

## THE FACTORY AS AN ELEMENT IN SOCIAL LIFE.

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A superficial study of the factory in almost any community leads to the conclusion that it has a deteriorating influence upon the operative as well as upon the population surrounding it, but this is only the superficial view. Years ago, before I began the investigation of social and economic conditions, I very naturally adopted the superficial view; but as my investigations proceeded, and as I studied the real relation of the factory to common, everyday life, I was obliged to change my attitude. It is only natural that this superficial view should obtain in the popular mind. Almost every writer, certainly with rare exceptions, adopts the view that the factory has been beneficial in a purely economic sense. Few are ready to adopt the idea that the factory has been of itself and through its own influence an element in civilization or an element in lifting up the social life of any of the people.

The latter view results from a superficial study, as I have said, and also from an inverted vision. The glamour which surrounded the factory in the early days of its establishment in this country has led to very many erroneous conclusions. Everyone has heard of the Lowell factory girls and the intellectual standard which they attained. Then, looking to the present textile factory operative in different parts of the country, the comparison becomes very sharp and the conclusion apparently decisive. In making this comparison, however, the real conditions of the factory in the early days at Lowell, when the factory girls edited their own literary magazine,

which achieved high rank everywhere, are not clearly recognized. The then existing prejudice of England against the factory was well known here, and managers who built their factories in this country at that time were obliged, therefore, to offer attractive wages as well as attractive environment, and by such offers they drew into the eastern factories the daughters of the New England farmers and a high grade of English girls.

In speaking and writing of this period I have often called attention to my own recollections, and such recollections are just those which have led to false conclusions. My first teacher was a weaver in the factories at Lowell, Biddeford and Salem. She was a writer on the *Lowell Offering*, the factory girls' publication, and a contemporary of Lucy Larcom and the other noble women who worked in the cotton mills of those days.

A change came over the industrial condition, however, and the American and English girls were forced out of the factory through economic influences, but they were not forced downward in the scale of life. They were crowded out, but up into higher callings. They became the wives of foremen and superintendents, teachers in the common schools, clerks in stores and counting rooms, and they lost nothing whatever by their life and services in the factory. The lower grade of operatives that succeeded them brought the sharp comparison which led to the conclusion that the factory is in itself degrading. The women who came in then were very largely Irish girls, fresh and raw immigrants, coming from the ignorant and degraded localities of Ireland. Taking the places of the English and American girls in the eastern factories, they soon began to improve their condition, and the result was that they in turn were crowded out by another nationality. But the Irish girl did not retrograde; she progressed, as had her predecessor, and enlisted in higher occupations. The daughters of the original Irish factory operatives and scrub women who came to this country were no longer factory operatives and scrub women. They were to be found standing behind the counters of our great retail shops, well dressed, educated in our common schools, bright, active, and industrious and with a moral character equal to that of their predecessors.

The war period created the necessity of an increased number of factory operatives, and brought into our mills a great body of French Canadian women. The opposition in the New England states to the presence of the French Canadians was as great as it ever had been against the coming of the Irish. The opposition to the Irish had ceased; it was transferred to the French Canadians, but I venture to say that there never has been a nationality coming into the United States that has shown such great progress in the same period of time as have the French Canadians. They are now graduating from the factory, the Swedes, the Greeks, and others coming in, and the factory is performing the same civilizing operation for the new quotas that it has always performed for the others. It is reaching down and down to the lower strata of society and lifting them up to a higher standard of living.

Now we are in the presence of another experiment, or experience, rather, which teaches the soundness of the view I am trying to convey, and that experience is in the south. When the American girls left the factories of New England, foreigners took their places. The establishment of the textile factory in the south led to the employment of the body of native people, those born and bred in the south, popularly known as the poor whites, who up to the time of the erection of cotton factories had lived a precarious existence and always in antagonism to the colored people, looking upon work as rather degrading than otherwise, because of the peculiar institution of the south, and on the whole not constituting a very desirable element in southern population. Today these people are furnishing the textile factories of the southern states with a class of operatives not surpassed in any part of the country. This is the testimony of the late Mr. Dingley in a speech in the house of representatives. It is the testimony of English manufacturers who have carefully studied the conditions in the south, and the testimony from all sources is to the effect that the poor whites of the south are entering the cotton mills as an opportunity which had never before been open to them. They are becoming industrious and saving in their habits, and, coming to the factory towns, they bring their families, and they are in turn brought into an

environment entirely different from that under which they were reared. They are now able to educate their children, to bring them up in a way which was never possible to them before, and thus the poor whites of the south are gradually and with more or less rapidity becoming not only a desirable but a valuable element in southern population, on which the integrity and prosperity of a great industry largely depends.

The experience of the south is simply that of other localities, whether in this country or in England. The factory means education, enlightenment, and an intellectual development utterly impossible without it—I mean to a class of people who could not reach these things in any other way. It is an element in social life. By its educational influences it is constantly lifting the people from a lower to a higher grade.

When the textile factory was originally established in England it took into its employment the children of agricultural districts—paupers, charity boys and girls. Much was said about the degradation of the factory children. Parliamentary investigations and reports bewailed the conditions found, but it was forgotten in every instance that the factory really lifted these children out of a condition far worse than that in which parliamentary committees found them when employed in the factories. We have had no such conditions to contend with in this country, but we have this superficial idea with which to contend. The notion that the factory creates ignorance, vice and low tendencies is absolutely untrue. It does bring together a large body of comparatively ignorant persons; it congregates these persons into one community, and hence the results of ignorance and of lower standards of life become clearly apparent because of the concentration. Before the concentration the ignorance existed precisely the same, but was diffused and hence not apparent.

There is a class of writers who are very fond of drawing comparisons between conditions under the factory system and those which existed prior to its establishment. They refer to the halcyon days of England, and call attention to the English operative working under hand methods as a happy, contented, well fed, moral person. History teaches just the reverse. Prior to the establishment of the factory the working

classes of England lived in hovels and mud huts that would not be tolerated even in the worst coal mining districts in this country or in England to-day. The factory graduated all these people from the mud hut. But what was the old system? Degrading, crime breeding and productive of intemperance in the worst form as compared with the factory of to-day.

We hear a great deal about the sweating system, and the popular idea is that the sweating system is the product of modern industrial conditions. The fact is that it is a remnant of the old industrial system. It is the old hand system prior to the establishment of the factory, and has been projected into our time. Once universal, the sweating system is now limited to one or two industries, and is gradually being eliminated through the very system which is sometimes condemned. Just as fast as the sweatshops are developed into the factory and brought under the laws which relate to factory regulation, just so rapidly is the sweating system being eliminated. The only cure is to make of the sweatshop the factory. The social life of sweaters can be improved only by lifting them to the grade of factory operatives.

We sometimes hear of the immorality of factory operatives. I have no doubt that immorality exists among factory operatives, the same as it exists in Fifth avenue and everywhere else on earth where men and women are found, but I do not believe that it exists in any greater proportion in the factory than in any other walk of life. On the other hand, I believe that immoral lives are less frequent among the factory population than among any other class in the community, and investigations, and extensive ones at that, in this country and abroad teach the truth of this assertion.

Some years ago it was my good fortune to look over some of the great thread works in Paisley, Scotland, and this very question of immorality was discussed with the foreman of one of the works. One gentleman, who had been connected with the Coates factories for forty years, informed me that during that period he had known of but one girl who had departed from a strictly honest life, and she, as soon as her habits were known, was ostracized by the coldness of her associates. This I have found to be true in almost every factory I have ever

visited. As soon as a girl loses her character her mates frown upon her and she is fairly driven from the field. Women in cotton mills and in all other factories are as careful of their characters as is any other class. The charge that the factory breeds immorality among women is not true, and cannot be sustained by any facts that have ever been collected. This one condition constitutes the factory an important element in social life, for the women who are there and are working for low wages—lower than any of us would like to have paid, but which are governed according to economic conditions and laws—are working honestly and faithfully and living honest and virtuous lives. It must be so. Women cannot work eight or ten or twelve or more hours in a cotton factory and live a dissolute life the rest of the day.

There is another supposition relative to the factory to which I wish to call attention. It is that the factory has a dwarfing influence upon skill; that skill is degraded to common labor. This supposition also arises from a superficial examination of modern establishments wherein a cheap and often an ignorant body of laborers is employed, the appearance being that skilled and intelligent workmen are replaced by unskilled and unintelligent workmen, the conclusion being that the modern system forces the skilled and intelligent workman downward in the scale of civilization. This is not the true sociological conclusion, which is that the modern system of industry gives the skilled and intelligent workman an opportunity to rise in the scale of employment, in intellectual development, in educational acquirements, in the grade of services rendered, and hence in his social standing in his community, while at the same time it enables what was an unskilled and unintelligent body of workers to be employed in such ways, under such conditions, and surrounded by such stimulating influences that they in turn become intelligent and skilled, and crowd upward into the positions formerly occupied by their predecessors, thus enabling them to secure the social standards which they desire. This conclusion, it seems to me, is the true one, and makes the discussion of the question whether the modern system of industry, the factory, really has a stimulating effect upon the intellectual growth of the

people not only an interesting but a peculiarly appropriate one.

The whole matter of the consideration of the workingman to-day, then, becomes intellectual. He is carried onward and upward by the power of mental activity which comes from the factory, and cannot be treated separately as one of a class, as he could in the olden time, because in the olden time he was neither a social nor a political factor. Changed conditions in all directions have brought mankind to a new epoch, the distinguishing feature of which is the factory itself, or machinery, which makes it. This we see is true when we comprehend that machinery is constantly lifting men out of low into high grades of employment, constantly surrounding them with an intellectual atmosphere, rather than keeping them degraded in the sweatshop atmosphere of the olden time.

Of course we know that the condition of the worker is not the ideal one; we know that every employer who has the welfare of his race at heart, and who is guided by ethical as well as economic motives, would be glad to see his work people receiving higher pay and living in better houses, living in an environment which should increase rather than diminish their social force. At the same time, we recognize that the sanitary and hygienic condition of the factory is vastly superior to the sanitary and hygienic condition of the homes of the operatives in many cases. When the factory operative in his home reaches the same high grade that has been reached in the factory itself his social force and life will be increased and his standard raised to a much higher plane. All these things are matters of development, but when we understand that manufacturers in this country are obliged constantly to deal with a heterogeneous mass, so far as nationality is concerned, while those in other countries deal with a homogeneous mass of operatives, the wonder is that here we have kept the standard so high as it has been. In considering all these aspects, as briefly as they have been touched upon, we cannot but feel, as I have indicated, that the factory reaches down and lifts up; that it does not reach up and draw down those who have been raised to a higher standard. This is the real ethical mission of the factory everywhere.

Whether the new developments of concentrated industrial interests will lead to a still higher recognition of the ethical forces at work is a question which cannot at present be answered. My own belief is that the future developments of industry will be on this line, and that the relation of the employer and his employees will rest upon a sounder basis than heretofore.

The social condition of the workingman and his education, which we have insisted upon, have led him into the strike method as a means of asserting what he called his rights. He has in this adopted the worst examples set him by his employers in the past. Greater intelligence, a broader recognition of the necessity of higher social standards, will lead to a recognition of other principles that will enable him to avoid industrial war and his employer to recognize the intelligence which is willing to avoid it.