

LETTER XXVI.

DEAR C.:--

I will add to this a little sketch, derived from the documents sent me by Lord Shaftesbury, of the movements in behalf of the milliners and dressmakers in London for seven years past.

About thirteen years ago, in the year 1841, Lord Shaftesbury obtained a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the employment of children and young persons in various trades and manufactures. This commission, among other things, was directed toward the millinery and dressmaking trade. These commissioners elicited the following facts: that there were fifteen hundred employers in this trade in London, and fifteen thousand young people employed, besides a great number of journeywomen who took the work home to their own houses. They discovered, also, that during the London season, which occupied about four months of the year, the regular hours of work were fifteen, but in many establishments they were entirely unlimited,--the young women never getting more than six hours for sleep, and often only two or three; that frequently they worked all night and part of Sunday. They discovered, also, that the rooms in which they worked and slept were overcrowded, and deficient in ventilation; and that, in consequence of all these causes, blindness, consumption, and multitudes of other diseases carried thousands of them yearly to the grave.

These facts being made public to the English nation, a society was formed in London in 1843, called the Association for The Aid of Milliners and Dressmakers. The president of this society is the Earl of Shaftesbury; the vice presidents are twenty gentlemen of the most influential position. Besides this there is a committee of ladies, and a committee of gentlemen. At the head of the committee of ladies stands the name of the Duchess of Sutherland, with seventeen others, among whom we notice the Countess of Shaftesbury, Countess of Ellesmere, Lady Robert Grosvenor, and others of the upper London sphere. The subscription list of donations to the society is headed by the queen and royal family.

The features of the plan which the society undertook to carry out were briefly these:--

First, they opened a registration office, where all young persons desiring employment in the dressmaking trade might enroll their names free of expense, and thus come in a manner under the care of the association. From the young people thus enrolled, they engaged to supply to the principals of dressmaking establishments extra assistants in periods of uncommon pressure, so that they should not be under the necessity of overtaxing their workwomen. This assistance is extended only to those houses which will observe the moderate hours recommended by the association.

In the second place, an arrangement is made by which the young persons

thus registered are entitled to the best of medical advice at any time, for the sum of five shillings per year. Three physicians and two consulting surgeons are connected with the association.

In the third place, models of simple and cheap modes of ventilation are kept at all times at the office of the society, and all the influence of the association is used to induce employers to place them in the work and sleeping rooms.

Fourth, a kind of savings bank has been instituted, in which the workwomen are encouraged to deposit small earnings on good interest.

This is the plan of the society, and as to its results I have at hand the report for 1851, from which you can gather some particulars of its practical workings. They say, "Eight years have elapsed since this association was established, during which a most gratifying change has been wrought in respect to the mode of conducting the dressmaking and millinery business.

"Without overstepping the strict limits of truth, it may be affirmed that the larger part of the good thus achieved is attributable to the influence and unceasing efforts of this society. The general result, so far as the metropolis is concerned, may be thus stated: First, the hours of work, speaking generally, now rarely exceed twelve, whereas formerly sixteen, seventeen, and even eighteen hours were not unusual.

"Second, the young persons are rarely kept up all night, which was formerly not an unusual occurrence.

"Third, labor on the Lord's day, it is confidently believed, has been entirely abrogated.

"Under the old system the health and constitution of many of the young people were irretrievably destroyed. At present permanent loss of health is rarely entailed, and even when sickness does from any cause arise, skilful and prompt advice and medicine are provided at a moderate charge by the association.

"In addition to these and similar ameliorations, other and more important changes have been effected. Among the heads of establishments, as the committee are happy to know and most willing to record, more elevated views of the duties and responsibilities, inseparable from employers, have secured to the association the zealous cooperation of numerous and influential principals, without whose aid the efforts of the last few years would have been often impeded, or even in many instances defeated. Nor have the young persons engaged in the dressmaking and millinery business remained uninfluenced amidst the general improvement. Finding that a strenuous effort was in progress to promote their physical and moral welfare, and that increased industry on their part would be rewarded by diminished hours of work, the assistants have become more attentive, the workrooms are better managed, and both parties, relieved from a

system which was oppressive to all and really beneficial to none, have recognized the fundamental truth, that in no industrial pursuit is there any real incompatibility between the interests, rightfully interpreted, of the employer and the employed. Although not generally known, evils scarcely less serious than those formerly prevalent in the metropolis were not uncommon in the manufacturing towns and fashionable watering-places. It is obviously impracticable to ascertain to what extent the efforts of the association have been attended with success in the provinces; but a rule has been established that in no instance shall the cooperation of the office, in providing assistants, be extended to any establishment in which the hours of work are known to exceed those laid down by the association. On these conditions the principals of many country establishments have for several years been supplied; latterly, indeed, owing to the great efficiency of the manager, Miss Newton, and to the general satisfaction thus created, these applications have so much increased as to constitute a principal part of the business of the office; and with the increase the influence of the association has been proportionally extended."

This, as you perceive, was the report for 1851. Lord Shaftesbury has kindly handed me the first proof of the report for 1853, from which I will send you a few extracts.

After the publication of the letter from the ladies of England to the ladies of America, much was said in the Times and other newspapers

with regard to the condition of the dressmakers. These things are what are alluded to in the commencement of the report. They say,--

"In presenting their annual report, the committees would in the first place refer to the public notice that has lately been directed to the mode in which the dressmaking and millinery business is conducted: this they feel to be due both to the association and to those employers who have cooperated in the good work of improvement. It has been stated in former reports, that since the first establishment of this society, in the year 1843, and essentially through its influence, great ameliorations have been secured; that the inordinate hours of work formerly prevalent had, speaking generally, been greatly reduced; that Sunday labor had been abolished; that the young people were rarely kept up all night; and that, as a consequence of these improvements, there had been a marked decrease of serious sickness.

"At the present moment, in consequence of the statements that have appeared in the public journals, and in order to guard against misconceptions, the committees are anxious to announce that they perceive no reason for withdrawing any of their preceding statements--the latest, equally with former investigations, indicating the great improvement effected in recent years. The manager at the office has been instructed to make express inquiries of the young dressmakers themselves; and the result distinctly proves that, on the whole, there has been a marked diminution in the hours of work.

"The report of Mr. Trouncer, the medical officer who has attended the larger number of the young persons for whom advice has been provided by the association, is equally satisfactory. This gentleman, after alluding to the great evils in regard to health inflicted in former years, remarks that these have, through the instrumentality of the association, been greatly ameliorated; that as regards consumption,-- although the nature of the employment itself, however modified by kindness, has a tendency to develop the disease where the predisposition exists,--he is happy to state that the average number of cases, even in the incipient stage, has not been so great as might, from the circumstances, have been anticipated; that during the last two years, out of about two hundred and fifty cases of sickness, no death has occurred; and that but in a few instances only has it been necessary to advise a total cessation of business. Mr. Trouncer adds --and this is a statement which the committees have much pleasure in announcing--that, in the majority of the West End houses, the principals have, in cases of sickness, acted the part of parents, evincing, in some instances, even more care than the young persons themselves.

"In addition to these satisfactory and reliable statements, it is a matter of simple justice to state that many houses of business have cooperated with the association in reducing the hours of work, in improving the workrooms and sleeping apartments, and generally in promoting the comfort of those in their employ. Some employers have also very creditably, and at considerable expense, exerted themselves

to secure a good system of ventilation--a subject to which the committees attach great importance, both as regards the health and comfort of those employed.

"It is not, by these statements, intended to be said that all requiring amendment has been corrected. In their last report the committees remarked that some few houses of business systematically persisted in exacting excessive labor from their assistants; and they regret to state that this observation is still applicable. The important subject of ventilation is still much neglected, and there is reason to apprehend that the sleeping apartments are often much overcrowded. Another and a more prevailing evil relates to the time allowed for meals: this is often altogether insufficient, and strongly contrasted with the custom in other industrial pursuits, in which one hour for dinner, and half an hour for breakfast or tea, as the case may be, is the usual allowance. In an occupation so sedentary as dressmaking, and especially in the case of young females, hurried meals are most injurious, and are a frequent cause of deranged health. It is also the painful duty of the committees to state that in some establishments, according to the medical report, the principals, in cases of sickness, will neither allow the young people an opportunity of calling on the medical officer for his advice, nor permit that gentleman to visit them at the place of business. The evils resulting from this absence of all proper feeling are so obvious that it is hoped this public rebuke will in future obviate the necessity of recurring to so painful a topic."



The committee after this proceed to publish the following declaration, signed by fifty-three of the West End dressmakers:--

"We, the undersigned principals of millinery and dress-making establishments at the West End of London, having observed in the newspapers statements of excessive labor in our business, feel called upon, in self-defence, to make the following public statement, especially as we have reason to believe that some of the assertions contained in the letters published in the newspapers are not wholly groundless:--

"1. During the greater portion of the year we do not require the young people in our establishments to work more than twelve hours, inclusive of one hour and a half for meals: from March to July we require them to work thirteen hours and a half, allowing during that time one hour's rest for dinner, and half an hour's rest for tea.

"2. It has been our object to provide suitable sleeping accommodations, and to avoid overcrowding.

"3. In no case do we require work on Sundays, or all night.

"4. The food we supply is of the best quality, and unlimited in quantity."

Five of these dressmakers, whose names are designated by stars, signed with the understanding that on rare occasions the hours might possibly be exceeded.

The remarks which the committee make, considering that it has upon its list the most influential and distinguished ladies of the London world, are, I think, worth attention, as showing the strong moral influence which must thus be brought to bear, both on the trade and on fashionable society, by this association. Their first remark, with regard to those employers who signed with the reservation alluded to, that they have every reason to believe that the feeling which prompted this qualification is to be respected, as it originated in a determination not to undertake more than they honestly intended to perform.

They say of the document, on the whole, that, though not realizing all the views of the association, it must be regarded as creditable to those who have signed it, since it indicates the most important advance yet made towards the improvement of the dressmaking and millinery business. The committees then go on to express a most decided opinion, first, that the hours of work in the dressmaking trade ought not to exceed ten per diem; second, that during the fashionable season ladies should employ sufficient time for the execution of their orders.

The influence of this association, as will be seen, has extended all

over England. In Manchester a paper, signed by three thousand ladies, was presented to the principals of the establishments, desiring them to adopt the rules of the London association.

I mentioned, in a former letter, that the lady mayoress of London, and the ladies of the city, held a meeting on the subject only a short time since, with a view of carrying the same improvement through all the establishments of that part of London. The lady mayoress and five others of this meeting consented to add their names to the committee, so that it now represents the whole of London. The Bishop of London and several of the clergy extend their patronage to the association.