

The Working Life of Women in the 17th Century *

In the absence of any largely conceived and philosophically treated history of the part women have taken in the development of the world's civilization, such careful special studies as Alice Clark's "Working Life of Women in the 17th Century" are suggestive and important.

The book is a record of activities, of actual contributions made by women to the productive industry of the 17th Century. It certainly is a busy person that Miss Clark pictures. There is the woman of the aristocracy managing estates and often making up for the squanderings of irresponsible and rakish husbands and sons, engaging successfully in various trades and businesses, going after patents, taking advantage in a most modern way of every business opportunity that presented itself. The contribution by woman to the agricultural life of the 17th Century is skilfully analyzed. She is shown to be the very backbone of the textile industry, doing the spinning of all England, whether the organization was domestic, family or capitalistic. In the crafts and guilds it was recognized that she should be allowed to take her husband's place when he was incapacitated or died. That is, in all the more highly developed forms of industrial life she was an energetic, recognized factor.

When you drop below this into the ranks of the wage

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earner, you find her everywhere, valiantly struggling through poverty and disease, habitually overworking, and often making a spirited fight for betterment of her position and for protection in what she conceived to be her rights.

The details which Miss Clark heaps up demonstrate the enormous contribution to the wealth of the nation which women made in this period, both inside and outside of the family; and she makes this, it must be remembered, in spite of serious handicaps. Very rarely indeed did she have the training for executive or craft work that was accorded the man. As a wage earner, it went unquestioned in the 17th Century that her wage should be lower, her food ration less than his, that she could not ask so good a house or expect to have the same privileges; that is, her working life was carried through on the theory that she was the less important sex and therefore the one to receive the lesser share. The necessity of preserving the men for the protection of the nation, the teachings of the church, the natural spirit of domination in men, and the equally naturally submissive spirit in women--were all factors in establishing this theory of her lesser importance. Such studies as Miss Clark's challenge the long accepted view of the inferiority of her contribution to the developing of civilization. The outstanding impression is of a figure incessantly productive, that, whatever the disaster, can be trusted to carry on.

In spite of all the changes in industrial life that

three centuries have wrought, the activities of the working women of the 17th Century were very like those of the 20th; it is likeness not difference that the book demonstrates. There still persists, at least in this country, the domestic and family as well as capitalistic forms of industry. Women today in the United States are making enormous contributions to the production of the country in Domestic Industry. It is not only directly by the fruits of their gardening, canning and needle which find their way to market, but through the important contribution of managing the family budget--a matter quite as important to a country's general prosperity as the production of marketable articles. The family as an industrial unit still exists; and not only exists but at certain points seems to the writer actual on the increase.

There is a striking likeness in problems. Miss Clark quotes more than one complaint of conditions familiar today as, for instance, those of DeFoe on the behavior of servants, their incessant demands for increased wages until, as he says, an ordinary tradesman cannot keep one;"the over-supply of labor in towns caused by the unwillingness of young people to remain on the farms;"and always the pressure for the higher wage and the shorter hour. There were plenty of people in the 17th century that seem to have felt that the world was going to the devil because of the unrest of the working classes and have expressed their pessimism in terms very like those we hear in the 20th Century.

An outstanding hopeful comparison which springs from

reading the book is the great advancement that has been made in the position of woman in the capitalistic organization of industry in the three past centuries. Equality in her treatment as a wage earner is today widely recognized. In the capitalistic organization of industry the woman is coming rapidly into a position very far in advance of that which she formerly occupied. Training is accorded her in almost every craft and trade. Executive positions are becoming more and more open to her and slowly, though surely, she is taking her place as the responsible head of all sorts of enterprises; that is, she is beginning in this country to approach to something of the place that she has long taken in France.

It is on such detailed documents as Miss Clark presents that the future history of women, for which we are all looking, must be based. Such studies bring woman out of the misty place where false generalizations have thrust her. They show her to us as something beside an impotent, submissive dependent in the work of the world, demonstrate the fact that she was then as she is now, and, as far as we have the facts, has always been, a lusty, practical, indefatigable factor in the carrying on of life, that no matter what the organization for production in her time has been, she has taken her full share while at the same time, she has fulfilled the higher purposes of her being, carrying on the race and creating a home for the spiritual development of her child.