

SOCIAL QUESTIONS OF TO-DAY

EDITED BY H. DE B. GIBBINS, M.A.

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WOMEN'S WORK

SOCIAL QUESTIONS OF TO-DAY.

Edited by H. de B. GIBBINS, M.A.

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WOMEN'S WORK

BY

MISS A. AMY BULLEY

AND

MISS MARGARET WHITLEY

With a Preface

BY

LADY DILKE

Methuen & Co.

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PREFACE

THE writers of the present volume have a purely practical object in view. They have no desire to discuss, theoretically, the duties, rights, and responsibilities of women. They consider that it would be unwise to give prominence to considerations affecting the political or social position of women, in a work dealing specially with their industrial situation.

On the other hand, they are fully aware that there is a necessary connection between the views which appear to be in course of formation as to the proper position of women in the labour market, and the change which has taken place in the standpoint from which all questions—even the most abstract—regarding the condition of women are now discussed. Various reforms have been forced on us within the last thirty years through the necessity of recognising, legally and socially, that development in the relations of women to the state and to society which has been brought about by the pressure of the altered circumstances of modern life. Unfortunately, the agitation which has accompanied the carrying of these reforms has been characterized, in some directions, by a deplorable lack of self-control and judgment on the part of certain of

those who have put themselves forward as the leaders of their sex. In the past, it must be confessed that our social system has not afforded to the majority of women those opportunities for the acquisition of disciplined habits of mind which are to be found only in bearing the responsibilities of independent action and self-government. When we hear the voices of those who have been called the "shrieking sisterhood" uplifted in frenzied violence against the male oppressor, when we are tempted to repudiate their follies, we may remember that crimes against good sense, good taste, and good feeling are, like other crimes, bred of the bitter resentment of wrong which springs in the breasts of all who awake to consciousness of the suffering inflicted by centuries of unjust rule. This being so, we may see some extenuation even of the ravings of those unhappy "wild women" who appear to hold the most serious national interests as of no importance, in comparison with the fascinating amusement of fostering an unwholesome antagonism of sex.

The clamour raised by those who have taken this line of extreme reaction has retarded the advance of public opinion in the direction of practical and needed reform, and has gravely hampered the efforts of those who have striven to arouse public interest in the attempt to better the position of women in various fields of labour. People have, not unnaturally, been alarmed by what seems to many the absurd suggestion of equality between the sexes, and, shrinking from the assertion of such principles, have adopted an attitude of hostility to the just claims of women

for consideration in respect of their labour and wages, their education, the protection of their earnings and property, the removal of such trade and professional restrictions as are of an artificial character, and the opening out to them of wider means of obtaining a livelihood.

In view of the responsibilities and duties which society now imposes on women, changes in the direction of these reforms are not only reasonable but necessary in the common interest. To insist, however, that such reforms shall under no circumstances take account of the differences of sex is to fight against indisputable facts which must, in the end, prove too strong for us. There is no danger to society in the recognition of equal human rights for both sexes, if we are also ready to recognise the divergence of their capabilities, for the relations of men and women to each other, their functions in the family and the state, must ultimately be determined—however ill it may please the more ardent female reformer—by the operation of natural laws.

If we attempt to ignore these laws we are at once landed in a sea of difficulties. Take this very question of "Women's Work." At the outset we are brought face to face with facts that show us that all employments are not equally suitable to men and women. We find that, in the case of mothers at least, there are many occupations for which they are wholly unfit, but in which men may engage with impunity. Day after day we find child-bearing women compelled to labour after a fashion for which they are

temporarily unfit, and which is not only the frequent cause of permanent injury to their own health, but entails a heritage of disease, or of that feeble health which falls a ready prey to disease, on all their offspring.

I have seen many married women who were habitually employed in handling white lead, and in but two instances has my question as to the health of their children been satisfactorily answered ; whilst in certain branches of the potters' trade the employment of the mother not unfrequently means the death of her children in their early infancy. Even where the employment is not in itself unhealthy, its pursuit, regardless of the claims of the family—as in the case where working mothers leave their little ones at the gate of the factory to a stranger's care—has to be paid for by a high per-centage of infant mortality.

It is impossible to look into facts of this class without realising that natural laws impose severe limitations, and will probably continue to impose much the same restrictions, as to health and strength on women workers ; and when these marry there arise ties which conflict, and, as far as one can see, will always conflict, with the efficiency and regularity of the labour of married women. The violation of these restrictions on any large scale not only constitutes a danger to the state by causing the steady deterioration of a large section of the population, but the intermittent character of the supply of labour from the ranks of married women greatly heightens the difficulties with which those who are concerned with the organisation of modern

PREFACE

industry have to deal. It is indeed a common place
a-days, that without improved organization and regulation
of the labour of women there can be no security for the
majority of breadwinners.

The present state of anarchy in the labour world, and
the difficulties of our industrial situation, have been appre-
ciably heightened by the course of conduct pursued and
advised by those who persist in regarding the interests of
women as in themselves separate from the interests of men.
Colossal fortunes are built up in large measure by the
enforced labour of women and children, who are encouraged
in their suicidal rivalry with their husbands and fathers
in the labour market by those who do not realise the re-
tribution which follows on the adoption of their counsels.
I have used the word "enforced" advisedly; unchecked
competition is a force of great power. There are masses
of workers in England who are no more free to choose
their work, or to make terms for it, than were the slaves
on a Virginian plantation. The Newcastle woman in the
white lead works of Elswick, who counts seven little ones
at her board, whose man is out of work, is tied and bound
as with chains. Her man, her children, look to her for
food, and at her heels are hundreds of other women in
similar distress, whose breadwinners are, perhaps through
no fault of their own, also out of work, or in receipt of
wages wholly inadequate to the maintenance of the family.
Those who encourage our women to treat men as their
rivals, to compete with them, and by their competition to
persistently reduce the earnings of men, are doing their

best to aggravate this state of things. The wages of the husband and father being reduced by the entrance into his trade of the women who undersell him, the wife and mother needs must turn her back upon her home, and give her working day to make up the difference. In this way the homes of our working classes are too often destroyed, and the health of future generations sacrificed.

Apart from the fact that, in most trades, women have made their appearance on the scene in the capacity of "blacklegs," it must be admitted that there has been, on the side of men, something like resentment at the intrusion of women into professions or branches of industry which have been hitherto reserved to themselves. The expression by the men of this natural feeling—in the case of the doctors it was something more—has, as naturally, irritated the friends of those women who are seeking fresh means of employment; it has enabled them to appeal for sympathy and support from the public as against the "injustice" of men, and it has strengthened their determination to treat men, at all costs, as rivals and enemies who must be driven from their occupations by what I once heard one of these ladies describe, with more force than elegance, as "the cheaper animal."

To the onslaught of these shortsighted champions of the working woman's cause, the men, with equal unwisdom, have retorted by raising, on every occasion, possible or impossible, the plea of "unfitness" as a bar to the treacherous encroachments of the opposite sex, and they have thus, in their turn, tried to win popular sympathy with

their efforts to prevent the entrance of women into certain coveted employments, or to expel them from others in which they have already gained a footing. "Unfit!" Yes, undoubtedly, much labour at present performed by our women is unfit, if there is any fitness in our old and cherished ideal of home and of the place of the woman in the family; but, if we once enter on the line of restricting their employment by artificial barriers, it seems to me difficult to foresee the number and variety of the complications which would ensue.

We may, however, freely concede that some interference may be necessary where, through the helplessness of the employed and the unscrupulousness of the employer, the health and wellbeing of future generations is jeopardised. In other words, certain restrictions on the labour of children and child-bearing women may be required by the interests of that society of which they are a part; further than this it seems scarcely wise to go in our demand for anything like legislative interference in respect to this matter of "unfitness." The true remedy lies in the direction of the better organisation of the trades themselves. The same too may be said of the disastrous effect on the market of that increasing supply of cheap labour which is ever swelling to larger and larger proportions through the influx of our women. Instead of encouraging them to enter into competition with men, and by so doing to drag wages down to lower and yet lower levels, the task before us is to teach them that the interests of labour are one, and that wherever they enter a trade they

must in self-protection refuse to sell their labour for less than a rate proportional to that demanded by their men.

Increased and effectual organisation would do away with the causes which provoke that clamour for prohibitive legislation which, as in the case of the pit-brow women, calls forth angry protest from those who see their livelihood endangered, and intensifies that bitter spirit of rivalry of sex which is a fatal obstacle to the better and harmonious ordering of the world of industry. The only safe course for women, the only safe course for the community at large, is to consider their industrial position as an essential part of the general problem, not to be dissociated without risk from the organisation of the men. The cardinal points of the programme of the leaders of labour—the shortening of hours, the abolition of overtime, the regulation of wages, the limitation of the number of apprentices in the overcrowded trades—these are matters of chief importance to all workers, matters in which the interests of all, whether they be men or women, precisely coincide. Even where, at first sight, their interests appear to diverge, it will on further consideration be found that such sacrifice of personal freedom as the woman may be, on certain points, called upon to make, she makes for the sake ultimately of her own hearth and of her own children. Those who prefer to regard the interests of men and women as opposed must accept a view of their mutual relations which, involving as it does antagonism of sex, pits the woman against the man in an unregulated competition for employment, which, if forced to its extreme, will end by lowering

the whole level of English life far more surely than the immigration of any number of "destitute aliens."

The difficulties which meet us therefore in adjusting the relations of the sexes in the great field of labour are not insuperable. Once our women workers see how much depends on their co-operation, on their self-restraint, on their standing firm, they will not fail their men, and the difficulties which beset them and their position in the labour movement of the day, once solved in the full light of that which is best for the family, best for our society and best for our national life, we shall assuredly be far on our way towards the settlement of those less pressing grievances which are put forward by the idle classes. The highest interests of women in every sphere of life are indissolubly bound up with those of men, and any attempt to deal with either separately is fraught with danger to the State and to the nation.

This principle lies at the bottom of all reasoned Trades Unionism, which, in so far as it is concerned with the organisation of women's work, has for its ultimate object the restoration of as many as possible to their post of honour as queens of the hearth.

EMILIA F. S. DILKE.

76, SLOANE STREET.

May, 1894.

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