

The Strike of the Shirtwaist Girls

By ELIZABETH DUTCHER

IF YOU had chanced to be in New York Christmas week, in the year of our Lord, 1909, you might have observed, in the inmost of the holiday crowds, near, perhaps, a shop window bedecked with holly and cheerful mottoes of *Merry Christmas!* and *Peace On Earth, Good Will Toward Men!* a young girl selling newspapers. She was thinly and rather poorly clad, with a scarf tied round her face instead of a hat, but pinned across her breast was a long streamer that stated in big black letters: *Ladies Waist Makers' Union. On Strike for better conditions.* And you would have heard her calling bravely, "Special strike edition! All about the shirtwaist girls' strike! Read the girls' own story!"

She and several thousand like her, scattered all over our great city, were trying to publish the truth about their struggle, and at the same time to raise money for their treasury, by selling copies of special editions of newspapers, contributed by friendly journals, and edited by women sympathizers. And hungry, cold, perhaps wet, at the end of one day the amateur news girl came back to headquarters, with shining eyes watched the counting of her money, and, without a sigh, saw it disappear into the general fund. She was out with thirty thousand others, and she claimed no special privileges. Perhaps she might get a three dollar benefit that week,—most likely not, alas! She had had nothing the week before and had had some hard sledding on one meal a day for a fortnight past. But it was the union's money, and would she take a cent of it? Not she!

A Revolt Against Oppression

HOW did she have to be on strike in winter time in a big, careless city?

New York is a great center for the shirtwaist industry, and over forty thousand people, mostly women, are employed in its factories at this work alone. The trade is seasonal. There is little or no work in summer weather, when all the feminine world is wearing the pretty garments, but from New Year's until June the machines whirr almost continuously. Last year, in many of the factories, the girls remained at work four nights in the week until nine in the evening, and then came back for five hours' work on Sunday.

Church, settlement recreation center, and most alluring of all to these ambitious girls—night school—beckoned in vain. The flashing needle was a jealous master. Now, the trade requires deftness and intelligence. And yet,



—Courtesy Hampton's
Clara Lemlich (in oval), who put the motion
for a general strike, and Helen Marot,
of the Woman's Trade Union League,
who directed the strike.

between a grievous system of sub-contracting and the firms' own cupidity, their wages were small. A low percentage might occasionally get more, but three dollars to nine dollars weekly was the usual amount, and out of this they paid for power and needles and oil,—sometimes for thread too. And most vexatious of all were the fines, ranging from ten to seventy-five cents, for every imaginable offense, from dropping their work to stopping for an instant to tuck a troublesome lock of hair into place.

Wages, too, varied amazingly in the same shop. Bertha might get seven dollars "coming to her" in her pay envelope, while Fannie who was an equally good worker, but quieter, meeker, very much afraid of losing her position, and unskilled in repartee, received only four. And if a whisper of "joining the union," went round, the girl agitators were always discovered and locked out.

It was such a lock-out of one hundred and fifty union operators that started everything going. They hadn't demanded anything, but they were just invited to quit. Quit they did, but they immediately started in to picket. And the be-reaved manufacturers arose to the occasion.

The Twentieth Century Spirit

GOD MOVES in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. If the little pickets had been left alone to pursue their lawful avocation there would have been no big strike. Instead the masters tried intimidation. They reasoned thus: they were little working girls, many of them foreigners, and without any political influence (since they had no vote). A few good scares,—and who would be the wiser?

So police protection was summoned, reinforced by well-paid private detectives, and strong arm men with criminal records and plenty of business sense. The girls were cursed, battered, pummeled, dragged off to police stations, and there brought before

magistrates who openly stated that they were on the side of the manufacturers, and had no use for strikes, still less for any peaceful picketing, legal or illegal. Fines were accordingly imposed of from one to ten dollars, and several girls sent to the workhouse, there to be shut in with the most degraded of their sex.

Mark you, at this time the girls had committed absolutely no acts of violence. Did you ever hear of a man's strike which did not include scenes of riot? The Ladies Waist makers, in their most unladylike rages, when they had known privation and want for months, committed no acts more overt than an occasional call of "scab" or a furtive pull at the alluring puffs of the



—Courtesy Collier's
AN EAST SIDE SCENE DURING THE STRIKE



MRS. GEORGE
BIDDLE
and
LENA SENDROW

The prominent Philadelphia woman and the 14-year old girl striker whom she bailed out of prison.

—Courtesy Phila. Evening Times

girls who were taking the bread out of their mouths. As Mayor Gaynor himself put it, when it was all over except the shouting, "These girls have been badly treated. There isn't one of them who has deserved more than a twenty-five cent fine."

Just here, however, was where that new, and as yet unexplained phenomenon,—the twentieth century spirit of solidarity, among women—made itself felt. The Women's Trade Union League heard what was going on and looked into things. They found that not only had the girls a clear legal right to do picket duty, but that sympathizers might help. So they proceeded to help picket. And as speedily were they arrested.

To the "nice" woman, a college graduate perhaps, who had seen only the pleasant side of life, and had thought of policemen as occasionally useful to help one across crowded streets, the truth came as a great shock. On picket duty, arm and arm with the strikers, cursed and railed at with them, going to the long sessions of the Night Court with them, a new world opened before her eyes,—a world of hardship, of bitter competition, where "influence" and "connections" did not exist for her, and justice was almost unknown—the world of the immigrant working girl in New York.

The newspapers began to find the strike interesting, and to publish accounts thereof, some of them alleging that Miss Anne Morgan and Mrs. Belmont and the members of the Colony Club had taken up the strike as a new diversion. Well, there are diversions and diversions. But there is nothing appealing, to the average woman at least, in getting up with the grey winter dawn, and hurrying breakfastless, to a factory door at seven o'clock, there to spend two or three hours in ceaseless pacing to and fro. Evening picket duty meant a chance, if anything went wrong, of being in the Night Court, in the vilest possible surroundings, until perhaps two or three in the morning. And yet many a delicate woman undertook this new task, from ten to sixty times in the course of the three months.

Perhaps hardest of all to bear was the constant profanity and abuse. This had to be endured with stoical calm. I remember one volunteer, a Southern college girl, who was told that no matter what was said to her, she could make no rejoinder more than that she would go home and pray for the gentlemen, or words to that effect. "Ah suppose you ah right," she said sadly, "but ah do wish ma brother could meet that man in South Ca'lina!"

"For the Cause"

THE calling of the great general strike at Cooper Union in Thanksgiving week,—when at one call of Clara Lemlich, thousands of girls took the old Jewish oath, "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither and drop off at the waist from the arm I now raise," and thirty thousand left their shops the next day—the spread of the strike to Philadelphia, and the remarkable organization work accomplished there by Mrs. Raymond Robins,—all these events have now passed into history.

For almost three months after the calling of the general strike, the struggle continued. How hard it was for the girls no one will ever know. A woman has not the credit resource that helps men in strikes, and many of the girls were alone in the city, boarding with strictly neutral landladies.

One girl came home at 2 A. M. from a long, supperless session at Night Court to find all her possessions on the stairway. She had been dispossessed. Another had two little sisters and a blind mother dependent on her.

But with that dash of fanaticism which even the most sensible woman has when she is thoroughly aroused, they desperately stood together, feeling it was a "now or never" proposition. Public opinion was with them; the press was largely on their side,—and they endured to the end.

A Notable Triumph

IT WAS a real victory. Three hundred and fifty-two shops settled with the union, granting all the debated points,—fifty-two hours to be the week's work; only three evenings over time a week; no Sunday work; all disputed points to be settled, not between the individual girl and her employer, but by one firm in consultation with a committee of the girls themselves. And in all but fourteen instances, the agreement was made on a "closed shop" basis; a basis which, in a seasonal trade, the girls believed to be the only guarantee of a really permanent contract. Two shops have put on the union label, and friends all over the country can, by demanding it on their waists, make sure that they are helping the right girls.

Of course, not every one could win,—particularly in New York, for in Philadelphia all the girls went back on a common agreement. But the losers to whom I have talked seem to agree that they are glad they went on strike; it helped on the victory of the girls who won, and the whole trade feels the influence of the strong, organized force working to improve things.

Well-disposed manufacturers openly rejoice that the trade has been standardized, and that they can give the good conditions that a fierce and somewhat brutal competition prevented their granting before. And the manufacturer who doesn't care—the so-called bad manufacturer—he has had his lesson.

A strike against God,—so one of the magistrates termed it, adding that it was the Almighty's will, since the primal curse, that man should earn his bread in toil and sorrow, and that any attempt to make his lot easier were blasphemous. This is an interesting and somewhat unique view. But to many an earnest thinker, with the future of America at heart,—America with her six million women in industry, her ceaseless stream of immigrants with primitive standards of living,—and, on the other hand, a growing corporate control of industry, that reckons nothing of the individual employee,—when he considers all this, he may well find deep encouragement and hope for the future in this successful strike of thirty thousand girls in New York through three months of winter weather.

* * *

¶The last thing to be realized by the educator is that he really has before him an entirely new soul, a real soul whose first and chief right is to think over the things with which he comes in contact. By a new soul he understands only a new generation of an old humanity to be treated with a fresh dose of the old remedy. We teach the new souls not to steal, not to lie, to save their clothes, to learn their lessons, to economize their money, to obey commands, not to contradict older people, say their prayers, to fight occasionally in order to be strong. But who teaches the new souls to choose for themselves the path that they must tread? Who thinks that the desire for this path of their own can be so profound that a hard or even mild pressure towards uniformity can make the whole of childhood a torment.—Ellen Key.