

THE STORY OF A LONDON FACTORY GIRL'S CLUB.



To many people, even now the term "factory girl" means something terrible; a rough, wild creature, scarcely to be considered human, it may be, quite different from anyone we are ever likely to come across, or be brought into close contact with. A girl to be shunned and feared, or possibly pitied, because if we stop to think about her at all, we

cannot but feel how very different her life must be from our own. This was what we thought ten years ago of the factory girls who lived and worked around us. In the daytime they might be met going to and from their work arm-in-arm, and in the evening, on Sundays, and at holiday-time, and by holiday-time we always mean Boxing-day, Easter-Monday, Whit-Monday, and August Bank-holiday, they stood at the corners or raced about the streets, laughing, shouting, and joking with their friends, always noisy and rough, never very tidy or clean. We were surprised to hear of clubs being started for girls of this description, and to find that there were some people who did not consider them so very unlike other girls. We went to see some of these clubs, one especially which was held in a cellar, the only available place for it. It was a bright cheery room in spite of its many disadvantages, in fact a place where you felt at home, and so did the girls who crowded in as soon as their day's work was ended.

It was very nice, and when we got back to our own neighbourhood the contrast between those fortunate girls and our own was very great, and we began to think if it would not be possible to do something of the kind for them.

Two or three girls came to us asking for work—they had been without any for weeks and were almost in despair. This seemed an opportunity for getting friendly with them, by no means an easy task, as they are very independent and objected to have anything to do with what they called "toffs and aristocrats." We began by offering to lend books to the girls who were out of work, and we said that they might tell their friends. For some weeks on Friday evenings they came to the Rectory for their "libraries" as they called them. Few wore hats, all had thick, low, uncurled fringes, most of them came straight from work, their frocks were generally ragged and dirty, but almost entirely covered by a linen apron with many pleats, never very clean, as it was the end of the week; we did not dare look at their boots, especially in wet weather; a big shawl, or bright woollen cross-over, usually completed the costume.

Some friends at the Dulwich High School sent us flowers nearly every week through the spring and summer, and a bunch was given to each girl when she came for her book. Flowers are always a great delight to them, and are carefully treasured for days. If people only knew how they are appreciated, especially in some parts of London, where we are far from the parks and never see anything to remind us of the country except the flowers

and vegetables on the street-stalls, they would surely send us a great many more. "Real country flowers" that some one has troubled to gather for us are worth so much more to us than those we may be able to buy, and wild flowers, especially buttercups and daisies are great favourites.

Having made friends with the help of books and flowers, we found that it was possible to get on with the girls, although it was a very long time before we felt that we had the slightest hold of them. We then thought what else might be done, and decided that a little excursion to the country would be a good thing to arrange. Our first outing was to Hadley Woods near Barnet; the station was near, and we met there one Saturday afternoon, a very noisy excited party, ready for any amount of mischief unless carefully watched and kept in check. Our high spirits were, however, a little damped when we found that one girl was literally howling because she had a tooth-ache; various remedies were suggested, but in the meantime we were likely to lose our train; however, there was a chemist's shop near, and one lady was able to get some stuff to try and relieve the pain. As "Haggy" had no handkerchief she lent her one to tie up her face. The girl, a big rough French-polisher, declined to return the handkerchief to its owner, but some time after when the same lady paid a visit to the club it was produced and shown to her as a great treasure, and an admiring crowd of friends stood round while she explained that it belonged to the lady, but that she meant to keep it always to remember her by because she made her tooth-ache well.

It was very evident that we must have some place where they could spend their evenings and holidays, and in September, 1885, we started a club-room for the girls and young women living and working in the neighbourhood of Saffron Hill and Leather Lane, which was formally opened a short time after as a branch of the Church of England Women's Help Society.

They never entered a church, and our first attempt at taking them to a Harvest Festival service was a terrible experience. They rushed in without hats or coats—a rough noisy party; they fought for what they considered the best seats; some brought food with them which they began to eat at once, others produced crochet from their pockets and set to work, pausing now and again to comment on anything in the church which caught their attention. The officials seemed paralysed by the invasion and did not attempt to do anything with them, and indeed, they would have only been defied if they had interfered. By the time the service began, we had succeeded in getting some sort of order, but the preacher—a stranger—and the rest of the congregation were horrified at the appearance and behaviour of the girls, although we could only feel thankful that there was no serious disturbance. Now we go to church in large parties on great festivals, behave well, and take an intelligent part in the services, and there are always some girls at church on Sundays.

The great ambition of the younger girls is to be thirteen and leave school, so that they can go to work; then they consider themselves quite grown up, though they are such children. They soon find out that after all school has its advantages. Directly a little girl goes to work she expects to stay out until 10 o'clock at night, and much later at holiday-time, walking about the street with her friends and dancing to the organs if she has no club to go to. Many do not leave off work until 8 o'clock in the evening, or later if they are busy, so they have not very much spare time.

Their hours vary; 8 o'clock in the morning until 8 at night are probably the usual hours still, with an hour for dinner, and a quarter of an hour for tea and lunch; lunch takes the place of breakfast. There is generally a small girl belonging to each room, whose special work is to get the errands for all the other girls. In a few factories a room is provided where they can cook and eat their dinner if they live too far off to go home, but they usually prefer to buy it at the cook-shop. Fried fish, potatoes, lemons, ice-cream, and pickles are what they like best. Numbers of girls can usually be seen walking about the streets in rows between 1 and 2 o'clock with saucers of pickles red, mixed, or mustard, which they evidently greatly enjoy and offer to each other; quite a large quantity can be bought for a halfpenny. They are most generous, and will share their last farthing with a friend, or go without themselves.

Often during the winter months a whole family is depending for food on what can be earned by a girl of sixteen or seventeen. We always arrange to have our parties at the end of the week, because they are sometimes almost starving then, as all the money has been spent. Some get paid on Friday night, others on Saturday. They are almost always stopped pay for holidays, and often shut out for a week or longer if trade is bad.

The work done by women and girls is most varied. Several of our girls are employed at a large silk factory, where they divide, wind, skein, and reel off the best silk used for crewel and other fancy-work; their looms recall the old weaving industry which flourished for so many years at Spitalfields; the noise of the machinery is deafening to strangers, though the girls themselves do not notice it much. Many of them are rather stout, and are fond of wearing their hair down. Their forewomen had warned them that it was a dangerous thing to do, and one night some of them came into the club-room thoroughly frightened. We asked what was the matter, and were told that "Janey's" hair, of which she was very proud, had been caught in a machine, and pulled out by the roots. She came in a little later herself, looking very much shaken and upset, and, needless to say, the girls have all taken care to keep their hair well tied up, and out of the way of the machines ever since.

Sweet-making sounds an attractive occupation, but it is one of the least pleasant as a matter of fact. The starch used in the preparation of so many sweets gets into the clothes and hair, and cannot easily be got rid of, so that you can generally tell by a girl's appearance if she works at a factory of that description; when they first go they are usually allowed to eat as much as they like, and have soon had enough.

"You wouldn't care about sweets if you knew what they were made of," they often tell us, and we can quite believe it.

Some work, especially lead, paint, and enamel is dangerous, and various precautions have to be taken; the girls are expected to take milk often, wash continually, wear overalls and mouth protectors, and sometimes have a dose of medicine given to them every



week by their forewoman; this they object to most of all.

Several are employed at French-polishing, which is very hard, dirty work; the best tennis-rackets are polished by these girls. Card-board box-making, collar-making, fur-sewing, machining, cartridge-making, bead-work, cigar-making, feather-curling, book-folding and stitching, envelope-making, glass-blowing, umbrella-making, selling flowers, oranges and lemons, and minding stalls of various descriptions, besides every kind of house-work, are some of the employments of girls and women.

Their earnings vary from 2s. to 10s. per week, but they are often thrown out of work for a long time, or are compelled to take holidays, for which of course they are not paid. A girl who is in steady work all the year round is looked upon as a most fortunate person, even if her earnings are small.

A beautiful feather, white, red, violet, or green, to go across a very big hat, falling gracefully down behind, a smart dress and clean apron for holiday time, used to be the height of their ambition. The feather is paid for in weekly instalments for months before a bank-holiday, and is proudly worn for a day or two, and then taken to the pawn-shop to get money for food and, if possible, taken out again for the next holiday. The little girls sometimes buy beautiful paper-feathers and fasten them round their hats.

They are always ready to be amused, and can throw off in a wonderful way all their troubles—the worry about the rent, food, and work; directly they get into a bright, cheerful room, they seem able to see the bright side of everything, and are generally full of spirits and fun after the hardest day's work. Even a bad toothache has its compensation; they can go to the hospital and have it pulled out and returned to them, and it is shown to their friends while they relate how many doctors it took to pull it out, and how far off their screams could be heard while the operation was being performed. "We could live happy if it wasn't for the rent and grub," a girl was overheard to say, and one is inclined to believe it.

They are always ready to dance, and dance well, although it is not easy for a player who does not understand their time to satisfy them. The favourite dances are waltzes, polkas, or what they call "a round un," jigs, and the "twist," which is danced in rows of two or more; the steps are pretty, and the way the girls keep time is wonderful to an on-looker. They do not care for set-dances, though they will now and then have a country-dance if they know it well. A wonderful marching-game, which was delightfully noisy, was very popular for a time. Skipping is almost always fashionable—French, English, Dutch, Peppers, and jumping. One girl proudly boasts that she kept up over eleven hundred once at the club, and no one has beaten her record.

Battledore and shuttle-cock, tops and marbles each have their turn; roller skating is perhaps the greatest enjoyment of all both to the skaters and the onlookers, but the skates are expensive and soon get out of order, so we cannot indulge in this amusement often. They never tire of draughts, dominoes, old maid, snap, and happy family, but will not trouble to learn any other games.

There are classes, lectures, and various entertainments from time to time. The girls make most of their clothes at the club, paying off a little every week as they can for the material. Very cheap sales of old clothes sent from time to time by friends are a great pleasure; they are eagerly attended, but we never have enough things for all. There is also a library, bank, and small dispensary.

They are always pleased to have visitors, and can be very pleasant and amusing if they approve of them, but they see at once if any one is inclined to patronise, and will have none of it. It is only necessary to be friendly, and take an intelligent interest in their work and amusements to get on well with them.

We soon found that the country was a sealed book to the girls, hardly any had seen the sea, or even slept out of London for a single night; so in 1888 we made our first attempt at sending them away, and started the Factory Girl's Country Holiday Fund for these poor women and girls who had never had a country holiday, and stood in such great need of change and rest. They were boarded out with cottagers, and generally a lady living in or near the village, or the clergyman found the homes, made all arrangements, looked after them to a certain extent during their stay, and did their best to give them a happy holiday.

At first they were not particularly anxious to go, and we thought it was very doubtful whether the experiment would answer. We were told by most people, even by those who knew something of the need for an organisation of the kind, that the scheme was a mad one and could never be worked successfully. The girls themselves were rather frightened at the idea of going out of London; their friends too did not want to part with them even for a week, chiefly because they would lose their earnings while they were away, which helped to support the family, and it was only after the return of two or three of the bravest who ventured first, and came back laden with flowers, full of the delights of the country, and the kindness of their new friends, that others wanted to go. Thirty-eight were sent during the first summer, for nearly all of whom clothing and boots had to be provided. Plenty of good food, fresh air, cleanliness, and a real bed to sleep on if only for a week, made them look very different when they returned. It can easily be understood how different country life and surroundings must have been from anything they had ever experienced before. Free from care or worry, free from work, free from all anxiety, in fact being treated as they considered like "ladies" had a marvellous effect on them, and we had good reports of the conduct of those even who give the greatest trouble in the club-room. Geography is not a strong point with them, but they like a long journey, and are always most anxious to know how many miles away the place is, and how long they will have to spend in the train. One girl who was told she was going to a village near Hertford immediately wanted to know if it was in Ireland. Some who were staying near Cambridge said, "We went a good nine miles hunting for the sea, and not a bit of water could we find only the well."

The sea is an endless source of wonder.

"I never see such a sight in my life," said one, on seeing it for the first time, and another who evidently thought the sea-weed gave an untidy appearance, asked if some one could not clear it all away. They always declare that they will be too frightened to go near the water; however the fear soon wears off, and boating, paddling, bathing, and cockling, are the chief enjoyments of a seaside place.

They consider village churches very unlike their own. One says in her letter, "We go to church twice on Sunday and it is such a pretty church, it is funny to what it is in London;" and another tells us, "In the church they have candles and lamps, there are about a dozen seats, and they all marched out to the little organ."

The contrast between London and country policemen strikes them at once. "The policemen are 'toffs' and have white hats on down here. There was a little private house for a police station and the policeman had no staff, and only four buttons down his coat, we laughed every time we see him. They had a policeman in church to keep order, and we say it was the first time we see him down there, so he says, 'well have a good look at me,'" are some of their remarks on the subject.

They hardly ever want to come home. One says, "I enjoyed myself a treat, and should like to stay there always." A card-board box-maker writes, "I have enjoyed myself ever since I came down here. Oh! I do like the people very much; I should like to stop with them for ever. I like the country very much, and we do think it is handsome down here: when we wake up our breakfast is always ready for us. We have such hot weather, we are going out every day cockle-hunting on the sands, and it is nice there; we are all getting a fine colour. We have plenty of food, and we have got a light bed and me and Tilly is lost when we gets into it."

It is quite an interest to the cottagers to have the girls. Everything about their life and work in London is so different. They learn to care for them, and beg to have the same visitors year after year; a strong link is thus formed between town and country, which must be helpful to both. A marked effect on the girls themselves is the change in their style of dress. Shawls, feathers, and showy colours almost entirely disappear. They begin quite early in the year to mend and make a little stock of clothes that they may go away nice and tidy. But although they do all they can towards their scanty outfit, many things have to be provided for the poorest; night-dresses, which were formerly unheard-of luxuries, and bathing-dresses generally have to be lent.

The fund has grown steadily year by year and has been extended to various parts of our great city, especially East and South London. It has been proved that it was greatly needed, and can be successfully worked both in town and country.

After all, factory girls are not much unlike other people if only we will learn to be patient and gentle with them, and try to realise how terribly hard their lives are, and how little there is to soften and refine in the noisy factory, and crowded wretched homes in which they live.

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