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THE WIFE'S CONTRIBUTION TO FAMILY INCOME.¹

It is matter of common knowledge that there are large numbers of women who work under terrible conditions, toiling long hours for starvation pay in the midst of filthy and unhealthy surroundings. A little time ago it was the fashion to ascribe this appalling state of affairs to the sweating system, and to define sweating as a method of employment involving sub-contract.

The painstaking inquiries of Mr. Charles Booth, Mr. David Schloss, and Mrs. Sidney Webb, soon proved that the evils in question were constantly present in cases where there was no system of sub-contract, and were likewise absent in numberless cases where the method of employment *was* that of sub-contract. Sub-contract having thus been shown not to be in fault, the next cry raised was that home work was to be held responsible, and particularly the home work of women.

The outcry against sub-contract had been swelled by the antagonism of labour to capital,—the dislike felt by the man who works for wages to the man who works for profit. The outcry against home work is swelled by the hostility of the working man to the woman wage-earner. This feeling of resentment at women's presence in the wage market is based upon fundamental ignorance of social and industrial history. The popular impression seems to be that women to-day are taking a larger share of the world's work than they have ever done before—that this is a new departure, the outcome of the factory system.

As a matter of fact the share taken by women in the work of the world has not altered in amount, nor even in intensity, only in character. Even in character it has not changed as much as the working man imagines.

¹ Read before Section F of the British Association, September 18, 1893.

Leroy Beaulieu has good ground for hazarding his assertion that if only our classical education had familiarized us with something more than mere details of the Camp and the Forum, we should see that the organization of labour amongst the ancients differed far less from our own before the introduction of machinery than is generally supposed, and that women took a vastly larger and less sedentary part in productive industry than our prejudices will allow us to admit.

Confining our attention to later times however, and dealing with the more precise data to which we here have access, we find that it was in France that woman's industrial position was earliest secured. Under the feudal system the serfs in that country had not only to yield to their lords part of the produce of the land, but to render to them linen yarn, pieces of stuff, tunics and other garments, the work of their female belongings.

'Long before the tenth century the old seigniorial manor included, besides farms and fields, work-rooms of men and women.'¹ Light work such as spinning, weaving, bleaching, dyeing, and the making of clothing, fell to the women, most of whom worked in their own homes, but many of them in the gynæceum. Sometimes the gynæceum was under the direction of the wife of the feudal lord, who allotted the tasks and herself shared in them; sometimes, as in the case of the monastic manor, it was controlled by the abbey intendant, who supplied all the material and saw that no time was wasted.

As early as the ninth century, too, associated work entered upon a new phase through the introduction of industries into monasteries and convents. The spinning and dyeing of wool engrossed a considerable portion of the nuns' existence. Not only in many cases did they make everything needful for their maintenance, from bread down to shoes, but they worked for the outside market as well.² This, as every one knows, they have still gone on doing all through the centuries. Not the least interesting detail in the life of the great Galileo,—contained in an incidental mention in his correspondence with his daughter, Sister Celeste—shows that he had all his needlework and washing done at the convent of St. Matthew, in Florence, and was a good customer to it for candied fruit and citron. Convents indeed were active centres of industrial life, and in their efforts to supplement their revenues competed largely with outside labour and promoted improvements. Thus the Flemish nuns, in their con-

¹ *Le Travail des Femmes au XIX. Siècle.*—Leroy Beaulieu.

² Levasseur, *Histoire des Classes ouvrières*, II., ch. iv., p. 139.

vents near Ghent, brought out that point lace which was so largely produced during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

When we come to the latter half of the middle ages we get a still better notion of the extent and nature of the industries engaged in by women. In the production of luxuries for the nobles, in countries where the industrial arts had made any progress at all, women early bore their share, and that this share was no inconsiderable one is apparent to any one investigating the history of ecclesiastical embroidery, white embroidery, the manufacture of such light fabrics as battiste, muslin and silk textiles, and above all of lace.

The even larger share borne by women in that productive industry which supplied the coarse food and clothing of themselves and their families is less patent, because industry of this kind was domestic in a double sense—being carried on *by* the family *for* the family—each family supplying its own wants first and then disposing of the residue. Obviously, where all the members of the family work together it is difficult to estimate precisely the monetary value of the individual contribution to the total labour required.

The difficulty exists even when the work is being done for outside custom, as is very well illustrated in the present day by the East End tailoring trade. A daughter, receiving subsistence and a certain amount of pocket money, ‘helps’ her father; a wife, receiving subsistence and no pocket money, ‘helps’ her husband. It is not till the wife as a widow, and the daughter as an orphan, do precisely similar work at fixed rates for a tailor not related to them, that the world realizes that what is called ‘*helping*’ father or husband is really ‘*maintaining*’ herself.

In primitive industries the male head of the family disposes of the finished product, sweeps in the earnings and distributes them as his caprice or interest determines. What was the rule in pre-machinery days is even now the rule in some of the surviving domestic industries of England, for instance in the wrought nail trade of South Staffordshire, where the man’s ‘stint’ of nails constantly embodies the labour of wife and daughter, though his name alone appears on the master’s books. Something analogous to this is described by Mr. Scott in his interesting account of the Co-operative Society of Basket Makers at Villaines (*ECONOMIC JOURNAL*, Sept., 1893). ‘The baskets,’ he says, ‘are entered in the workman’s name by the secretary, whether he, or his family have actually made them, and he is credited with the amount.’

Where the financial arrangements are of this nature there is obviously no talk of women's work—the husband is the nominal worker. And I venture to think that a great deal of woman's work in the past has escaped the notice of economic inquirers through this practice of *throwing in* her work with her husband's.¹

In sparsely settled districts and in industrially backward countries such as England was before the 15th century, women are not idle but are constantly associated with men in agricultural labour. In the *Crede of Piers Plowman* there is a graphic description of the peasant's wife leading the oxen while her husband guides the plough. 'Before the Plague,' says Thorold Rogers, 'women were employed in harvest work, in reaping the stubble after the corn was cut (for the thresher or for litter), in hoeing, in planting beans, in washing and shearing sheep, and sometimes in waiting on the thresher or tiler.'

In face of all this evidence of women's activity in the past, it is simply absurd to denounce their alleged increased employment in the present, or to seek to saddle nineteenth century civilization with the onus of having evolved the working woman and set up competition between the sexes.

This competition is no new thing. As early as the reign of Edward III. women's need to earn a living was recognized by a law prohibiting men from the use of the distaff and spindle, while, in 1789, just before the Revolution burst upon Europe, a petition of the women of the Third Estate to the king set forth that every occupation which involved spinning, knitting, or sewing, should be reserved exclusively for women.

Facts of this sort make the more cautious and thoughtful among the opponents of female labour content themselves with attacking not so much women's wage-earning altogether, as the practice of continuing wage-earning after marriage. This at least they declare is an innovation—and one which heralds the destruction of the home.

¹ Cf. *A History of Agricultural Prices in England*, by Thorold Rogers, p. 75. 'The Manor of Thorncroft, that is Leatherhead in Surrey, contained one tenant in villenage.' From him numerous labour rents were exacted, amongst others—'To find one woman to wash and shear sheep and lambs, and to do this for nothing.' This woman would naturally have been either his wife or his daughter. Cf. also Craigie's 'Size and Distribution of Agricultural Holdings in England and Abroad,' *Journal of Statistical Society*, Vol. I. 'A special form of *petite culture* prevails in Sweden, whereby small plots called "torps"—about 180,000 in all—are let to labourers who pay rent not in produce or money, but in labour—one to three working days a week, and certain extra work by women at harvest, being the usual terms.'

So obvious are the evils consequent upon the withdrawal of the wife and mother from the domestic hearth, that it would be impossible not to sympathise with the men's point of view, did they confine their opposition to the employment of married women in workshops and factories. But seeing that they oppose, quite as actively, work done for wages by married women in their own homes, it is clear that something else moves them than mere dread that maternal and household duties may be neglected.

Analysing carefully, we find that what they object to is the *wage-earning* not the *work* of wives. Home-work enables a married woman to become joint earner with her husband, and they profess to fear that facilities in this direction may lead to the gradual substitution of the wife for the husband as bread-winner. Such a fear is the veriest scooped-out, sheet-draped turnip that ever made a village dolt take to his heels and run. If being joint earners with their husbands could have led to the substitution of the wife for the husband as bread-winner, then this substitution would long since have been effected.

For, it is indisputable that women of the working classes always *have* been joint earners with their husbands. At no time in the world's history has the man's labour alone sufficed for the maintenance of his wife and children.¹

So far from keeping his wife, the true account of the matter is that he and she have together kept themselves and the younger children, and this they continue doing to the present day.

It is not by economists that this truth has been overlooked.

In order to bring up a family,' says Adam Smith, 'the labour of the husband and wife together, must, even in the lowest species of common labour, be able to earn something more than is precisely necessary for their own maintenance.'

Nassau Senior is equally explicit: 'We include as part of the wages of the married labourer those of his wife and unemancipated children. . . . The earnings of the wife and children of many a Manchester weaver or spinner exceed or equal those of himself.'

Again, Thorold Rogers states that in England before the Plague, the total earnings and perquisites of an agricultural labourer were £1 15s. 4d. a year, and that assuming that the wife worked only 100 days in the year, 8s. 4d., or a little less than one-fifth of the whole, was her contribution to the family resources.

¹ 'Cette société idéale,' says Leroy Beaulieu, 'où l'homme pourrait suffire aux besoins de la famille, et où la femme n'aurait qu'à vaquer aux soins de la maison et à l'éducation des enfants n'a nulle part existé dans le passé.'

According to Roscher, in France in 1832, a man working in the field earned on an average $1\frac{1}{4}$ francs a day, the wife $\frac{3}{4}$ of a franc (200 days to the year), and three children 38 centimes (250 days in the year), an aggregate of 650 francs per annum. The wife's contribution thus amounted to 23·0 per cent., or a little less than one-fourth of the whole.¹

While economists have freely conceded that the wife's share in family maintenance, whether her labour be confined to her home or no, is an appreciable one, responsible statesmen have on occasions made and acted upon the same admission.

Thus in France, when a scheme of working class pensions was under consideration, some fifty years ago, the then Minister of Finance refused to entertain the project on the ground that it did not sufficiently recognize the claims of wives. It was out of the question, he said, that one alone of a married couple should reap the benefit of an annuity, the payments for which were made possible by the joint labours of both.

Amongst English statesmen Lord Brougham also seems certainly to have been alive to the large share taken by the wife in productive industry. Speaking at a meeting of the Society for the Encouragement of the Social Sciences in 1862, he stated that one-seventh of the married women of England were engaged in independent and isolated labour, while in addition there were large numbers of wives, daughters, and sisters who shared in the labour of their male relatives on farms, at the desk, behind the counter, and in domestic workshops.

Miss Edith Simcox, then, was within rather than beyond the truth when she affirmed before the Industrial Remuneration Conference, that in England 'not more than half the whole number of working class families are maintained by the labour of the father assisted only by the elder children.'

Even in America, where one would suppose men's wages would be on a sufficiently liberal scale to enable them unassisted to provide for wife and children, the wife's labour is an important and necessary factor in family maintenance. The United States Department of Labour recently conducted an inquiry into the industrial conditions of Europe and America, subjecting the industries of coal, iron, steel, and glass, and cotton, woollen, silk and linen textiles, to complete investigation, and collecting Budgets of Cost of Living from 770 workmen employed in Europe

¹ Monsieur Baudrillart states that at the present day in the Arles district the annual income of a family of petty peasant proprietors and petty wage-earners is about 850 francs, of which the wife contributes 150.

and 2,490 employed in America. As a result of these investigations, it was ascertained, that not only are the total earnings of the family highest in America, but the contribution of the husband thereto is both relatively and absolutely higher than elsewhere. Yet even here 'only in two cases—viz. the bar-iron and steel manufacture—was it possible for the husband unaided to support his family.' In Belgium, where the return to labour generally is small, it is calculated that only three-fifths of the family income come from the husband's wages.

But it may be urged, grant that wives have at all times earned their bread, is it not perfectly possible that they are beginning in these modern days to do more than earn their bread? Are we not witnessing a real displacement of male labour? To this the answer is a decided negative. There may be a change in the distribution of male labour, but that is quite another matter from its displacement. The woman's share in household maintenance is no more than it ever was. The facts have not altered, but the conditions of modern industry enable us to see what the facts are. In short, we are witnessing not a process of *substitution* but of *revelation*.

People who assert glibly that wives in the past had enough to do looking after their homes, seldom realize what looking after the home meant 150 years ago. It meant chopping wood, fetching water, baking bread, spinning flax, weaving, knitting, pickling, curing, churning, preserving, washing.¹ But now, water is laid on into the houses, bread is bought at the baker's, it is cheaper to buy garments than to make them, wood and coal are brought round to the door in carts, and jam and pickles, butter and bacon, are all to be had from the general shop. So that now,—for dwellers in big cities at any rate,—'looking after the home,' means only cleaning, cooking, washing, mending, care of children being the same in both cases. Even washing is ceasing to be the essentially domestic occupation it used to be, many women finding it more profitable to work at some trade in their homes and to give their washing out to a poorer neighbour to be done in the municipal wash-houses, or in the places set apart for washing in model buildings.²

¹ An incident in the life of a notable American woman, detailed by Helen Campbell in an article on 'Women Wage Earners' in the *Arena*, shows what looking after the home has sometimes meant. 'In mid-winter, with neither money nor wool in the house, one of the boys required a new suit. The mother sheared a half-grown fleece from a sheep and in a week had spun, wove, and made it into clothing, the sheep being protected from cold by a wrappage made of braided straw.'

² Le Play, with whose works Mr. Henry Higgs has done so much to familiarize

Though women did not earn wages for all the multifarious occupations which 'looking after the home' formerly involved, it is clear they did as much of the necessary work of the world as they do now. If, then, the fallacy that there is a limited amount of work to be obtained, and that the more the women take the less the men get, be supposed true, it is certain that female labour competed as much with male labour heretofore as now. The only difference was that each woman took an infinitesimal share of a great many different kinds of work, whereas now she takes, as a tailoress, clerk, jam-factory girl, or what not, an appreciable share of one particular kind of work.

Without drawing subtle distinctions however I may conclude by saying, what I think few will dispute. So long as the wife must contribute her quota to family maintenance, it is distinctly advisable that she should be allowed to do this in the way she herself finds least irksome. The ideal to be aimed at, I submit, is not that the man should be the sole bread-winner, but that bread-winning should go on under circumstances which secure the most comfortable life for the men, women, and children composing the family, which permit the fullest development of all powers, and which openly substitute economic co-operation on the part of the wife for economic dependence. Tested by reference to this ideal, home work will always, in the very teeth of admitted drawbacks, find itself justified, for it indisputably allows the married woman to contribute her share to family maintenance in a way congenial to herself, and on lines which are consonant with the beauty and stability of family life.

ADA HEATHER-BIGG.

English readers, predicted long ago that amongst Western nations washing would ultimately cease to be carried on as a domestic industry. Now that steam laundries are springing up on all sides and vast amounts of linen are washed by men and machinery, this prediction seems in a fair way of being realized.