

WOMEN BEHIND THE COUNTER

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HOUSANDS of girls of the better class, who have had good school facilities, and many who have gone through normal colleges expecting to teach, and failed to obtain positions, turn to the stores for employment. They consider working in a store a higher grade of employment than working in a factory. They forget that it is harder work, and that the pay is

less. A few women in every store are paid good wages, and some are exceptionally well paid. But take an entire store through, the average pay is less than that in a factory. It is difficult to average the wages of girls in shops, for the reason that different places pay different rates, and the pay varies in the same place. Hundreds of cash girls sell notions and fancy articles while they are still paid as cash girls, and get only from \$2.50 to \$3.00 a week. These may be employed several years before their pay is increased to \$4.00 a week. After they become good saleswomen they are paid \$6.00, and even more in some establishments. A fortunate few are paid \$25.00 a week; but they are women who are thoroughly familiar with the business, having worked up from much lower positions, and are possessed of exceptional ability. They are given charge of a department, or are buyers, or hold some equally responsible position. The wages paid to these exceptions should not be an incentive to others looking for situations, as there is room for but a few in these important positions. It is safe to say that women of corresponding ability make more money in almost any other employment than they do in this. Even when they are heads of departments, or buyers for the big retail stores, women are paid much lower salaries than men who occupy similar positions. In some cases they receive one-third less. In many cases they get only half of what is paid to men. It is difficult to learn just what women in shops are paid, as they are not organized, and are at the mercy of their employers, and when asked what they receive, feel ashamed of their low pay and are inclined to exaggerate the sum.

Employment in stores is an unhealthy occupation. The standing and the poor ventilation make it that. In only a few of the better class of shops is the air good. This and the long hours make the existence behind counters especially unhealthy. Ordinary hours are from eight o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, through the week, and until ten o'clock on Saturday night. The stores are supposed to close at ten o'clock, but it is considerably later than this before the employes get their work finished, and it is nearly midnight before they reach their homes. This would be bad enough on any day of the week, but it is particularly so on Saturday. The girls lie in bed until noon on Sunday to get rested, and the only holiday in the week is spoiled. It is cruel to keep girls standing from eight o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night, as is done in the large stores every Saturday, and for two or three weeks before Christmas every day in the week.

The long hours that are exacted of saleswomen on Saturdays and at holiday times are not accompanied by any extra compensation. Some stores have saleswomen in the basement where the poor ventilation and the heat, caused by keeping the gas lighted all day, combine to produce a most unhealthy atmosphere. Girls who are required to stand and sell goods all day in these places are often overcome, and are carried out in a fainting condition. The rules of many establishments are arbitrary and unjust. The girls are fined for lateness, which is not so bad as the other fines for talking, laughing, singing, or failure to put away their aprons when the work of the day is ended. Often at the end of the week a girl who is careless finds that nearly all of her wages is used up in fines. In factories, the law compels employers to give an hour for dinner, but in stores the girls are obliged to wait their turn before going to the lunch room. In the busy season only a few are allowed to go at a time, and it is often four or five o'clock before some of the girls get a chance to eat their mid-day meal. Eating in the store is forbidden at all times. It is no wonder that the girls faint, when they are compelled to stand all day without eating. Some of the better class of stores are more considerate, and even give one or two weeks' vacation with pay to the girls in the summer.

If the normal schools taught girls book-keeping, many of them could become clerks and book-keepers instead of trying to get places as teachers, and when they find no place open to them turning to the stores and overcrowding them. Girls have few opportunities to prepare for positions that are remunerative. The two or three occupations which are considered genteel for women are overcrowded, while there is often a demand for girls as feather workers for example. If trades such as the making of jewelry, surgical instruments, and similar manufactures, were taught here in technical and industrial schools like those of Paris, girls would receive better wages than they do now. Even now girls of equal ability make more money in factories than in stores, excepting the few who have positions of trust. Occupations like feather making are not overcrowded. The only trouble is in the dull season, when there is lack of employment, but the wages when there is work are sufficient to enable a girl to get along even if she is idle a part of the time. Many provide for this by learning two or three trades. On the whole, the employment of women in mercantile pursuits is undesirable; it is poorly paid; it is not regulated by law as it should be; and while it is considered more genteel than at the light trades, it is less remunerative.