

SHALL RICH WOMEN WORK?

BY CLARA LANZA



IF late years work has become a delightful necessity to some superior women. To others it is possibly an irksome duty, dictated by unsympathetic needs.

But there are women, hundreds of them, to whom work is a mere fad and nothing more. This probably is the direct outcome of the peculiar social conditions under which we live, and which have made feminine labor, in the best sense, not only facile but honorable.

The poor woman works because she is obliged to do so, or die. The rich woman works for various reasons; sometimes because she fancies herself endowed with an extraordinary talent that it behooves her to exhibit to the world. Then again, she may be animated by a desire to shine in the eyes of her neighbors, or perhaps her education is such that idleness is a galling restriction and a vague incentive to still vaguer effort. Now and then she has real genius that cannot be stifled. But in nine cases out of ten the rich woman who works does so from vanity or a desire to gratify merely a passing whim; or to see her name in print.

Now, the vital question presents itself: In what manner does her co-operation or her competition, as the case may be, affect the labor of her humbler sister whose bitter struggle for existence forms at once the most tragic and the most pathetic chapter in the history of our great metropolitan centers. Does the well-to-do woman's dabbling in this or that employment interfere materially with the opportunities of the poor girl whose work happens to lie in the same direction? In a number of instances it does, and if examples are required we need not go far to find them.

Nobody except a prejudiced, narrow-minded bigot would venture to deny for a moment that the people of the United States are a nation of money-getters and money worshippers. When our every faculty is not strained in the mad pursuit of dollars and cents we are metaphorically on our knees before those who, more fortunate than ourselves, have accumulated what in vulgar parlance is termed a "pile." A certain deference is paid to wealth everywhere on the face of the earth because it represents power. But in this country deference and respectful consideration, too often, become ecstatic toadyism. Rich people possess every virtue that the strictest code of ethics can inculcate. They are always good-looking, distinguished, clever. Anything that detracts in the smallest degree from their acquirements or their tempers is a slander. On the other hand the poor, like the absent, are invariably in the wrong. There is no merit in poverty, especially if it be honest poverty. Poverty is not a misfortune, it is a positive crime. So we close our doors to the poor and open them to the rich. We slam the golden gates of opportunity in the face of the pauper, deserving or not, and fling them wide apart when we see the carriages of the rich approach. Perhaps this sounds exaggerated. If so, listen.

Personally I know of a young girl, an artist of exquisite refinement and ability, whose pictures, though admired, were rejected by a community that made a specialty of purchasing and selling women's work, because a lady who was a member of the committee in charge, painted such trifles herself, and it would never do to take the work of a mere nobody in preference to hers. She was a rich woman and did not need money. The girl was dependent for food and shelter upon the disposition of her panels and sketches, but she was turned away for all that, and curtly informed that her offerings were "not available."

Another philanthropic firm of the same description dismissed an excellent saleswoman for no reason apparently, and when she insisted upon learning the cause that led to her removal she was told in chilling tones: "Yes, we admit that your duties have been performed in a satisfactory manner, and our sales have increased since you have been here, but you don't dress expensively enough." "How can I on ten dollars a week?" inquired the girl in dismay. "Ah, that is just it. You can't, of course. That is why we are compelled to dismiss you and take Miss Blank, who has hosts of rich relatives to help her, and give her pretty gowns."

I do not in the least mean to insinuate that a woman of wealth must of necessity be frivolous and unsympathetic. I know dozens of rich women who, if they have not the commanding genius of a de Staël have something that nearly approaches it. They work because their inspiration and talent demand an outlet, and to these women I would say continue by all means. They occupy a position that cannot be encroached upon by the feebler sisterhood of any class. Genius, whether it dwell in palace or hovel, is on the same level. But these supreme cases are rare. To rich women whose foible is working at nothing in particular for no reason in particular, I should say: "Step aside; your place is elsewhere. Make room for those whose maintenance depends upon the favors that to you are baubles of no more real value than your last season's clothes."

Speaking in general terms, the proper sphere for women of wealth and leisure is not a utilitarian one, the exceptional cases are exemplified by a superabundance of natural gifts combined with an absorbing love of work. These make labor a necessity. But most women of the cultivated class appear to the best advantage in a purely æsthetic way—as sovereigns of the drawing-room, as skilled mistresses of conversation, as the amateurs whose legitimate fitness to command and advise none will dispute. Let these offer kindly assistance to the poor worker, and whisper to the faint heart the buoyant word that will bring back the vanished spirit of hope.