
Life in the Laundry ...

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LIFE IN THE LAUNDRY.

THE laundry industry has during the last few years undergone a remarkable and rapid economic development. Formerly a purely domestic industry, organized upon the economic principle of one woman one wash-tub, it is now a typical, modern, machine "business," characterized by aggregation of workers in one building under one head, subdivision of labor and the use of labor-saving machinery. All over the country, but more particularly in London, there has been a rapid multiplication of large laundry companies and syndicates, "certain of which own as many as a dozen or more fine, well equipped steam-laundries, filled with the latest ingenious inventions in labor-saving machinery, and organized into 'departments,' in which the division of labor is at least as marked a feature as in the majority of non-textile factories. In such cases a single shirt will pass through seven or eight different machines in the process of ironing alone. In place of the elderly married woman or widow 'washer,' we find skilled engineers in charge of a shedful of machinery still called the wash-house, while scores of girls and young women from thirteen upwards 'tend' the various kinds of ironing machines with exactly the same precision and routine as those in any other factory. Even in those departments where machinery is not required, for instance, the sorters with their staff of 'markers,' the dryers who fill and empty with almost automatic regularity the series of drying-closets through which hot air is driven by propulsion fans, the labor is organized and regulated as in an ordinary factory."*

This economic revolution has taken place during the past eight or ten years. According to the Census Report for the County of London, 1901 (Cd. 875-1902), the number of men and lads engaged in laundry and washing service was 3,175, of whom 1,309 worked at home; the number of women and girls was 47,362, of whom 10,408 worked at home; of the males 723 and 16,223 of the females were under 20 years of age. The steam laundries on the register in the London district for 1901 were 216, and the hand laundries 578.

Insanitary Conditions.

This rapid development of laundry work from a hand to a machine industry has been accompanied by many of the evils which have attended the same process in other trades. Some of the most important are those which are inseparable from the use of premises unsuited to the uses of the industry. The enterprising laundry proprietor, alive to the profit-making possibilities of machinery, is not disposed to wait until he possesses suitable premises before beginning

* Annual Report of H.M. Chief Inspector of Factories, 1900, p. 382.

business as the proprietor of a steam laundry, and so long as sanitary conditions are a minor consideration an ordinary dwelling-house can be made to serve his purpose. Side by side with the large laundry factories described above, where the structural conditions are as regards sanitation on the whole fairly satisfactory, there is a very much larger class of laundries consisting of ordinary dwelling-houses more or less badly adapted for the purpose.

"It is no uncommon thing to find a row of houses in separate occupation, the back yards of each of which is roofed in and packed with laundry machinery, all driven by an engine installed at one end of the row."*

"The rapid growth of the small laundry factory is a striking feature. It seems to be due partly to the increased cheapness of certain parts of machinery, and largely to the fact that the wage bill is thereby so much lessened."

"It is simply amazing to see the lightheartedness with which an engine, gas or steam, is introduced into what one might call the domestic circle, for in noting unguarded machinery in the house-factory laundry I have always in my mind not only the workers, but the children of the occupier, whom I have so often found watching in a fascinated way the movements of the machines."†

"The prime mover for gas or steam engine is found in a badly lighted basement and in charge of a man who knows little or nothing of the dangers or management of machinery; the fencing of the fly-wheel is in many cases inadequate, a wash-tub often serving the purpose; other dangerous parts are equally disregarded, and it is difficult to persuade the owner that accidents may occur even with a low power."‡

All occupations have their special conditions prejudicial to the health of the workers employed therein, and it is one of the tasks of factory legislation to remove as far as possible the evil effects of such conditions.

The chief unhealthy conditions of the laundry industry are:—

1. Wetness of the washing room floors.
2. The presence of steam in the washing room, and also, though to a lesser extent, in the ironing room.
3. Heated and vitiated atmosphere of the ironing room. To counteract these conditions it is essential

(a) That the floor of the washing room should consist of a properly laid impermeable material, provided with adequate means of drainage; and (b) that the washing and ironing room should be properly ventilated.

These, however, are precisely the features that are most conspicuous by their absence from many of the converted back yards and sculleries in which the clothes of most of us are washed, where the laundress works with her head bathed in steam and her feet in water.

"The badly arranged floors in even large wash-houses are a constant source of discomfort and probably ill-health to the workers. The Act requires that they should be 'drained in such a manner as to allow the water to run off freely,' but makes no provision that it should be drained off on the spot where it is discharged."

"It is not all uncommon, therefore, to find that the yellow and foul water from the row of tanks or washing machines at one end of the wash-house flows all across the floor and over the feet of the workers before eventually reaching the drain. In one

* Annual Report H. M. Chief Inspector of Factories, 1900, p. 380.

† Annual Report of the Principal Lady Inspector of Factories, 1901, p. 178.

‡ Annual Report H. M. Chief Inspector of Factories, 1900, p. 380.

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laundry where a cataract of dirty water was discharged over the feet in this manner every twelve or eighteen minutes from certain patent washing machines, the occupier triumphantly pointed out that it 'flowed quite freely' to the drain on the other side of the shed."*

But bad as the conditions in the smaller laundry factories often are, the state of things is much worse in those factories which have not developed beyond the "workshop" stage. This will appear from the following quotation from the Annual Report of H. M. Principal Lady Inspector of Factories for 1899 (p. 257):—

THE WASH-HOUSE.—"Very often on entering the wash-house the whole place is so pervaded with steam that I cannot see the workers. A great deal of this steam comes from the coppers, of which there are generally two or three. The provision of hoods would to a great extent remedy matters, but in the greater number of cases these are conspicuous by their absence."

THE IRONING ROOM.—"As the provision in force in factory laundries, viz., that all stoves for heating irons shall be sufficiently separated from the ironing room, does not apply to the workshop laundry, it is only where the temperature is unreasonably high that any steps can be taken to remedy the matter. The heat of the ironing room is largely owing to the fact that very few laundries possess drying rooms. Thus, except in summer, most of the drying is done overhead in the ironing room. This leads to inadequate ventilation, for most laundry proprietors consider shut windows an indispensable condition of drying indoors."

"What with the unscreened stove, the damp clothes overhead, the tightly closed windows streaming with moisture, caused by want of ventilation, the room crowded with the legal quantity of women, perspiring, sneezing, and coughing, a small ironing laundry room is not in working hours a very attractive place. But at dinner time it is less attractive still. The uninitiated would naturally imagine that during the women's absence for meals the windows and doors would be thrown up and the rooms thoroughly aired. Experience unfortunately proves that this is seldom the case. Frequent dinner-time inspections have taught me what to expect. At dinner-time the ironing room becomes a furnace. The stove is heated to the greatest extent, and the windows and doors are particularly tightly closed, and drying proceeds under conditions alleged to be advantageous from the laundress's point of view, but frequently not so."

The small hand laundries, especially those in the Soho district of London, receive special attention in the Annual Report of the Principal Lady Inspector of Factories for 1900 (p. 385):—

"The owners of many of these laundries are of French or Italian origin. They invest their small capital in the rent of a house or part of one, sub-let the upper rooms, and devote the lower to their trade. They appear to start with the impression that any house is good enough for a laundry, given a fair supply of water, and show no consideration whatever for the health of their workers or the number of hours they are employed. The front room on the ground floor, originally intended for a shop, forms in most cases the principal ironing room. . . . The wash-house is placed in the basement room, more often like a cellar than a room. In one, the worst of any, it was not more than six feet in height, and ventilated only by the door leading up to the house. The place was black with accumulated dirt. The floor was covered with water. A gas-jet in one corner gave the only light. A copper in another corner poured out steam for which there was no means of escape, and which was so thick as to hide the two workers almost completely from view. The temperature was so high that the perspiration streamed off their faces. This was, of course, an exceptional case, but one having many points in common with others which have hitherto escaped the attention of the proper authorities. Laundries of the kind described above may be exempted from inspection if it can be proved that not more than two persons besides members of the same family are employed."

* Annual Report H. M. Chief Inspector of Factories, 1900, p. 385. Section 8 of the 1901 Factory Act will probably be found useful in preventing the existence of the state of things described above.

The special importance of good sanitary conditions in laundries is at once apparent when it is borne in mind that, as the law affords very imperfect protection to the laundry woman in the matter of hours of labor, the laundry is occupied for long periods. The Factory Act of 1901 left this subject untouched, and the following provisions of the 1895 Act form the sole protective enactments against excessive hours of labor :—

“(1) In every laundry carried on by way of trade, or for the purposes of gain, the following provisions shall apply :—

“(a) The period of employment, exclusive of meal hours and absence from work, shall not exceed for women fourteen, for young persons twelve hours, and for children ten hours in any consecutive twenty-four hours ; nor a total for women and young persons of sixty hours, and for children of thirty hours in any one week, in addition to such overtime as may be allowed in the case of women.

“(b) A woman, young person or child must not be employed continuously for more than five hours without an interval of at least half an hour for a meal.

“(c) Women, young persons and children employed in the laundry shall have allowed to them the same holidays as are allowed to women, young persons and children employed in a factory or workshop under this Act.

“(e) The notice to be affixed in the laundry shall specify the period of employment and the times for meals, but the period and times so specified may be varied before the beginning of employment on any day.

“(2) Women employed in laundries may work overtime, subject to the following conditions, namely :—

“(a) A woman must not work more than fourteen hours in any day ; and

“(b) The overtime worked must not exceed two hours in any day ; and

“(c) Overtime must not be worked on more than three days in any week, or more than thirty days in any year ; and

“(d) The requirements of section 50 of this Act with respect to notices must be observed.” [That is to say, the employer must give seven days’ notice of his intention to work overtime to the Inspector and to the employees.]

Compare these provisions with those which obtain in the case of Factories and Workshops. There the work begins and ends at a definite stated time ; definite and simultaneous times for meals are prescribed ; overtime is prohibited altogether for young persons (*i.e.*, persons under eighteen),* and is only allowed for women under ex-

* By section 51 of the 1901 Act overtime is allowed for young persons and children in exceptional industries, *e.g.*, bleaching and dyeing works. But not more than thirty minutes overtime can be worked per day, and the total number of hours worked must not be “above the number otherwise allowed under this Act.”

ceptional conditions ; night work is prohibited for young persons,* and Sunday work prohibited altogether. In factories, moreover, no child or young person can be employed without a medical certificate of fitness for employment. In laundries no medical certificate is required, Sunday work is not prohibited at all, and, although young persons are not allowed to work "overtime" as that term is technically defined in the Act, yet under the present law a girl of 13 or 14 may (allowing two hours for meals guarded by illusory provisions which it is impossible to enforce) be kept at work in the laundry from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. on three days and from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on two days every week in the year, and still have four more hours' work for Saturday. And so far from night work being prohibited, the normal period of twelve hours work per day which the law allows for a girl of 14 may be arranged for any part of the twenty-four, and the girl may actually be kept at work all night.

It may be thought that the humane instincts of employers would forbid the employment of young girls at night ; but the following quotation shows that this is far from being the case :—

"Accustomed to the conditions of life and work among ordinary factory workers, nothing is so striking to the Inspector as the spectacle of numbers of young girls from 14 years old and upwards all legally employed at 10 or 11 o'clock at night in the ordinary factory labor of tending machinery. Passing at night from one factory laundry to another, and finding the young calender-feeders employed in their mechanical task of "feeding" the large steam-heated, power-driven, ironing rollers with the damp linen to be ironed (a cloud of steam rising as each "piece" is passed through), it is impossible not to speculate on the effect of the work and the hours on these young girls. One can only feel surprise that accidents are not more numerous when one realizes that the slightest carelessness or inattention may result in the fingers or hand being drawn between the hot cylinders, and when one considers how easily such inattention may arise in the case of over-tired young workers. In few, if any other industry, are the daily working-hours so long.

"Working and standing in the steaming hot atmosphere of a calender-room, from 8 a.m. till 9 or 10 p.m. all the week, with the exception of one day, is an arduous strain on the young constitution."†

The irregularity of the periods of employment makes the detection of illegal hours exceedingly difficult. In a factory or workshop the work begins and ends at a stated time, and the working-day must be within the round of the clock. If the work begins at 6 a.m. it must end at 6 p.m. ; if it begins at 7 a.m. it must end at 7 p.m. The period of employment, *i.e.*, whether the hours are to be from 6 to 6 or from 7 to 7, etc., must be fixed beforehand, and when once fixed cannot be altered without written notice to the Factory Inspector, and to the workers, and even then not oftener, unless in exceptional circumstances, than once in three months. In laundries the round of the clock rule does not apply. Provided the hours are specified in a notice exhibited in the laundry before the day's work begins, the period of employment may vary from day to day, and may vary for each individual worker. Under these conditions it is

* In certain exceptional industries, *e.g.*, blast furnaces, a limited amount of night work is allowed for *male* young persons.

† Annual Report H. M. Chief Inspector of Factories, 1900, p. 383.

obvious that the legal maximum number of hours must often be exceeded, and the fact escape detection. It is, indeed, difficult for the laundry-keepers to understand the law which they must observe. As Miss Paterson says: "It is easy for even a person of limited experience to understand such an instruction as that from Monday to Friday no one will be employed before 8 a.m. or after 8 p.m., and that the limitations on Saturday are 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., but the laundry regulations with rigidity here and laxity there are *not* understood."* The freedom given to spread the number of working-hours over the whole day is without parallel in our factory legislation. "Under the present law, allowing two hours for meals, women can be kept continuously at work from 8 a.m. until 12 (16 hours) on two days in every week throughout the year; on two other days in the week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. (12 hours), and on Mondays and Saturdays (the usual short days) from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. (10 hours), and from 8 a.m. until noon (4 hours) respectively. And this without overtime." ("Law and the Laundry," *Nineteenth Century*, February, 1897.)

In the matter of long hours it is questionable whether such special and imperfect legislation has not made the lot of the laundress worse instead of better. Formerly, it was the custom of the trade to regard work after 8 p.m. as overtime. Now, overtime is only reckoned after the maximum of sixty hours per week has been worked. Counting overtime, it is possible to arrange the hours of labor in a laundry during any ten weeks in the year, so as to make this table legal:—

Monday	...	...	...	from 8 a.m. to	8 p.m.
Tuesday	...	...	...	" 8	" 8 "
Wednesday	...	...	...	" 8	" 12 midnight.
Thursday	...	...	...	" 8	" 12 "
Friday	...	...	...	" 8	" 12 "
Saturday	...	...	...	" 8	" 12 noon.

Nearly the whole of the work of a laundry is done standing, and the long hours spent in this position, often in surroundings the reverse of sanitary, amidst a heated and damp atmosphere, render the laundress especially liable to pulmonary complaints, varicose veins and ulcerated legs. Uterine displacement, a terrible affection, which embitters the lives of far more women than is generally known, is particularly prevalent amongst laundresses. Miss Deane, one of H.M. Inspectors of Factories, from whose valuable report on laundries, published in the annual report of the Principal Lady Inspector of Factories for 1900 (p. 384), much of the information contained in this Tract is taken, investigated the effects of the present conditions of labor on the health of the laundry women. She examined the records of the number, ages, diseases, and occupations of the patients at the Isleworth and Wandsworth and Clapham Infirmaries, and extracted the following table, which speaks for itself.

* Report, etc., 1901, p. 178.

TABLE A.
ISLEWORTH INFIRMARY (INCLUDES ACTON, CHISWICK, BRENTFORD).

	Number	Suffering from ulcers of legs	Proportion	Phthisis	Proportion
1898					
Laundresses	58	9	1 in 6	6	1 in 10
Women other than laundresses	179	7	1 in 25	7	1 in 25
1899					
Laundresses	79	13	1 in 6	9	1 in 9
Women other than laundresses	218	7	1 in 31	11	1 in 20

TABLE B.
WANDSWORTH AND CLAPHAM INFIRMARY (INCLUDING BATTERSEA).

	Number	Suffering from ulcers of legs	Proportion	Rheumatism	Proportion	Bronchitis	Proportion	Phthisis	Proportion
1899									
Laundresses	247	36	1 in 6	16	1 in 16	45	1 in 5	21	1 in 11
Women other than laundresses	1,171	50	1 in 23	49	1 in 22	129	1 in 9	63	1 in 19
1900									
Laundresses	199	27	1 in 7	12	1 in 16	21	1 in 9	18	1 in 11
Women other than laundresses	1,127	41	1 in 27	69	1 in 16	133	1 in 9	59	1 in 19

Miss Vines, another of the Factory Inspectors, points out:—"A danger to the health of the women employed in wash-houses appears to me to be the close proximity in which new laundries are built. It not infrequently occurs that the windows of one wash-house are only a few feet away from those of the other next door, the natural result of such an arrangement being that when steam is forced through the outlets of one wash-house, it often merely passes in at the windows of the adjacent laundry. . . . Another danger, only likely to arise when a laundry business is carried on in a dwelling-house, is the admitted presence of disease."*

* Report of H.M. Chief Inspector of Factories, 1901, p. 178.

Exempted Laundries.

The provisions of the Factory Act with respect to laundries, inadequate as they are, have only a limited application. Two important classes of laundries are exempt altogether from the operation of the Act by the following clause:—

“Nothing in this Act shall apply to any laundry in which the only persons employed are—

- “(a) Inmates of any prison, reformatory or industrial school, or other institution for the time being subject to an inspection under any Act other than the Factory Act; or
- “(b) Inmates of an institution conducted in good faith for religious or charitable purposes; or
- “(c) Members of the same family dwelling there, or in which not more than two persons dwelling elsewhere are employed.”

Institution Laundries.

The Factory Bill of 1895 contained provisions for the regulation of these establishments. Speaking on the second reading of the Bill, Mr. Asquith said: “We cannot concede that they (the institutions) are entitled without inspection to have machinery which is dangerous in its character or operation, or to employ persons for a larger number of hours than the Factory Act allows.” The proposed regulations, however, met with the keenest opposition from the Irish members on whose vote Mr. Asquith was dependent, and had to be dropped. In the Government Bill of 1901 another attempt was made to bring a modified form of inspection to bear on the institution laundries, but the same opposition was renewed and with the same success.

It is difficult to see by what arguments the exemption of the institution laundries can be justified. Many of these laundries are practically business establishments competing freely in the open market, and though it has been urged in Parliament and elsewhere that they do not work for profit, it cannot be denied that many of them make large sums of money, as is shown by the following figures taken from the Annual Charities' Register for 1901:—

Name of House.	Income from Laundry.	Income from other sources.
Magdalen Home, Edgbaston	631	237
Home of Good Shepherd, Malvern	703	287
Asylum for Penitent Females, Dublin	1,046	225
Edgar Home, Belfast	1,132	144
Edinboro' Industrial Home for Fallen Women	1,649	158
Magdalen Asylum, Edinburgh	5,847	493

It is impossible to deny that establishments such as these are serious competitors in the laundry industry; and there is justice in the demand of the laundry proprietor that charitable and religious institutions should obey the law which he has to obey, that they