MARRIED WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

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THROUGHOUT all history married women have carried on productive industry, feeding and clothing the race. And in that coöperative commonwealth which some of us hope to see, they will undoubtedly again participate largely and beneficently in the industrial work of the community.

It is perfectly easy to conceive of a prosperous village in New England or the state of Washington, with coöperative intensive culture of gardens and orchards, with coöperative dairy, laundry, bakery, store and workshops. In such a village the high school might well have as its adjunct a nursery where the oldest girls could learn the art of caring for babies and little children, as the normal school of today has its kindergarten and primary classes for the benefit alike of the children and the teachers in training. The citizens of such a village would obviously be highly enlightened folk, and might be expected to limit their working day to four, five, or six hours. Given these easily conceivable conditions, the industrial work of mothers of children as young as one year might perhaps be an asset for every one concerned.

It is, indeed, one serious charge in the indictment against the present competitive organization of industry that the industrial employment of married women to-day does harm and only harm. With the increasing industrial work of married women in our competitive industry comes increase in the number of children who are never born. In industrial centers, the world over, wherever records are kept, the decreasing birth rate manifests itself. Where this is due to drugs or surgery it is of the gravest social significance. Childless working wives are a permanently demoralizing influence for husbands. If these are inclined to idleness they can idle the more because the wives work. However disposed to hard work the men may be, the presence in the market of a throng of unorganized and irregular

workers (and married women are both more unorganized and more irregular than others) presses upon the wage rate of men. Whether the wife leaves home to work in cotton mill or laundry, or whether she stays at home working under the sweating system, she suffers the disadvantage of carrying the double burden and enduring the twofold strain of home maker and wage earner. And she presses upon the wage scale of her competitors as the subsidized or presumably subsidized worker must always do.

Aside from childless wives, married women wage earners consist of deserted mothers, widowed mothers and women who have both children and husband. All these are ordinarily subsidized workers, the deserted and widowed receiving charitable relief, and the women with husbands having, at least in the theory which underlies their wages, some support from them.

The heaviest strain of all falls upon the wife who has husband and children and is still herself a wage earner; for she has usually child-bearing as well as wage-earning duties. Even where her wage earning is due to the husband's tuberculosis, or epilepsy, or other disability, this does not ordinarily end the growth in number of mouths for which the industrially working mother attempts to provide.

Here and there, even in the great cities, an exceptional woman may be found who has endured to middle life, or even longer, this double strain, and has brought up children creditable in every way. Such rare women are usually immigrants of peasant stock, fresh from rural life in the old country, and merely serve, exceptions as they are, to prove the rule.

Whether the wage-earning mother leaves home, or brings her work into the home, her children pay the penalty. If she is away, they are upon the street or locked into their rooms. From the street to the court is but a short step. From the locked room to the grave has been for unknown thousands of children a step almost as short, many having been burned and others reduced by the long intervals between feedings to that exhaustion in which any disease is fatal. Most dangerous of all to the young victims of their mothers' absence, are the unskilled ministrations of older sisters, those hapless little girls

ironically known as "little mothers." These keep neither the babies nor the nursing bottles clean; nor do they keep the milk cool and shielded from flies. They have no regular hours for feeding or naps. They let the baby fall, or tumble down stairs with it. And in all the cruel process their own backs grow crooked and they are robbed of school life and of the care-free hours of play. Even where the mother does her industrial work at home, the older girl suffers from the delegated care of the younger children, and there is a strong tendency for the dwelling to be dirty and neglected, and for all the children to be pressed into service at the earliest possible moment, at cost of school attendance and of play.

Homework, which is peculiarly the domain of married women, forces rents up, because the worker must be near the factory. This promotes congestion of population, to the advantage of no one but the landowner.

Even the employer is injured by the presence in the market of a body of homeworking women. By their cheapness he is tempted to defer installing the newest machines and most up-to-date methods. Enlightened employers who do make such provision have competing against them the parasite employers who drag out an incompetent existence because they can extort from their homeworking employes the contribution to their running expenses of rent, heat, light and cleaning.

In the employment of married women, as in all other industrial evils, it is ultimately the whole community which pays. Whether the children die before or after birth, the moral tone of the population suffers and hearts are hardened by acquiescence in cruelty and law breaking. Whether the surviving children (by reason of their mother's absence or her neglect in her overwrought and harassed presence) become invalids or criminals, they do not suffer without sending in their bill to the community which tolerates their sufferings. In the growth of vice, crime and inefficiency, and in the spread of communicable disease, consciously or unconsciously, the whole community pays its bill to the children whom it has deprived of their mothers.

In this country we do not know the number of wage-earning mothers either at home or elsewhere. Our records, official and

unofficial, are as defective in this regard as in all others. We cherish a general impression, as pleasing as it is erroneous, that the old usage persists under which, in the early days of the republic, the father commonly maintained his family until the children had had some share of school life, and thereafter father and children supported the mother.

In the textile and needle trades, however, even this tradition never prevailed, and of late a contingent of the washerwomen of yore seem to have moved bodily into the steam laundries of today.

Now cities which are centers of the textile industry are, and for sixty years notoriously have been, the centers also of the labor of women and children, of infant mortality, tuberculosis, immorality and drink. This was the thesis of Friedrich Engels' volume on *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. Even today in Saxon Chemnitz and in New England Fall River, wage-earning mothers away from their homes and children are a characteristic and sorrowful feature of the dominant local industry.

A perverse element in the problem, which would be humorous if it were not tragic, is the encouragement persistently given by philanthropists to the wage-earning labor of married women. Day nurseries, charity kindergartens, charity sewing rooms, doles of home sewing, cash relief contingent upon the recipient's taking whatever work she may be offered, are all still in vogue in the year 1910.

The monstrous idea has been seriously advocated (without editorial denunciation) in the columns of *Charities* that a night nursery might enable women to work at night after they have cared for their children by day! A shameful spectacle visible every night in our cities is the army of widowed mothers on their knees scrubbing the floors of railway stations, stores and office buildings. This noxious task is sacred to them because the work is so ill paid and so loathsome that men will not do it. The opportunity to enlist in this pitiable cohort of night toilers is commonly obtained for the widowed mothers by their influential philanthropic friends.

And in all these cases the obvious fact is overlooked that

such charitable effort is inevitably self-defeating. Overworked mothers, like other overworked human beings, break down and are added to that burden of the dependent sick which society perpetually creates for itself.

We have preferred to live in a fool's paradise, ignoring the social implications of our stupendous industrial development. We have, therefore, adopted only one of all the palliatives with which other industrial nations have been experimenting during the past sixty years.

In our textile manufacturing states the men (though a minority of employes in the industry) have succeeded in so bringing to bear their trade organizations and their votes as to obtain legal restrictions upon the working hours of women in industry. For married women the net result of this palliative measure has, however, proved largely illusory. Every shortening of the working day tends to be followed by speeding up of the machinery to keep the output as large as before, or by a cut in wages due to reduced output if no change is made in the speed. Now married women, particularly when mothers of young children, are inevitably the least organized and self-defending part of the adult working class. And they have, in fact, suffered both speeding up and the worst rates of wages in their branches of industry. Thus the numbers of married women enabled to continue in industrial employment without breaking down have not necessarily been greatly increased by our one attempt at legislation in behalf of their health.

Because we have never observed or recorded the facts in relation to the industrial work of married women we have no statutory provision for rest before and after confinement, yet many textile manufacturing communities have their body of knowledge (common and appalling knowledge) of children born in the mill, or of mothers returning to looms or spinning frames when their babies are but three or four days old.

Those industrial nations which scorn the fool's paradise gather the facts, face the truth, and act upon it. Thus Bavaria, which accepts as inevitable the factory work of mothers of young children, began in 1908 to encourage employers to establish nurseries in the mills and permit mothers to go to them at regular

intervals. The government voted 50,000 marks for payment to physicians and nurses who supervise the nurseries. The avowed object of these institutions is to reduce the disease which has ravaged bottle-fed babies left to the care of neighbors and of older brothers and sisters. In Italy, also, for several years employers have been constrained by law to give to mothers regular intervals for nursing their babies.

Fourteen nations of Europe, and the state of Massachusetts, have abolished night work by women in manufacture. This is obviously a boon to working mothers.

For the protection alike of the community and the workers, England, Germany, Austria and New York state have all been vainly striving for twenty years to devise legislation which would minimize the evils attending homework, yet would not abolish it. During this effort the tenement houses licensed for home-work in New York City alone have reached the appalling number of twelve thousand.

In England a long agitation has resulted in the enactment of the trade boards law in force since January 1st, 1910, providing for the creation of minimum wage boards and the establishment of minimum wage scales. How effective this may prove time alone can tell.

Several lines of action are clearly desirable and possible:

1. There must be a body of knowledge which we do not yet possess as to the number of married women at work and the industries which employ them, and this must be kept up to date from year to year. Why have the federal and state bureaus of labor statistics hitherto neglected this inquiry?

2. Such laws as are already in force against deserting husbands and fathers can be more rigorously enforced than is common at present, and their scope can be widened.

3. Orphans and widowed mothers of young children can be pensioned and removed from the labor market. This is the most useful palliative yet attempted.

4. The lives and working careers of husbands and fathers can be prolonged by prevention of accidents and disease. Effort in a large way to this end is only now beginning.

5. Those legislative measures which make work more endur-

able for all women (such as the obligatory provision of seats) can be promoted with especial reference to the urgent needs of married women.

6. A campaign of education among philanthropists can be carried on to induce them to cease from their cruelty to widows and deserted wives, and to lead them to imagine how any one of themselves would feel if she had to work all day in a mill or factory or laundry and then gather her babies from the day nursery for the night.

7. Public opinion can be created in favor of a minimum wage sufficient to enable fathers to support their families without help from wage-earning wives.

8. Finally, effort to substitute coöperative work for competitive work can be promoted. And herein lies the ultimate solution of the problem of married women's industrial employment. For it is only in the coöperative commonwealth that they can find just and beneficent conditions in which to carry on those industries which were theirs from the foundation of human life.