sewing-girls, who receive from \$3 to \$4.50 for each garment. The latter price is seldom reached \$4.50 or \$5 paying for a dress loaded with trimmings, puffs, buttons, etc.

At this rate there would seem to be a chance for wages a good deal beyond the average, but it is one of the unwritten laws that no sewing-girl shall exceed \$5 per week; whether formulated by superintendent or by firm, remains yet to be discovered. The one unquestionable fact is that if the superintendent of the work-room finds that any girl is expert enough to make over the price amount the price per garment is docketed to bring her down to the level. They are never driven. On the contrary they must wait often two or three hours at times, for the arrival of "Madame" who must inspect the work, drapes a skirt, or give some suggestion as to trimming. No outcry can induce the superintendent to give out another piece of work which might fill this vacant time, and the girls dare not state their case to the employer. No member of the firm enters the work-rooms. Reports are made by the superintendent of the department, and and the firm remains content with knowing that it has provided every comfort for its employees. Complaint would insure discharge, and if a girl hints that she cannot live on \$5 a week the answer has been for the years during which the present superintendent has held this place, always the same:

"If you haven't a home so that you have no expense of board, it is your own fault and I can't be expected to do anything about it."

There appears to be no question as to the entire "respectability" of the women, who would undoubtedly deny the implication contained in her own words. But there is rivalry between the superintendents as to which department shall make largest returns in profits, and wages are kept down to secure that end. There is also no question that a proportion of those employed are "supported," and merely add this work as a means of securing a little more pin-money. It is true of but a very few, but of those few an undeniable fact. It is equally a fact that, in spite of the manager's assertions, profits can be made and is made from this department, and that a large percentage of such profits come directly from the pocket of the sewing-girl, even when she wears button-hole suits. In the simpler dresses, the price paid beyond a good thing.

...the chief of first-year, as mentioned in the book, can be entirely dispensed with. The "father" stands a necessity, and as father sometimes means chiefly beyond the rate obtained when merely sewing-girl. Only slightly, however. It is a deeply-rooted conviction among these workers that a fault even if it may be formal understanding has been settled upon by employers in general.

"I don't know how it is," said one of the most intelligent among the many I have talked with, "I never saw any trouble about getting work. I've even had them send after me when I had gone somewhere else in hopes of doing better. I used to earn ten and twelve dollars a week on suits, children's or ladies', but now if I earn five or sometimes six I do well. The work goes on with a rush. It's a whole building, except the first floor. Five stories and suits of every kind. The rooms are all crowded and they give out piece-work, but they're managed so that we all earn about alike. When the rush of the fall and spring seasons is over they do white work and flannel skirts and such things, and a great many are discharged in the fall. But go where you will, up-town or down, it doesn't seem to matter how well you can turn out the work or how long you have been at it. They all say, if we ask for better pay: 'It can't be had as long as there is such competition. We're losing straight ahead.' I don't understand. We don't any of us understand, because here is the great rush of work and it must be done. They can't do without us and yet they are gridding us down so that I get half-distracted nonsense, wondering where it will end and if things will ever be better."

"Would not private sewing be better? There is always a demand for good seamstresses."

"I don't know anything about private sewing. You have to cut and plan and I never learned that. I like to work on things that are out by a center and just so, and I can make up my dozen after dozen with not an eighth of an inch difference in my measurements. I'm an expert, you know."

"But if you learned to do private sewing perfectly you could earn a dollar and a quarter a day and board and have your evening quite free."

The girl shook her head. "I've had that said to me before, but you know it's more independent as I am. Maybe things will be better by and by."

There is no obstinacy like the obstinacy of deep-seated prejudice, and this exists to a bewildering degree among these workers, who, for some inscrutable reason, seem filled with the conviction that private employ of any nature whatever is inevitably a deception filled with unknown horrors. There appears to be also a certain esprit du corps, that holds sustaining power. The girl likes to speak of herself as one of such and such a firm's hands, and to regard this distinction as compensation for over hours and underpay and all known wretchedness encompassing her trade. The speaker I have quoted was an American girl of twenty-six. Had had three years in public schools, and regarded the city as the only place in which life could be considered endurable.

"I shouldn't know what to do in the country if I were there," she said. "I don't seem to like it somehow. It isn't the company, for mother and me keep to ourselves a good deal, but somehow we know how to get along in the city, and the country scares me. I like my work if only I could get more pay for it."

"Do you ever think that if all who work in your line joined together and made common cause you might even things a little; that it might be easier for all of you?"

"We wouldn't dare," she answered aghast. "Why, do you know, there'd be ten for each one of us that was turned off? Women come there by the hundred. That's the way they say to me in our firm. 'What's the use of fussing when here are dozens waiting to take your place.' There isn't any use. They say 'you' that it is the fall season, and they've put our room on flannel skirts; two trucks and a beam, and a maulin yoke that has to be gone round four times with the stitching. One day I made ten, but since is all use can do without nearly killing themselves, and they pay us one dollar a dozen for making them. It used to be \$1.50, and that was fair enough. It's the kind of work I like. I shouldn't be content to do any other, but its bringing us all down to starvation point, and I think something ought to be done."

In a case like this, and it is the type of many hundreds of skilled workers, who regard their calling with a certain pride, and could by no possibility be induced to seek other lines of work or other methods of living, there seems little to be accomplished. They are, however, but a small portion of the army who wait for some deliverance, and who, if they had been born to a trifle more common sense, would turn in the one sole direction from which relief is certain. And this brings me to a point which I had not intended to touch upon till the presentation of existing conditions had been much more fully made. Now shall I now, believing it distinctly best to carry out the plan originally formed, beyond stating for the benefit of my many kindly correspondents, some speaking in the columns of THE TRIBUNE itself, many more by private letter, and all with the one question: "Why don't you organize household services, and what is the reason that none of these girls and women can be persuaded to enter it?"

Many speak more imperatively and with an undercurrent of wonder at the writer's apparent evasion of a great opportunity.

"You do not appear to have considered that all this suffering is unnecessary, save in cases where there are young families to support, and the Children's Aid Society could attend to them. Why don't you say so?"

For the reason, good friends, one and all, whose interest delights me, and whose criticism is always welcome, that the opening paper stated fully that all facts had all been presented there would be no attempt to explain or suggest methods of dealing with them. The writer's convictions are as strong as those of her correspondents, but her first charge is to present the case as she finds it. There is an argument against the household service organ as solution of all problems, and that this service is so slung shows that some genuine ground exists for the feeling. In good time this argument will be given as it has come to me from workers of every grade, and with it will be given such suggestions as seem to hold a way of escape from its dominion.