

CHILDREN'S LABOR: A PROBLEM.

AMONG the many excellent laws of Massachusetts there have stood for a number of years certain statutes to the effect that—

“No child under ten years of age shall be employed in any manufacturing, mechanical, or mercantile establishment in this commonwealth.

“No child under fourteen shall be so employed except during the vacations of the public schools, unless during the year next preceding such employment he has attended some public or private school at least twenty weeks; nor shall such employment continue unless such child shall attend school twenty weeks in each and every year following; and no child shall be so employed who does not present a certificate, made by or under the school committee, of his compliance with the requirements of this act.

“Every owner, superintendent, or overseer who employs or permits to be employed any child in violation of this act, and every parent or guardian who permits such employment, shall forfeit a sum of not less than twenty nor more than fifty dollars for the use of the public schools.”

From these carefully worded statutes it would seem as if every precaution had been taken by the State of Massachusetts to prevent the overworking of children in the commonwealth and the neglect of their proper schooling. It is one thing, however, to make wise laws, and quite another to enforce them, as may be seen from the following statistics.

During the past year some hundred and sixty factories in the State that have been inspected give an average of only two per cent. where strict compliance was found with the enactments quoted above. In one factory the in-

spector was shown a file of certificates which gave the names of thirteen children employed in the mills, but no data of their ages. Singling out, at random, a bright little fellow busily at work as a “doffer,” the inspector asked him his name and age.

“John Donnelly, sir, and I’m goin’ on twelve years,” was the ready response.

“But how is this?” said the officer, running over the list of certificates he still held in his hand. “There’s no such name here as ‘John Donnelly,’ and—Well, who is that little girl tubing the machine by the window?”

“Oh, her’s Maggie Sweeney,” said the little doffer, thrusting a huge square of tobacco into his mouth and hurrying back to his work, as if to avoid further questioning.

No Maggie Sweeney, either, was to be found among the names on the certificates, and the officer’s suspicions being now fully aroused, he questioned a number of the little operatives, whereupon it appeared that *not one half* of the children employed in the factory were represented upon the certificates. Further investigation also proved that a large proportion of these children were under ten years of age, while amongst the balance were many who had been working a long time without the prescribed absence of five months for the legal amount of schooling.

In another factory, where the certificates seemed to show a compliance with the laws, a fine, well-developed girl of fourteen was found who could neither read nor write. “She had worked in the mills ever since she could remember,—had *never had no time* to go to school.”

In still another factory, the very first child interviewed was under ten years of age; and a truant officer who visited

some thirty factories in and about Boston reports that he found in every one of them children kept at work in open violation of the law. Systematic investigation has shown that of the 13,000 children employed in various factories throughout the State in 1878 only 4575 received the legal amount of schooling; and that among the 282,485 children in Massachusetts between the ages of five and fifteen there are no less than 25,000 children who never have been present in either our public or private schools.

An overseer in one of the print works in the State says: "There seems to be a growing disposition on the part of parents to put their children to work before they are of the legal age, and to avoid sending them to school the length of time required by law. Scarcely a day passes but mothers come to the mills and beg us to use our influence in procuring employment for their children."

"We endeavor to comply with the school law," said a prominent mill owner to one of the inspectors, "but find it extremely difficult, as parents again and again give false statements regarding their children's ages. We always, however, discharge all those we find to be under the legal age. Did you notice the little fellow I just sent across the street?" he continued. "We do not need him here in the office, but I keep him to run errands and do chores, out of pity for his invalid mother, who depends upon the wages he can earn. She is a widow, and has three children younger than Harry, who, as you may have judged from his size, is only twelve years of age. We always send the boy out to take his 'twenty weeks' schooling,' but during those times the family would suffer from hunger did I not provide for them out of my own larder."

"Please, sir, could Denise have a permit to stay in the mills a month longer? It's time she was in school, I know, but the father is all drawn up with rheuma-

tis', and they've took him to the 'ospital, and I don't know how ever in the world we're goin' to git along if Denise has to leave the mills!"

It was all said in one breath, and the superintendent of the schools, glancing up from his books, saw a woman of thirty-five or thereabouts, with a peculiar, dazed expression, and eyes as dull and faded as the old gray waterproof she was nervously twitching with one finger.

He answered, not unkindly, "We cannot give any such permit. Besides, you are liable to a fine of fifty dollars, if the child is kept out of school. How old did you say she was?"

"Eleven years, sir."

"How many children have you?"

"Four, with Denise."

"Is she the oldest?"

"No, sir. I have one fourteen year old, but she's nervous and daft-like. I keep her at home to mind the baby."

"So Denise is the only one at work. Has she ever been to school?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Tell the gentleman, Denise, what reader you were in last."

"'T was the First Reader,—the primer, you know," whispered the little girl, hanging down her head.

"A child of eleven years ought to be farther advanced than that!" remarked the superintendent.

"I suppose so," acknowledged the mother, with a sigh; "but I couldn't spare her to go to school when she was a earnin' twenty cents a day."

"Has your husband been a drinking man?"

"Oh, no. Not but that he would take a glass, now and then, but it never got the better of him,—oh, no! He's always been a good husband, and we got along nicely the whilst he was well and a gittin' fair wages. Denise never worked a day in the mills, sir, till the rheumatis' took *him*. He was a shoemaker by trade, and I've been a takin' in sewing, off and on, as I could git it; but work

is scarce now, sir, and they say at the 'ospital as how he may never be able to use his hands agin, sir, and it's more nor I know what ever 's a goin' to become of us!"

"Why don't you go and state your case to the mayor, or to the overseers of the poor?"

A hot flush came over the woman's face.

"I could n't do *that*," she answered quickly. "I'd be willin' to work my fingers off, but I'm not a pauper,—I can't go on the town! If Denise could only stay in the factory one month longer, the folks as I sews for will be home from the country, then, and" —

The superintendent shook his head. "I am really very sorry for you, madam, but according to the law your little girl must enter school to-morrow. Here is a paper she is to give the teacher; it certifies how long she has been in the factory, and authorizes her, after the twenty weeks are over, — but not one day before, — to return to her work in the mills."

With a look of utter discouragement, which was reflected in miniature upon the face of the little operative, the mother silently took the certificate and left the room.

My friend, who had happened in at the superintendent's office and heard the whole conversation, resolved to investigate the case. She found the woman's story true in every particular, and after giving her what assistance she could finally prevailed upon her to go to the overseers of the poor. Denise accompanied them, but when they came to the office the woman bade her little daughter wait outside,—a tender, motherly care that my friend fully appreciated when the door of the ante-room was thrown open. The long settees on either side were packed with old men shaking with palsy, little children almost nude, shrinking women with their old hoods drawn over to conceal their faces, strong

men with desperation in their looks. It was like a picture of Doré's, or a page from Victor Hugo, suddenly animated with a breath of life!

"Are there not an unusual number of applicants to-day?" inquired my friend.

"Oh, no!" answered the officer in charge. "Sometimes there are twice as many." Here an abrupt pause and inquiring look reminded my friend of her errand, and the case of the woman and her little daughter was stated as clearly and briefly as possible.

The overseers listened attentively, scanned the applicant, and asked about her husband, children, place of residence, etc. The investigation was somewhat complicated, as the woman was a French Canadian, and had never resided in any one place the requisite five years.

"Still, we do not allow any one to suffer when we can help it," said the elder officer kindly, as he handed her an order upon a provision store. Then, turning to my friend, he said, "We are always especially glad to encourage any one who is trying to comply with the laws, but we have already helped the husband of this woman a number of times, and are now paying his expenses at the hospital. It often seems to us that the State is unconsciously encouraging pauperism by these last enactments of the school law. Heretofore we have been authorized to investigate each individual case, and to decide whether or no the child's labor was absolutely necessary for the family's support; now, however, the law controlling school attendance is compulsory in every instance, and much suffering in families is occasioned during the twenty weeks' schooling, when the children's wages are stopped."

My friend left the office in a brown study. "Can it be a normal state of things," she said to a certain political economist, "when children of eleven years are reckoned among the bread winners of a State?"

"Something must be wrong," he answered, "when an organic law of production is violated, as is the case in Massachusetts, where children between the ages of ten and fifteen constitute forty-four per cent. of the whole number of working people, and yet produce but twenty-four per cent. of the income!"

"But is it not possible for a strong, able-bodied man, if he is temperate and provident, to earn enough to support his family and keep his children in school till they are fifteen?"

"It certainly ought to be, but with the present relation of wages to cost of living in Massachusetts it seems that a laboring man with a family cannot keep out of debt with a yearly income of less than \$600. Now, the fact is that the majority of workmen earn considerable less than \$600 a year. I know of one Irish family where both the father and eldest son, a child about twelve, work in the mills. Their combined earnings amount to \$564, — an income which falls, you notice, below the *minimum* sum. The family numbers six, and one of the four children the parents have kept in school. They dress shabbily, occupy a tenement of four rooms in one of the most unhealthy localities in the city, and are in a wretched condition generally. Knowing that the family were constantly running in debt, I inquired into their items of expense, and found the yearly amount to be as follows: —

Rent	\$78.00
Groceries	281.74
Meat	68.23
Fish	13.60
Milk	25.82
Boots and shoes	14.70
Clothing	26.80
Dry goods	18.00
Sundries	20.11

This total of \$589 is a larger expenditure than is warranted by the income of \$564. Subtract from this income the child's wages, which amount to \$132,

and you find the father's income to be only \$432. What would be the financial condition of this family without the child's labor? I cannot tell how provident they are, but it is difficult to see where their expenses could be lessened, when, according to the statistics of labor, the yearly average expenditure for the food of a family is reckoned at \$422.16, which is nearly the amount of the father's earnings.

"A shoemaker, an American, has done work for me, occasionally, whom I know to be economical in all his expenditures, and yet with his earnings last year of \$552 he ran behind some \$70, and was obliged to take money out of the savings-bank during the three months and a half when the shoe business was dull. He has four children, whom he has managed thus far to keep at home, and the two eldest are in school; but the father says that at the close of the next term he shall be obliged to put one of them at work. They occupy a comfortable tenement of six rooms in a pleasant neighborhood; their expenditure for clothing and dry goods averages only \$28.50 per year, yet the children are always dressed neatly and tastefully. The family are constant attendants at church, and have an excellent standing in the community."

"You said he was an American; are not the Americans and Germans more thrifty, as a class, than the Irish?"

"Yes, in the majority of cases; but I know of one Irish mill-hand who, with an income of \$736, is in very comfortable circumstances. The family numbers six; they rent a tenement of four rooms in a pleasant part of the town, the children are always well dressed, and they have, besides, a little money laid up for a rainy day."

"Does the father do all this without the assistance of his wife and children?"

"Oh, no; it would be impossible without the aid of his eldest son, who is fourteen years of age, and earns \$238 of the

\$736 that I mentioned as the family income."

"It would seem, then, that without children's assistance, other things remaining equal, the majority of workingmen's families in Massachusetts would be in poverty or in debt?"

"That would seem, indeed, to be the true statement of the case."

My friend was resolved to pursue her investigations, and, taking one of the child operatives as her guide, she visited a number of homes among the working people. As a rule, the tenements at convenient distances from the mills were rented at unreasonably high prices, although many of them were totally unfit for the occupancy of human beings. There were some pleasing exceptions, however, and not a few of the homes were brightened with house plants and other indications of "a desire for something better." As she had been informed, it was only in rare instances that the father's wages were sufficient to support the whole family; and yet it was a striking fact that *those families which contained the greatest number of child laborers were always found in the most crowded rooms and in the worst class of tenement houses.* In one instance, where the whole family, father, mother, and two children twelve and fourteen years of age, were at work in the mills and earning \$1800, the home was found in a wretched state of filth and squalor.

In England, the over-working and under-schooling of minors is now subject to heavy penalties; but past generations of factory children have already given rise to an almost distinct class of English working people, — pale, sallow, and stunted both in physical and mental growth.

How long will it be before a deteriorated race like the Stockinger, Leicester, and Manchester spinners springs up on our New England soil?

Present legislative steps in England will in due course of time undoubtedly

lead to the entire prohibition of child labor throughout Great Britain, and provide compulsorily for the education of minors; the same humanitarian, and we might add *politic*, movement is apparent in every European country.

In many of our manufacturing towns, it is true, mill schools, half-time and evening schools, are provided for the little unfortunates doomed to labor; but class schools of any description are mischievous to the best interests of a democracy. Doubtless any instantaneous elimination of child labor from a community would for a time increase the amount of suffering, — that suffering of which it really has been a primal cause. But let us consider what is the ultimate result of child labor upon the interests of the parent, and also upon the interests of the manufacturer.

We will suppose that the owner of a certain factory suddenly discovers that he may lessen the cost of production, and thereby gain advantage in trade, by employing young persons of fifteen or sixteen where he has heretofore employed adults. He can hire them for one half the sum he has been accustomed to pay his men, and more applicants are found than he can supply with work. Other manufacturers follow the example. The demand is increased for minors, who are willing to work for half the wages a laboring man with a family to support absolutely requires.

The competition increases; large numbers of adult workmen are thrown out of employment, and since they must have some means of subsistence they say to the manufacturers, "If you cannot give us twice as much as you give these boys, we will work for a little less than we have done; but surely our skilled labor is worth more to you than the work of mere children." So a compromise is made: part of the men are retained at lower wages, and they are comforted by the thought that their children's earnings will make up the

deficiency. But competition does not stop here: with improved machinery, younger hands, at still lower wages, can be employed, and a constant reduction follows throughout the mills and all other places where children's labor is countenanced.

Strikes ensue; the streets are filled with throngs of unemployed men; intem-

perance increases; and crimes of every description are multiplied. Who is to blame? *Without* child labor, ten per cent. of the laboring class, *with the present relation of wages to cost of living*, would be in a state of debt or pauperism; *with* child labor, competition is constantly on the increase and wages are still suffering reduction.

Emma E. Brown.
