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THE NEEDS OF SELF-SUPPORTING WOMEN.*

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Within a generation the heroic working girl has been transformed in character. Emerging from a simple life with few wants to a complex and artificial existence, the burden of social disadvantage weighs upon her, and she becomes more alive to her importance as a social power. She refuses to starve; she will strike, she will sin. As Gunton points out in *Wealth and Progress*, wider opportunities for the masses must precede the formation of higher social desires and character. Shorter hours of labor, signifying more leisure and less exhaustion of the faculties, would soon create new wants, establish better habits, incite to friendly intercourse, to reading, travel, all those intellectual enjoyments which are the measure of civilization. Wherever man's social opportunities have been most limited, industrial and political progress has been slowest. Wherever women and children are condemned to excessive toil, wherever "the fatal industrial policy prevails of sacrificing human lives to produce and accumulate wealth, instead of the broad and humane policy of using wealth to save and improve human lives," there the homes are always most miserable, there reign illiteracy, pauperism and vice. Each reduction in the hours of work, from sixteen to fourteen, from fourteen to twelve, from twelve to ten, has occasioned immediate and enormous improvement in the condition of the laboring classes. Shorter hours tend not only to provide occupation for millions of unemployed, but they will stimulate production and widen our markets by multiplying wants; they will make education possible, and conduce to a higher social and moral development in the home.

To all earnest minds interested in economic and ethical problems, the absorbing question is how to give our toiling sisters wider opportunities for self-development? Why, despite the good which

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the Women's Christian Associations and kindred societies accomplish, do they often fail to benefit the most needy and meritorious? Evidently one stumbling block in the way of usefulness is the *de haut en bas* tone which pervades all efforts at conciliation and help. We meet our industrial friends in a false spirit. The "lady," however conscientious and charitable, who at the working-girls' club scorns to treat shop women and seamstresses as equals, proclaims by her manner as well as by her words: "God made the lower classes different and they are different; why tell them otherwise?" Until these flaunting airs of superiority, this latent phariseism and aggressive patronage are exterminated, the trials and sufferings of our self-supporting women will never be laid bare, and practical relief will never be administered.

The wants of the ordinary female worker must be comprehended within the narrow average of \$5 a week for food, raiment, and the satisfaction of the intellectual and spiritual nature. To some of us who know the personal sacrifices and resolute self-denials of these noble, humble lives, it seems almost mockery to preach, from the stand-point of our ampler incomes and habitual self-indulgence, the wisdom of small economies and more ideal desires. Yet nobler wants may be created in the breast of the roughest, most untaught creature, and along with these wants, greater efficiency may be gained for the first essential with every toiler—self-maintenance. For, until she is equipped with self-supporting arts, the higher nature is in abeyance. Until her home is neat, wholesome and well-ordered, it is useless to expect any lasting elevation of character or morals. The best stitcher, the best type-writer ought also to be shown how to become the thriftiest housekeeper, most helpful wife and wisest mother.

Patient observers who have watched the life of the laboring classes and studied their needs, emphatically urge industrial training in schools, clubs, guilds and societies, as one remedy nearest at hand for social ills.

Encourage the working-girl to cut and make her own dresses and relieve her overburdened parent. By practical examples, teach upholstery, bed-making, laundrying, house-cleaning, nursing the sick, the care of sleeping apartments. Fit up lecture and class-rooms as a model tenement, and give amusing, instructive demonstrations in economizing space, utilizing window seats and



lounges for clothes-presses, ventilating rooms, setting tables and turning simple decorations to effective account. Adopt a baby—nothing would delight young girls so much. Show them how to sew its little garments, to arrange its cradle, to feed and tend it, above all, how to leave it sometimes in repose. Thus would be saved the precious lives of thousands of the future offspring of our industrial community. Instruct the novices in housekeeping how to buy and to market. Make them understand that wastefulness in the home is as reprehensible as drunkenness, and that to throw away money on bad material and short weight is as sinful as to burn greenbacks in the stove. Let a new gospel obtain. Instead of loving their neighbors as themselves and gadding too much, they must love the family as themselves and help father, sister and brother. Impress upon the toilers that with our sex rests the responsibility for unhappy homes. Aid self-supporting women to re-create their households, to do away with the filth and misery which beget those morbid physical conditions that only alcoholic poisons can appease. Induce the mothers to choose poor living with longer schooling for the girls and boys, instead of comforts bought with the unhallowed earnings of overworked and ruined little ones, and thus abate the parent's sinful share in the fearful abuse of child labor. In fact, all educational effort for workers should aim at practical training and enlarged opportunities, social, intellectual and moral.

The Women's Christian Associations represent the most powerful and progressive religious sentiment bent on good works and the broadest usefulness. Sentiment, however, is not always backed by knowledge of actual conditions. A minister of the gospel, prominent in foreign missions, stoutly denied that white women are ever employed in tobacco factories, when in his own city a stone's throw from his home hundreds of females of the Anglo-Saxon race delved at the weed amid the most degrading surroundings. True understanding of the real situation must precede all successful reforms. The influence of the Women's Christian Associations, based on intelligent inquiry and thrown upon the side of industrial tuition, shorter hours of work, better factory laws and stricter inspection, the abolition of child labor, greater advantages for female workers, would bring to bear upon the burdens of our drudging sisters all the engineering of church aid and

the prodigious momentum of social enthusiasm. Yet few New York philanthropists realize the appalling problems of tenement house crowding and foreign inundation. Not many have ever walked among the Italians in the Mulberry Street bend, or visited the Russians and Armenians in the great Mott Street flat, or beheld the Jew's refuse market in Hester Street, on a Friday afternoon. How often do even the charitably disposed cross the thresholds of the poorest, sit on greasy chairs or vermin-infested lounges and watch the barefooted, perspiring mother drag her baby about on one arm while she cooks and washes with the other? Who has seen, what everywhere exists, overworked parents with their ten children, all under 16 years of age, begrimed and foul-bodied, in a steaming kitchen that looks like a receptacle for garbage, eating their supper of bread, tea, and cold boiled cabbage? How difficult to enter into the motives or desires of the pretty girl who never breathes any other air than that laden with odors of frying fat and vile tobacco, nor knows other surroundings than endless toil and pinching poverty, except the deadly diversions of the street! If she escapes the pitfalls to which these diversions lead, and fortunately marries, she too, unless practical benevolence interpose, will live in filth as her mother lives. She will eat unwholesome food because unable to cook, and buy tainted meat or rancid butter. She will be cheated in her shoes, her flannels, her furniture, and tricked by insurance or installment agents out of all her savings. Unhandy with her needle, she will clothe the nakedness of her baby with piano covers or disused tidies, instead of warm and suitable garments. Ignorant of the care of infancy, she will drench the little one with baths till pneumonia ensues, and, having killed it perhaps by violating all sanitary laws, will, in order to pay the undertaker, break down her own health by toiling in the mill while also doing her housework, till exhausted nature takes revenge, and the pauper hospital receives another victim.

The minutest instruction, the personal example of wiser women alone can bring about radical change in the methods of untaught girls or mothers. Not many members of charitable associations, however, with absorbing home duties, committees and visiting list, can cope with the tremendous crises occurring in the every day industrial life of the subjects of their care. Their

wealth nevertheless will command the services and enlist for the cause the heart, soul and brain of clear-headed, earnest officials. With a tact which is nothing more than common sense sanctified, such appointees would devote all their energies to the needs of workers. Not amateurs any longer, but professionals are required to take these important interests out of the realm of mere sentiment and philanthropy into that of the economic and practical. The magnificent executive corps whom the "silent partners" have placed at the head of these great benevolent enterprises in the largest cities, deal with the tragedies, with the inexperienced, the disappointed, the imperiled, better than any mere periodical visitor, however willing, however kind. Particularly in outlying districts where modern scientific methods of managing charities and reforms have not penetrated, specialists are indispensable. One does not call in a plumber to tie up an artery, or a butcher to model one's bust.

Immediate improvement and extension of the homes supported by the Christian Associations, must answer the objection of gratuitous critics, that superior accommodations at cheap rates encourage low wages, entice young women from the country and react for evil on the large body of toilers unable to share such bounty. The charges of opponents hold good wherever sympathy and generosity surround these boarding homes with comforts which the hard cash of the inmates could not buy. False standards are thus created and the beneficiaries are so demoralized that in every relation of life they expect to get more than they give. To abolish the useful homes, however, while inflicting hardship on the deserving woman who seeks their roof less for cheap board than for respectability, would neither raise wages nor tie the country girl to the worn-out farm. Retain the boarding homes, but make them go to the root of the workers' need. They must be multiplied, cheapened, located in quarters teeming with homeless girls. Have them plain enough and big enough and cordial enough for the tobacco stripper, the lint-covered cotton operative, the under-paid sewing drudge starving in a garret while the slop shops fatten on her life blood.

If the headquarters of the Christian Associations were established among the tenement boarding places and should feed and house as cheaply, fewer young women with illegitimate children

would be found, seeking to palliate their fall by the oft-repeated lamentation: "I had no mother and no home and knocked about from one boarding house to another." In the seething industrial centres, in the tenements themselves, there should be little unobtrusive homes to allure the poorest and lead them through neatness, order and purer standards to a higher life. Where foreign immigration flows fastest is there most call for respectable supervision and protection. Although the virtue of young maidens may be unaffected by the horrors of a brief steerage passage, will it resist the continued pressure of low wages reinforced by immoral lodgings where, besides the large family, from twelve to twenty men and women sleep indiscriminately on the floor of two rooms ten feet square?

Some self-supporting girls have inaugurated a great reform which it would be possible to operate for the benefit of thousands. Five newly-landed Irish flax mill operatives club together, hire a tenement, furnish it plainly in common, and, while one keeps house, four work in the factory. They share all expenses, plan, economize, save, and in their warm bed-rooms and humble little parlor, get not only real domestic life unshadowed by the eclipsing "institution," but a splendid education in adaptiveness, versatility and self-control.

Scores of young women are already solving thus the domestic problem, which for them is also complicated by sharpest want. Might not Christian Associations besides multiplying, cheapening and brightening the boarding homes, engage in the noble enterprise in every industrial centre of helping mill employés, cigar makers, clerks, teachers, all the friendless and solitary, to found small co-operative households? The inmates would group according to convenience, occupation or congeniality, one of the participants being maintained as supervisor, or some suitable head being found among the hundreds of genteel unemployed everywhere clamoring for work. Colonize thus in the lowliest tenement ten girls who can pay but two dollars a week, yet would like to "have a say" about their food and the outlay of their funds. They would feel that what physical comfort they could get by good judgment and close management out of twenty dollars a week would be theirs, and not an iota more. By a sense of responsibility the young housekeepers would be stimulated to

realize that the abode is their own, their castle, their haven, where they are not fleeced by a landlady, nor disciplined by a committee, but are themselves the architects of its well-being. The attributes of domesticity and the highest elements of independence and moral accountability would thus be developed.

Grade such co-operative colonies by the resources of the projectors. Let the inmates vote who shall be received and how their home-life shall be conducted. The great benevolent organizations should bestow upon these undertakings the benefit of their superior opportunities with landlords for securing cheap and sanitary quarters. Each little settlement might be kept under the oversight of one member of the Associations or official staff, to whom the occupants could appeal when in trouble. With the countenance of such advisers the girls should see their young men friends on Sunday. If denied this privilege on their only leisure day, how tempting and how perilously easy it is for them to go to the rooms of their male acquaintances under disreputable auspices. Sympathy with youth and youth's indiscretions and yearnings would naturally avoid hide-bound regulations and foster individuality, while broad catholicity respects religious prejudices and shelters the worthy however diverse their creeds.

Not alone the poorest demand help and a broader field. Well-to-do working women with good homes, of whom all our large cities boast an increasingly numerous and prosperous element, need uplifting from the deadening automatic routine, or the depressing influences of sordid authority, frivolous companionship, inane gossip and jests and petty jealousies. The utter poverty of resources, the shy, awkward unresponsiveness of the home-staying must be combated by wisely selected recreations and healthful activities. Around the hearthstone the best girls are often the dullest and saddest, burdens to themselves, useless to the family, incapable of interesting the children or brightening the home-coming of the father, their ideas petrified at the source. To these, priceless would be the increased social opportunities that guilds, societies and clubs can afford—change of scene, wider acquaintance, lectures, games, question clubs, collections of flowers, insects and stones, wonders of natural life—all the pretty information which filters through the fortunate high school student to the uneducated parents and juveniles, but which the fireside of the worker never enjoys.

The rough, the ignorant, the unhappy and lonely, who under genial influences would flower into gentle and beautiful womanhood, too often elude the present methods of Christian Associations, There is in science no classification of man into lower and higher orders. Without meaning to be autocratic or carping, it behooves me to say as the messenger of nearly 12,000 self-supporting girls whom I have personally interviewed, that the most deserving are barred out by the class distinctions which mark almost every phase of philanthropy. In shops and factories the needy cases are well known. The forewomen reach them, the companions in toil know the dilapidated dwelling to which little comforts often find their way, and even money, saved from the meagre earnings of unselfish friendship. Were prominent young women in the tobacco, underwear and box factories, the mills and rope walks of great cities, members of charitable associations, entitled to dispense their privileges, not mere subjects for experiment, they could point out many a lonely sufferer, bring many outcasts into the fold, besides greatly enlarging their own sphere of usefulness. But we are wont to seek even the stoically reticent, the heroic, the martyred as patron to beneficiary, as proud to the humble, as rich to the lowly, not as friend to friend. So long as Christian work keeps up the hollow mockery of the "lady" succoring the working woman, so long will the working woman resent or hold aloof from such beneficence, so long will reforms languish.

In the industrial centres as well as in the handsome streets, rooms should be open for the social intercourse and physical and mental refreshment of the laborer's household. If first made comfortable, then one is more easily made good. Beguile there the children, the girls, above all, the overburdened mothers. Work upon the family as a unit, instead of alienating the daughter from her home. Strengthen domestic ties, weld natural relationship. Talk more about ethics sometimes, even if less about religion. To interest mothers and daughters concerning the care of infancy, the discipline of children would check the reprehensible indulgence that often riots in the homes of the poor. Around many firesides, it is true, hover marvellous patience, almost angelic self-forgetfulness, shaming the best tempered women of leisure whose petty annoyances dwindle beside the wearing trials of the house-mother who is drudge, seamstress, nurse, pack-horse, from

5 a. m. till 11 p. m., yet kisses her fifteenth baby with all the passion of first maternity. Often, however, the gravest offenses go unpunished, or trifling faults incur a volley of vituperation. The object most commonly seen in my rounds was a heavy leathern strap, three inches broad, cut at one end into ribbons, the more effectually to sting. Children, big and little, are beaten by their parents with this unholy implement, and wee sisters of ten and eleven left in charge of infants and toddlers ply it vigorously on each offender. This is a type of the low civilization with which modern philanthropy must deal.

In every manufacturing town, North, West and South, thoughtful and educated women, as missionaries and practical teachers, have a more useful field than the valley of the Ganges or the Yang-tse-Kiang. The neglected cotton operatives of my own State, Georgia, the tobacco workers, shirt and overall makers, and mill employés of many magnificent cities need deliverance from ignorance and preventable misery no more imperiously than the unhappy dwellers in the numerous wretched tenements which in the most flourishing New England towns flank the public libraries and the grand and spacious schools.

In Fall River are 58 enormous mills, more than 20,000 operatives, nearly 12,000 of whom are females, a tenement system notoriously bad, thousands of solitary young women, and no Women's Christian Association, nor any boarding home under distinctly educating or uplifting auspices. In Nashua, Manchester and Dover, New Hampshire, Biddeford, Lewiston and Augusta, Maine, while the mill corporations provide as far as possible excellent dwellings and boarding accommodations, yet one half the employés live in tenements which, except as to greater space and better light, are as filthy and dilapidated as the worst habitations of New York. Not only are the Poles, Bohemians, Russians, Irish, and French Canadians often illiterate and forlorn, but in many States some of our sisters of native American descent are almost in barbarism. The sin of leaving our fellow beings in unsanitary, fever-breeding homes, huddling in degrading crowds, in mental darkness and moral irresponsibility and vice, is one which each intelligent, earnest woman must bring home to herself and answer for to her own conscience. Rescue the children, at least; ward off from future generations an inherited curse. Clear

our cities and manufacturing towns of the tenement plague spots, by a personal crusade against their hideous influences. Elevate their inmates by personal visits, personal help, the ministry of the hand, palm to palm, as woman to woman, not as patron to beneficiary. Prove the truth of Tolstoi's words, that in order to do a man good, one must be on friendly terms with him.

Nor must effort cease when through religious conviction or fellowship in high ideals our working sisters are first uplifted. The real needs just formulate themselves as the new life begins. The girl who could not read does not by a change of heart learn all the mysteries of erudition. As a Christian woman with a future before her, more than ever does she require to spell or write or cipher better, to be taught the amenities of a politer sphere. The work she could do as a worldling may be now forbidden by her conscience, and she must be helped to a higher individuality. When she turns from the worn and easy path of ignorance, frivolity and self-indulgence to the discipline of new purposes, this is her hour of greatest peril—the hour in which she pleads, inarticulately but earnestly and eloquently, not to be set adrift in the frail strength of untried resolutions, but to be given the higher education, the better industrial, social and moral opportunities that alone can meet all the needs of self-supporting women.

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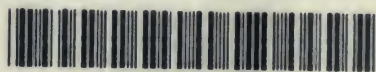
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