



COMPETITION AND CO-OPERATION AMONG WOMEN.

I.

By MRS. JEUNE.



THE evidence given on what is now known as the "sweating" or sub-contract system before Lord Dunraven's Committee gave to the civilized world as terrible a picture of human suffering as could well be imagined; and what intensified the evil was the fact which came out in the clearest way, that the class which perhaps suffers most from its effects is the unskilled working women of London and our big towns.

The trade of London is congregated at the East End, and there the majority of workers live so as to be near their places of employment. It is very difficult, nay, almost impossible, to exaggerate the want and misery which exist in thousands of families in that part of London, and it seems to be a poverty that nothing can overcome. It is mainly attributable to two causes. London will always appear to the country folk as a town paved with gold, a place of perpetual employment; and to the foreigner England is the only country where perfect liberty is allowed, and where, small as their wage may be, they can always earn more than in their own country, and as their standard of comfort is low, the necessaries of life they require are few, they can afford to work at wages which the ordinary English workman would not look at. Jews, Germans, Italians, Russians, all flock to London, and to the East End; and thus we have a swarm of half-starving, demoralized human beings preying on each other, and selling the only thing they all have to offer—their labour. The life demoralizes the men very rapidly, and when work is not to be got they leave it alone; and if they are not to starve the support of the family must fall on the women, who accept work, but at starvation wages, only because they are women. It is not necessary to use any sensational language in describing their life. Nature repeats herself there as elsewhere—the strong make war on the weak, the weak are crushed out in the fight; the "survival of the fittest" is the inevitable rule. The struggle is one of the most terrible. Endurance, affection, courage, determination, some of the noblest qualities of humanity, are pitted against avarice, immorality, dishonesty and cruelty, and slowly one watches their gradual defeat, while the forces of starvation and competition are victorious. The mother struggling hour by hour for her children's food, the wife to gain the commonest necessaries of life for her dying husband, the sister endeavouring to keep the home together for the little orphans, who but for her would go to the "House," are incidents we may see indefinitely repeated; and sometimes—more pathetic than any—the aged couple who have walked through life together, have brought up their children honestly, and whose love has been the sacred motive for all their labour, vainly trying to end their days together by taking work at a price that drains their hearts' blood. The whole of their surroundings make it impossible for them to improve their condition. Their miserable houses—rack-rented, badly ventilated and drained—destroy what little health they have; or if they are to live at all, they must work at such a wage that strength and energy dis-

appear, they become indifferent and hopeless, expecting no relief, and knowing that their rest will only come when the battle of life is done.

The work of women in London is divided into factory and home employment, and when you have the latter to deal with the pay is always bad. Tailoring, shirt-making, ties, frillings, umbrellas, furs, box-making, matches, confectionery, artificial-flower-making are the principal industries in which women are employed in London. When the work is carried on in factories girls are generally employed, the home work being, with few exceptions, done by widows or married women. Some work is done by women who are comfortably married, in order that they may have a little pocket-money, or, as in cases I know, the wife works at home, so that she may be able to defray the expense of the parents who live with her; but the women who work at home are more generally those who find it absolutely necessary to earn something, either to supplement their husbands' small earnings, or to support themselves and their children, and it is the latter class of women whom the presence of want forces to accept any wages that they can get. It is very difficult to make any broad statement as to the amount earned by unskilled woman-labour in London, for the conditions vary with each trade, and we should have to analyze each branch of industry, but taking the opinion of those who are competent to judge, it is miserably insufficient. Miss Clara Collett gives the average rate of pay to women as high as 2*d.* an hour, while Miss Black calculates it at 1*d.* an hour, and the latter calculation is distinctly the more general rate.

What tends more than anything to aggravate their hardships are the wretched dwellings in which they are forced to live and for which they pay a third of their scanty earnings in rent; and they are in many cases habitations hardly fit for animals, certainly not human beings. Within a mile of Shoreditch Church there are thousands of people living in rooms which are not large enough to hold a moderate-sized table, and with hardly any light or ventilation. Any one walking down Great Nichol Street, Castle Street, Mead Street, or Turville Street, can see habitations which are a disgrace to a civilized country. For the use of small, dirty, broken-down rooms like these from 3*s.* to 4*s.* a week is paid. No repairs are ever made, and yet the landlords are as inexorable regarding their rents as if they were sumptuous dwellings. The floor space given is less than eight feet square, so that the rents are some hundred per cent. more than are paid by the ordinary household in the best parts of London. As the poor in London, of whom we write, are obliged to live, sleep, eat and work in their rooms, the atmosphere at the best is but stuffy, and when we find six or seven people living in rooms seven feet by eight feet, and under seven feet high, how can we expect morality or health. I have seen rooms into which when it was wet the rain poured through the roof and ran in great streams across the floor under the door and down the stairs, with no windows, with no fireplaces, no locks on the doors, and with holes large enough in the floor for a child to get its head in.

The dampness of these dwellings is one of the most fruitful causes of the low fever which so often haunts a locality, for though the roof may be water-tight one sees evidence of the bad building and repairing of water-pipes in the damp, mouldy, oozing paper on the walls, and the smells which greet one at every turn of the broken-down, dangerous, rickety staircase tell a story of bad drains, fever, and constant ill-health.

It is very curious that though the people living in these dwellings know that there are laws which if enforced would oblige their landlords to spend money in improving, they seem afraid to move for fear of being turned out into the street and have to seek another room. But finding the week's rent in advance, which has to be paid on taking possession, is, I believe, a much more cogent reason than any other.

The rule laid down by the Local Government Board, and acted on by the police when it is found necessary to enforce it, is that four hundred cubic feet is to be allowed to each person, and were that law enforced as it should be, more than half of these rookeries would be demolished to-morrow; and some of the magistrates have acted on that principle already, and closed a good many houses. The County Council ought to go to the root of the evil, and see that the sanitary authorities appointed by the vestries are people who can be depended upon to carry out the laws in force with regard to unsanitary dwellings. It is a fact, that in parts of London some of the most disgracefully kept property belongs to members of the vestries, and that the sanitary inspector appointed to see that their hygienic conditions are satisfactory

are relatives of the people to whom the dwellings belong. Such an abuse ought not to be tolerated, and as the poor have neither the time nor spirit to undertake their own protection the authorities should put the law in force. They must live in certain localities on account of proximity to their work, and such being the case, they are the helpless and weak victims of the rapacity and greed of the small landlord.

An advertisement on a notice board is now to be seen in a wretched street off Bethnal Green Road, "These houses, Nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 Turville Buildings, to be sold, freehold; lowest price £750. For further information apply—. Gross rental £130 7s. per annum." The houses are of the usual type of houses, grimy and dirty, and in bad repair. Yet these rents, high as they appear, are not extortionate compared with what is paid for much worse property in that locality. Is any comment necessary on such figures as to the life and surroundings of the inhabitants whom stern necessity has forced to dwell in such places?

The foregoing facts prove how hard are the conditions of life under which thousands of poor women live in the large towns and manufacturing districts of England, as well as what is more serious, namely, that while Trades Unions have improved the position of the men little or nothing has been done for the women. Very few of the stories told of their existence have been over-coloured, and there are many homes where lives are even worse than those of whom we have been speaking. A movement which is now on foot to induce women to combine for their mutual protection as men have done, will give an opportunity of seeing whether it is possible for them to do so with any chance of success. Hitherto women have shown no capacity for combination; the idea of a strike does not recommend itself to the English working women, for their time is too fully occupied in earning the miserable pittance their labour affords them. As matters at present stand, the result of female labour is to restrict the employment and diminish the wages of men, without producing any beneficial results to the women themselves. If, however, it could be proved that women are able to organize themselves for the attainment of their legitimate claims on the labour fund, one of the most important obstacles to their competition with men would be removed. When they can no longer be used by the employer as a means to reduce the wages of both sexes, men would not suffer really in the competition for work, and the condition of the women would be infinitely improved.

The interests of the two classes of women workers, though they should be identical, are really antagonistic. The women who work in factories and the women who are employed in outdoor work have no intercourse or community of interest whatever. Unions are possible among factory women, as the Match Girls' Union of last year proved. There is a combination among cigar hands, and the Tailoresses' Union has branches in various parts of London. The work of organization in a factory is very easy, and were there no outdoor workers, trades combinations for women would be as numerous as for men. But the outdoor hands again act as a "screw" on the indoor and keep down wages, enabling the employer to play one class off against another. The indoor hands have been obliged to accede to reduction of wages by knowing that the work can be done by outdoor hands at a reduced rate, and the latter are at once stopped from resisting by finding that the indoor hands have already accepted the terms. It is perfectly evident that while these two classes of women remain in this position there is no possibility of their ever improving their condition.

It thus seems that we are confronted with an almost insuperable difficulty at the very beginning, and that the class of outdoor workers are those women on whom the abstract principle that they should combine for the benefit of their class has no influence. The majority of the outdoor workers in London are married women, to whom factory employment would be impossible, but to whom indoor work offers special attractions, in the fact that the work can be done at home. The pay is miserable, the supply uncertain, but it enables them to remain at home and attend to their house and children, and if a sufficient quantity is forthcoming there are no restrictions to time as in a factory, and a woman may work for twenty-four hours if she chooses. It is well known, however, that in the very poor districts in London the woman is very often during the winter the breadwinner of the family, and in thousands of families during the past years of want of work and low wages, the mother's and daughters' earnings kept the wolf from the door. The enormous competition among all trades

for labour that requires no special training, that is in fact unskilled, will always be the great difficulty to be met by any combination to raise the wages of women workers, and the sick children, the unemployed husband, the cold and fireless homes, will always be the greatest bar to any effort to persuade women to stand together for better remuneration. No one who knows anything of the working women of London can doubt that much as they in the abstract realize the powerful effect on their employers that a general strike for better wages would have—they would throw all such considerations to the winds when the cry of the starving children fell on their ears, and be false to all the principles they accepted, taking the first bit of work the most stony-hearted sweater would offer them.

Combination is much easier among skilled labour than in casual employment, which nearly all outdoor work must be, and when the competition is so keen it is not to the interest of any of these casual women workers to join an organization that would prevent them taking anything below a fixed minimum wage. Take for instance the tailoring trade. The majority of women who work in it are perfectly unskilled. Trousers are generally made by skilled tailors, that is to say the best work, but as regards vests and coats the work generally deteriorates and is distributed among women who work at home, and who, having had no previous training, take what they can get, and it is generally the poorest pay and the most irregular work. Shirt-finishers are very much in the same position, and are generally found among the poorest and oldest women in a district, and it is quite impossible for them to earn enough to live on. And all these women being untrained, and uncertainly employed, are not good workers, they are therefore willing to accept any pay, and when hard pushed are glad to take a reduced payment. To such women a Trades Union would be the last thing they could join, as it would practically be depriving them of their only means of subsistence, as they would thus be prevented from underselling themselves, which has now become a second nature to the women who work for the sweaters.

Combination among skilled women workers is increasing every day, though slowly, for women are naturally Conservative, and they do not readily accept the principle of Unionism. They have many of them suffered sorely from the effect of strikes, and though they realize that prolonged combination, if carried out consistently, must improve their position and in the long run raise their wages, never lose sight of the long period during which their employment must cease, till their ultimate demands are conceded. Added to which they do not forget the bitter feelings aroused—the breach between employer and servant, and above all that in a struggle, such as a long strike always must be, it is only the strong who win, the weak ones go to the wall. All these things make women shy, and slow to join a Trades Union, while the introduction of foreign labour in England, and the increasing demand, on account of their cheapness, for foreign goods, has made a much deeper impression on their minds than is generally admitted. The skilled woman worker has, however, the security of knowing that she can take up her stand with a greater chance of success, for with the best women workers, as with the men, the supply is rarely in excess of the demand. And were technical instructions given to women a good deal of the better class work they cannot do would be carried out in England instead of being executed by Frenchwomen, who are trained for it in the many technical schools which exist for women in France. In Scotland the question has been warmly espoused by the women who work in Glasgow and Dundee, and the prospect of combining for the unskilled as well as the skilled workers is very much more promising there than in England. Scotchwomen are more independent and self-reliant, added to which, though the pay is bad, their surroundings are less deteriorating than those of the London women, and their dwellings are better and rents are lower. The rapid increase of the population, and the influx of people from the country to the large towns, make the problem of how to deal with our unskilled female labour every year more difficult. The education hitherto given to women in England is purely intellectual, and when a girl has passed the standard, she at once goes into the ranks of the unskilled. If she can give time she may be apprenticed and learn a trade, but the number of girls who can afford to do that are getting fewer every day. The few shillings a girl can earn at once is much too important an addition to the family income to be rejected, and as the majority of them marry while practically children neither the necessity of being apprenticed, nor of joining a Union, appeals to them.

The great dislike to domestic service is another cause which swells the ranks of

the unskilled women workers, and it is not a prejudice which seems to disappear. The routine, the confinement, and the discipline of house rule is very distasteful to girls, and they prefer the uncertainty of their work with its liberty to the restraints and comparative comfort of service. Without some training which will give a woman the confidence that is necessary, when she enters service, it will be very difficult to make it more popular, in contrast to the smaller knowledge that is required and the greater freedom enjoyed by factory hands, but some scheme for imparting even the elementary knowledge only, would help to make domestic service more popular. It is only by helping to educate and elevate the young that we can deal with the difficulty at all. The future of the poor down-trodden, overworked, half-starved home-worker at the East End is, sad to say, a hopeless one. Habits of life engendered by the degrading influences of her surroundings make it well-nigh impossible except in very rare instances to raise her out of it, and though public opinion ought to be brought to bear in the strongest way on the employers and contractors for whom she works, the overwhelming demand for employment makes them naturally independent and indifferent.

It must never also be forgotten that there is another class of worker in the East End who has no sympathy for her English sisters, and whom organized attempt on their part to raise wages would benefit by giving her some of the work they rejected on account of bad pay—the immigrant from the Continent. Our national creed makes us welcome all such refugees to our country, and by so doing we have allowed them to take a great deal of the employment which legitimately belongs to our own people out of their hands. The most formidable of all their industrial competitors are the Jews, of whom there are from 60,000 to 70,000 in London—of which the Polish or Russian Jews form the majority. Driven by religious and political persecution from their country, they come to London, often in such a state of poverty as to be unable to pay the boatmen their fee on landing, and at first are compelled to take whatever work and at whatever price it offers itself, and will almost toil for months without pay, existing by the help of a co-religionist; or slaving day and night for a small labour-contractor, receiving as recompence a shakedown and a miserable crust of bread and water. They work silently, diligently, and without a murmur for a time; but one day their employer finds that, having learned the trade, they leave him, either to start in some small enterprise of their own, or to work for another sweater who has made a less onerous agreement with them. The Jews usually bring with them no skill of a marketable value, and have to learn what they can turn to the best account. They come to an overstocked and demoralized market, and it is only by pursuing the course described above that they can hope to overcome the obstacles which their language and nationality have created; and though at first engaged in the most unskilled branches of the lowest section of each trade, the Jews slowly but surely invade the higher branches of labour, bringing with them a system of work and a method of dealing with masters, men, and fellow-workers, which has largely been one of the causes of the evils now existing in the East End. Their religion, their training, the oppression under which most of them have passed the most impressionable years of their life, has made them patient, sober, thrifty, and in fact, everything that is a contrast to the people among whom they come to live, and on whom they prey. As the Jewish men live and suffer so do their women; and the evidence given by some before the Lords' Committee on sweating is a fair illustration of how they exist. The experience of one girl is typical. She was a Russian Jewess and came from Germany; she had worked in Russia for a rouble a week, but had shorter hours than in England, and was employed only for five days. She began by earning in England two shillings a day, and rose to three shillings a day of twelve hours. A dozen women worked in the same place, and they were not engaged on Saturdays, while Monday was a short day, and for half days they only earned eightpence. She was well satisfied with her lot, and seemed to think it much easier to make a living in England than in Russia. Another girl, whose evidence had to be translated, was a tailoress, having come from Hungary with her aunt who left her and went to America. She, with two other girls and four men, worked in one shop for a "master." For about four weeks only, she said, in the year she could earn five shillings, and when work was slack, only from two shillings to eightpence a week. The hours were 7 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. The workshop was small and ill-ventilated, and she often felt ill from it. The girl said in answer to other inquiries as to how she continued to live on such a pittance, that she lived with a country-

woman, and paid one shilling a week in rent, and was trusted for this small sum when times were bad. If such cases can be indefinitely multiplied, as undoubtedly they can,—and there are thousands of women willing and thankful even for such an existence—there seems little prospect of the unskilled English working women faring any better than at present. As a nation we have always gloried in being the asylum for the oppressed and persecuted of foreign lands, and it may well cost us a pang to think that one sure and important means of arresting the evils which the over-population at the East End creates, would be found in stopping the immigration of foreigners into England. The means employed by foreigners in carrying on their trade, the conditions which the workers employed by foreigners are obliged to accept, and the growing consciousness of the people of the grievous and unbearable hardships they endure in consequence, have awakened feelings against the Jews among the workers in the East End to which sooner or later some practical effect will be given.

One of the remedies suggested by a good many people is one that at first sight is plausible enough, namely, that in order to stimulate English industries and give a fresh impetus to production every one should purchase only English manufactured goods. If the only purchasing classes in England were the richer classes such a remedy might be possible; but if we consider for one moment that it is not the upper classes, but the lower classes themselves who have created the demand for cheap goods (which necessitates employing cheap labour), we soon find how futile such a course would be. A great deal of sensational nonsense is talked about the wickedness of buying cheap clothes, or foreign manufactured goods, and the reproach is always made against the upper classes that they are the greatest sinners in this respect. I wish to be no champion of the upper classes, but no one with any sense of fairness can deny, that it is the class to which the women belong whose cause we have at heart, that create the market for cheap goods. The factory girl with her velvet hat and feathers, her high-heeled boots; the domestic servant whose Sunday attire is always of the brightest and most varied kind; the artizan, with his small horde of children, all needing boots and clothing, for which he can only afford to pay the lowest price, are the customers of the shops where the cheapest goods are sold, and where the penny three-farthings represent the smallness of the margin of profit. The clerk who earns a few hundreds a year, and whose sympathies are, no doubt, with the starving victims of the sweater, would resent extremely any suggestion that he should only buy English goods, and prove how impossible it would be for him to keep up a decent appearance, or make two ends meet, were it not for the cheapness of the goods which foreign competition supplies to the British purchaser.

Some witnesses examined before the Sweating Committee said that mantles for West End shops were made for a certain contractor at the East End for $7\frac{1}{2}d.$ each. The West End is a very large and comprehensive term, and when we remember that it embraces Edgware Road, Tottenham Court Road, and the cheap part of Oxford Street, it is pretty evident that such goods supply the shops patronized by the classes of whom we have just been speaking. The rich, magnificently-dressed lady of London society gets her clothes made at a fashionable milliner's, and whether she pays thirty or forty guineas for her mantle, matters little to her, as she knows that for that price she insures its being made on the premises, and by the best hands. Ample proof that very little sweating goes on in the West End of London is always forthcoming, if any one will only take the trouble of going among the working people who work for the large shops, and who are very rarely out of employment. Unless we are to become protectionists it is useless to expect any improvement from buying only home manufactures, and it is quite obvious that the strongest opposition to such steps would come from the working classes themselves, who profit more largely than any other class, by the cheapness of all the necessaries of life. There is one fact always overlooked in the general abuse of the sweater or middleman, namely, that he is an abuse which the workers have largely created themselves. Any clothier, tailor, or warehouseman, will tell you that he constantly loses his materials when given out to be made up; and they are, therefore, of necessity obliged to find some one with whom they can treat, who will be responsible to the employers for the safe return of their materials; and a great economy of time is effected by treating with one person instead of perhaps fifty. The middleman is only, however, an evil when he is his own master,

and uncontrolled, for he is often, to begin with, as poor as his workers, and it is only by sweating them that he gets a start and makes a living.

There seems a remedy, though only a partial one, for all the sufferings and poverty we have been discussing, and that lies in the development of the co-operative principle in some form or other. Perhaps co-operation may hardly be the surest and quickest to apply at the beginning; but one or two attempts in that direction have had some success. The success achieved has been mainly in raising the wages of the best workers, in giving them constant employment; for the unskilled, the conditions remain unchanged, and nothing seems to improve their hard lot. There must always be in every trade, as in all other professions, some that have better brains and hands than others, and they in the long run improve and keep up their wages, while others remain stationary. This is especially true of women, for some have such peculiar qualities of quickness and neatness in their work, that they distance every one. In many factories we find girls of sixteen earning 12s. and 14s. a week machining, while others of the same age cannot earn half as much, the industry and capacity of the two being totally different things. Two schemes of co-operation have been tried in London within the last two years, one by Mr. Walker,¹ and another by Mr. Francis Peek.

The annihilation of the sweater or middleman would make a very material difference in the wages of the best workers, and co-operative principles applied to their work would alter the condition of their lives, give them a future with hope in it; but it sheds not one ray of comfort on those poor souls who are only too thankful to work at any wage. To talk of theories and preach assistance to these is more than useless. The fact is a stern and terrible one; but, none the less, it is a fact, that there are thousands and thousands of women in London at this moment leading lives of suffering and privation for whom little if anything can be done. Their position is so infinitely more hopeless than any man's, however small his earnings, for he, at any rate, can command a certain wage, and by combinations and strikes can so far improve his position that he is not obliged to sell his labour for what it will fetch. Women lack the power of combining as men, and they lack their physical strength, and in the absence of those two most essential qualities lie their weakness. Women cannot go into the streets and fight, nor can they intimidate, picket, and terrorize as men, and as men have earned their position and success by such means, the effect of physical superiority, in so far as women are weaker must they fail.

Beyond co-operation among women workers, there are only one or two remedies which appear to have any elementary evidence of being likely to improve the condition of the women workers in London. Nothing will stop the daily increasing number of workers but such remedies as are too important for discussion now. Arresting the flow of foreign immigrants would be a step in that direction, and it will probably be the one which the people themselves would suggest; but the evil lies far too deep for it alone to be sufficient. Education is always prescribed as the panacea for social evils and troubles so that there is no novelty in suggesting it; but technical education with applied industrial training would, if it did nothing else, give a good many women instruction which would raise them from the ranks of the unskilled to the skilled worker, and thus diminish some of the pressure on the unskilled. To give an instance, though a small one, of the want of such training, it is well known that a great amount of trimming is made in France and Germany because our manufacturers here cannot produce many of the more elaborate *passementerie* trimmings used in dressmaking; and some of the more finished parts of fancy cards and designs for art decorations are made abroad by the women trained in the various art schools. Such an education to be of any practical use must be applied, for theoretical instruction breaks down entirely when given without direct application. An opportunity of developing some education of this kind now exists in the scheme for the reorganization of Christ's Hospital which the Charity Commissioners have before them, and clever girls on leaving the Board School instead of being turned into some factory without any training, or working at home on the lowest paid sort of unskilled work, might be sent to such a school and serve an apprenticeship at some trade with applied teaching.

The question of domestic service also recommends itself as a remedy, but that again cannot be of much good unless, as in the other subjects, practical knowledge is acquired. Christ's Hospital might again (as is the case in many educational establish-

¹ For further information see Mr. Walker's article, page 301.—[Ed.]

ments for girls in France) be utilized also for that purpose. A development of the co-operative system would act in the same direction as improved technical teaching by removing the pressure on the unskilled to a certain extent, and giving those women who are quicker and sharper, a chance of rising into the ranks of the skilled. Mr. Peek's experience shows that good hands can earn a living after paying expenses and giving a profit, and in time the workers would see the advantage to themselves of becoming shareholders and participating in the profits. All these suggestions, however, if carried out to the full are so small in the face of the masses we have to deal with, and before whose numbers we feel so powerless, that they seem hideously insignificant; but the truth is that every suggestion, of whatever magnitude, is small in face of the herculean task we are trying to accomplish. The struggle is so unequal, and it must always be so. Against the masses striving for work is pitted the employer, whose margin of profit is not so large that he can afford to do aught else but buy his labour in the cheapest market; and combine how they may, when the pinch comes and the children want for bread, the mother's heart will obey no abstract principle of justice, but be true to her maternal instincts, and thankfully accept the veriest pittance to minister to their want; and no form of public opinion, no influences that affect others in the conflict will weigh with her. Nature is stronger than any human law, and a mother will be the truest of her sex in the hour of her greatest weakness.

What changes come, and what improvement is effected in the condition of these poor women must necessarily be very slow. Education must do something besides teaching them technically; it must raise their standard of comfort and help them to have more self-control, and make them realize that more than half of their suffering is the result of their own folly and want of self-restraint. The real cause of their misfortunes lies in the early marriages they contract and the swarms of children they bring into the world, without the smallest sense of the responsibility they incur in having children for whom they do not, and cannot provide. The boy and girl marriages of seventeen and eighteen, and even under that age, are the direct cause of more than half the wretchedness that crowds around us, and until some sense of the criminality of bringing forth children who are foredoomed only to suffer is brought home to our working classes, the misery we see around us will not diminish. Were their own sufferings and want the only consequence, they might possibly bear that in silent endurance, but the misery inflicted on thousands of innocent people by their conduct is indescribable and unjustifiable. The community on their part must not, however, forget that there are obligations laid on them which cannot be overlooked if they desire to help their weaker brothers and sisters, and one of the most important influences towards improvement is one that is always being put aside for a more convenient season. The dwellings in which the poor workers live are one of the most potent obstacles to any improvement in their social or moral well-being. One of the statements made before the Sweating Committee was that the insufficiency of their pay forced girls to lead immoral lives, in order to make their living, and that a woman had no alternative between starvation and immorality. That many of the women and girls are immoral in the sense that they are living as wives of men to whom they are not married, is, alas! but too true, but it is not equally true that they are driven to it by want of means. Vice in the East End of London is not an attractive or a well-paid profession, whatever it may be in the richer districts, and it does not offer women many attractions. What we consider vice, they, the women of whom we are now speaking, do not regard in the same light. Their moral sense, if it ever existed, has been blunted and destroyed by their early associations, and they drift into the relations they occupy without any one thinking the worse of them. In their rough, kindly way they are affectionate and true to the men to whom they belong. They are fond of their children, and though in drunken frays and fights the man may cut their head open, or give them a black eye, when he is sober and penitent they forgive him, and care none the less for him. Infidelity is very rare among those whom we consider poor outcasts, and their constancy, and attachment, dog-like in its character, is most touching, and they teach a stern lesson to their severe and apparently more virtuous sisters. And thus they drift on through their lives, picking up what living they can, when both are in full work doing fairly well, and when the man falls out of employment, the woman cheerfully works on at her starving pay till better times come. Such are the lives of people born and bred in the slums of our large towns. Nor can we—what right have we to?—expect as high, or, indeed as we do, a higher, code of

morality from them than we exact from ourselves, with all our worldly advantages and wealth? It is a reproach to a great country like England that numbers of such lives should exist. The Corporation of London, the late Board of Works, the County Council all spend hundreds of thousands of pounds in beautifying and improving the city. While all is fair and picturesque to look on, and stately streets and buildings rise around us, behind them, in the courts and alleys, men, women, and children are leading lives of degradation, infamy, and misery too terrible to think of, and though Commission after Commission has reported and suggested about the dwellings of the poor, nothing has been done. We cannot alter the laws of supply and demand, and we cannot raise wages and destroy the suffering that exists at one blow, but we can do more than mitigate it. We can destroy one of its most important causes, if not the most important of all, in sweeping away the rookeries and dens in which their lives are passed from their cradle to their grave, and in their place erect wholesome, sanitary dwellings, not as monuments of charity, but as paying concerns; and we ought to regard doing so as an obligation to them and a confession of the grievous way in which, as a nation, we have sinned against those whose weakness should have been the strongest claim on our protection and help.

II.

BY WILLIAM JAMES WALKER.

[A WITNESS BEFORE THE HOUSE OF LORDS SWEATING COMMITTEE.]

A CRISIS has been reached in the condition of the working women throughout the country, and statesmen are beginning to find themselves face to face with a difficulty which ordinary human beings have been trying to cope with for years past. It is now two years since I first became an East End man in sympathy and in effect, and during those two years many phases of London's great "Eastern Question" have become familiar to me. Hood sang with sweet sadness the "Song of the Shirt" some years ago, and if the cruel fate of the women who made those unpoetical garments stirred the heart of that great observer of humanity at that date, what would it do were he alive to-day and saw three women scrambling for a wage he deemed too little for one?

Mine is no hearsay evidence. I have visited these poor shirtmakers in their homes. At first it was a grimy experience, but the dirty, small rooms, with their various odours and air of general dismality gradually grew familiar to me. "Stitch, stitch, stitch!" from the early morn until the "farthing dip" burns low in the midnight hour. Working with the brain on fire, working with a gnawing hunger pain that will not rest, working with a broken, hopeless heart, from which the light of life has gone out in the fierce fight for daily bread! Such is the life of the shirtmaker.

Look with me into a home where sits a woman making what are known as blue Harvard shirts. She is only a poor hand-sewer, or "finisher," but there are many thousands like her in the "joyless city" of the East. Her hands are aching as she tries to finish three dozens of the cruel shirts before the long weary day is done. If she manages to perform that task she will get ninepence, or *one farthing per shirt!* And this would be a high average, as most women can only make two dozens per day. The room is only some eight feet by nine feet, and serves as work-room, bedroom, and dining-room. The window looks into a foul back yard, the fetid smells from which are the only form of "fresh air" granted to the helpless occupant. For this *home* she pays 2s. per week out of her miserable pittance of 3s. 9d. or 4s. "Home!" she calls it, for she knows no other place of shelter save the grim Union, but "home" it is not.

The machinist is a little better off. She earns more, being paid 9d. per dozen, but she cannot do so many shirts, and her machine has to be paid for. This she does as a rule by instalments of 2s. 6d. per week until she completes the sum of £7 7s. for a sewing-machine, the real value of which is £5 10s. if paid for in one amount at the

time of purchase. A machinist can make from one-and-a-half dozens to two dozens of shirts a day if she works hard and dreams not of rest until the aching back and eyes of pain tell her that nature's clock has run down and must be wound up in sleep, from which all sweetness is robbed by the dread of waking to the cold dull day of toil which knows no ending. Her labour is harder than that of the hand-sewer, and she is happy if at the end of the week she can earn 7s. or 8s. From the wages of both classes of workers must be deducted the cost of thread, which the poor shirt-workers have to find for themselves. Verily the art of making bricks without straw is not extinct!

I see now before me a small garret room, which you reach by means of a narrow, dark stair, having a rope nailed to the wall at top and bottom as a substitute for a banister. In the room are two gentle, delicate-looking sisters sitting at a table sewing the terrible blue-check shirt. The mother lies on a truckle bed in the corner of the room. They have dined—so they say—and ask me to excuse the “remains” on the table, consisting of a few crusts of dry bread, and something they said was butter. I found the sisters were too poor to buy a machine, and they could not go out to work in any factory for “mother is so old and weak.” So they toil on as *finishers to some sweater*. The home was quite clean, and round the walls my eyes rested upon sundry Scripture texts, some of them bound with faded ribbon, which told of better days. The old lady reclined upon her small bed and chatted brightly and hopefully. “How old are you?” I asked.

“Eighty-six last birthday.”

“And are you quite free from pain?”

“Oh, yes. Thank God, I am wonderfully strong.” And then she laughingly said, “Won't you give *me* some shirts to do?”

The woman's face was a poem. I shall never forget it. The room seemed to grow into something very beautiful as we lingered beside this aged saint's bed. The texts seemed real things, written in unfading gold across the illimitable blue of God's great heaven. I don't want to forget the scene or the pressure of the thin, old, feeble hands as they grasped a gift too small for such thanks as followed. I don't want to lose the pathos of her request as we were going away in the words, “Pray for me, dear sir.” Pray for her! That woman might pray for an angel.

I went that day to another home—a home that was not a poem. The room was small and dirty as were also the four or five children it contained. The shirtmaker was not interesting and perhaps the only prayer she knew was, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Poverty wore no mantle in that woman's home, it was naked and real. Here is her story—“My husband works at the Dock. No work this week, so I must do my best for the children. I sew shirts at 3*d.* per dozen, *providing my own cotton*. Can do three dozen a day if I work from eight till eight. Cotton costs $\frac{1}{2}$ *d.* per dozen. I never get any shirts on Monday or Saturday.” The poor woman was wroth with some wretched sweater who had kept 5*d.* back from her miserable earnings. No new complaint, but one I have heard again and again. Her husband was a docker, a “casual,” earning precarious wages, which she supplemented with the starvation pay of the shirt-sweater. In this way the fight waxes fiercer and wages are forced down. The married women do not depend entirely upon the sweater's pay; and may manage, with their husbands' takings, to eke out an existence; but as to their unmarried sisters in misery—what of them, to whom the wages paid are all in all?

In proof of this let us go to another home. On entering you see none of the squalid surroundings so common in such cases. The room is by no means grand, but it is comfortable. The woman is clean and without the wolfish look in the eyes which one meets so often in this region. She is machining common shirts as I enter.

“Will you answer a few questions frankly, Mrs. C——, so as to assist me in getting information about the shirt trade?” was my first interrogatory.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, then, from whom do you get these shirts?”

“From Mr. ——.”

“He is not a manufacturer?”

“No, sir; he is a sweater.”

“Is he kind?”

A smile played round her mouth as she replied,

"He ain't bad with me, because he knows I don't depend on him; but I hear he gives it to some of them most awful."

"What does he pay you?"

"Oh, ninepence a dozen."

"Now, Mrs. C—, I want you to think about what I am going to ask you next. You do not depend upon this awful wage, as you have a husband working; but how about the girl over the way, who *must* live on what she makes?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Can she live on it?"

"I don't think she can."

"Can she get any other kind of work?"

"No."

"Well then, you know the result?"

"I can guess," replied the woman.

I could give more statistics, but the foregoing figures may be sufficient to demonstrate the awful state of things now existing in the shirt trade in the East End of this city of London, under the reign of the "sweater."

I determined to try and find out whether the women, if freed from the yoke of the sweater and paid the full amount given by the warehousemen, could live. In other words, without any deduction for the middleman were the wages paid sufficient to support life? Thus it came about that on December 19, 1887, some fourteen women, representing the poorest class of shirtmakers, met in a little hall at Poplar, and through the kindness of a city manufacturer, were provided with a fair supply of shirts to make up. Very soon the numbers increased, and the experiment lasted until the end of May, 1888. By that time the information gained was sufficient to prove in the most conclusive manner that the machinists, if dealing direct with the manufacturer and obtaining the price commonly paid by him to the middleman, could just exist. They might earn according to age and ability from 7s. to 12s. per week, but while this amount is, unfortunately, a fair wage in the shirt trade, it admits of no wild flow of luxury into the lap of the recipient. Still it is good pay when compared with the poor finisher. With her the case seems well nigh hopeless. We gave her all that we got from the manufacturer, and even a shade more sometimes, and yet it was a noble wage if she reached 5s. per week.

The experiment in the Hall at Poplar lasted some five months, and cost about £50. This money represented the loss involved in giving the women the whole sum obtained from the manufacturer. At the end of that period the women were transferred to the Shirt Department of the Workwomen's Co-operative Association, Limited, 39 Walden Street, Commercial Road, and there for the most part they are still working. This is an Association formed at the instigation of Mr. Francis Peek and a few of us, who act as the Directors of the undertaking. It was chiefly meant to benefit tailoresses, and so far as they are concerned, the work has been and is distinctly successful. The shirt-workers, however, still form the battle-ground of our efforts. We cannot get them up. The wages are below decent living point among the machinists, and as for the finishers—the wages are below living point altogether.

A few months since I gave evidence before Lord Dunraven's Committee on sweating as it existed in the East End among shirt-workers. I was asked to attend mainly to prove the existence of the sweater in the shirt trade, and to correct or confirm the evidence given on the subject previously.¹

Any one reading that evidence will find the witnesses tell substantially the same dreadful story of a shirt which I have done. What a side light may be discerned by a thinking mind from the words used before the Committee on April 24, 1888. The witness, in answer to some questions put by Lord Dunraven, says:—²

"I have been having 7d., 8d., and 9d. per dozen for common work."

"I have done a dozen and a half a day of sevenpenny shirts."

"I have sat until twelve and one at night to do a dozen and a half; the children have been so tiresome and so cross that I had to keep leaving off to attend to them."

"I have earned 5s., 6s., and 7s. a week."

This woman is a machinist, and has to pay 2s. 6d. per week for her sewing-machine. Her evidence is only too correct, and exactly corroborates what I have

¹ The account of this evidence will be found in detail on pages 155 to 162 of the First Report.

² Page 154 of the First Report.

written in this paper. A hand-sewer or finisher also gave her tale of woe to the Commissioners on the same date, and it is worse. Here is part of it.

"How much a dozen do you get?"

"Threepence."

"And how many dozen can you do in a day?"

"About a dozen and a dozen and a half, because my eyes are very bad."

"Do you find any materials?"

"Only the cotton."

I know this woman quite well and have been in her home. *The shirts she refers to at threepence a dozen, the middleman, or sweater, gets fivepence or sixpence for.*

This brings me to the other point the Committee wanted to know absolutely, namely the *existence* of the sweater. That fact is difficult to prove, as the women won't inform lest the sweater should revenge himself; but they gave me the information privately, and on May 21, 1889, I wrote to the Committee, giving the names of four sweaters in the Poplar District. The Committee appeared satisfied from what I told them that the middleman is only too sad a fact in connection with shirtmaking in East London.

I was asked to name remedies, and suggested the compulsory registration of sweaters and union among the workers. I also named a drastic remedy which would cut at the very root of the sweating system; but I hesitated to recommend it. It was to forbid all home work. This would, however, mean so much hardship in many cases, that one would almost tremble at the result.

A far more constitutional remedy would be combination and co-operation among the women themselves. I believe if firm, united action were taken in this way that no general coming out of workers need be anticipated, as many of the manufacturers are quite ripe for an advance in wages.

THE WORLD IN SELF.

By SOPHY SINGLETON.

If all mankind were safe in Heav'n, and I
 (Alone denied the boon of second birth,
 Condemned to linger on a lonely earth
 Whence life and strife were banished;—could I lie
 Content, in contemplation of the sky
 Above my own self's unconsidered worth,
 —Dwelling with rapture on their gain,—my dearth
 Forgotten in the blessedness on high? . . .
 Ah, no! I, too, would share that perfect state! . . .
 There is a world, in each poor heart's domain,
 Of sense and action,—infinitely great
 Which needs no outward stress of varied life
 Or emulation! Wherefore, it were vain,
 —The peace of millions would not calm my strife.