

SOME THOUGHTS ON OUR SHORTCOMINGS.

We may find legitimate pride and satisfaction in the thought that, during four years of quite unparalleled industrial activity, the industries of this country have been so largely carried on by feminine hands. But it will also be useful, especially in view of the problems bound to occur during the period of demobilisation, to consider what are the defects most commonly attributed to the female employee; to consider, moreover, just how far these may be due to a natural disability, and how far they may simply be due to faulty training and environment, which we may hope to see remedied.

My own experience is that the average employer is extremely well pleased with "his girls"; and that, when he grumbles, his grumbling invariably follows one or two well-worn lines. Either he complains that the girls take too much time off on account of sickness, or else he says that they do not "settle down to their job," as a man would do; that, even when he, their employer, would be glad to regard them as permanent hands, they persist in regarding themselves as purely temporary workers, whose business prospects are liable to be upset or cancelled altogether at any time; he "never feels quite sure of them."

Now there is some truth in this, and the cause is not far to seek. For generations past every girl has had indurated into her head that the highest summit of a true woman's ambition is to become a wife and mother. Even if the girl herself has no particular aptitude or inclination for domestic duties, her imagination is continually worked upon through the medium of gossip and stories, plays and novels and cinema films, until it is no wonder if her mind runs, at times, upon her own matrimonial prospects. And if she intends to get married, and has every reason to expect that she will be married in a year or so, it is plain common-sense upon her part not to waste her time over the acquisition of knowledge which will be of no use to her in the future. But of course there are hundreds of girls who are perfectly content to remain single, or who have other claims upon them which exclude the idea of marriage—and here, I think, we come to the reason which lies at the root of all the alleged feminine lack of "keenness" and business ambition. For a working girl with

no prospect of matrimony before her is still expected to be perpetually at the beck and call of all her relatives at home; and if her mother wants her help about the house, or if one of her sisters is ill, or if her father gets work in another part of the country, or if her brother needs a housekeeper, she may be called upon at a moment's notice to throw up her own job in order to oblige them. Indeed, if she hesitates she is commonly considered a very selfish and hard-hearted young woman. How many valuable careers have been wrecked in this way will never be known; nor how many women have contrived to struggle through somehow against incredible handicaps, carrying on their business or their course of study, and acting as unpaid cook or nurse or charwoman in their leisure time. Dickens has described with wonderful fidelity (in "Bleak House") the unsettled frame of mind, the aimlessness, and the final deterioration of character in a promising lad who lives in continual expectation of some violent change in his own fortunes. There is hardly any modern young woman who does not suffer to a certain extent in the same way, and for the same reason. Even if she is the child of fairly prosperous and enlightened parents, even if her path in life appears clearly mapped out before her, there may always be the lurking thought at the back of her mind: "If such and such a domestic crisis occurred, I should have to give all this up!" The wonder is, in these circumstances, that she does so well and goes so far.

Probably this state of things will persist for some time yet; a "change of heart" is what is required, and a change of heart takes time. But as it undoubtedly originated in the tendency to consider a girl's work, a girl's brains, and a girl's ambitions as things of very small account, everything which raises the general status of wage-earning women is a move in the right direction.

With regard to the other charge against the female employee—the excessive time lost through sickness—it also has a certain foundation of fact. The average level of health amongst women is undoubtedly slightly lower than it is amongst men. This again is partially due to the fact that so many working women are burning the candle at both ends, and going straight from the shop or office or factory to housework and laundry work at home. Then they are less well fed than their

brothers; they are, as a rule, very badly and insufficiently clothed and shod; and, far too often, they never have the leisure or opportunity for properly regulated physical exercise. But, apart from admittedly dangerous trades—which are equally unhealthy for both sexes—our recent experiences seem to have established the fact that manual labour, especially manual labour in the open air, actually suits the feminine physique better than some sedentary employment indoors.

It may be that we shall have to revise a good many of our grandmothers' ideas upon this important subject. It may even be best for the future welfare of the race that the man shall come back to the counting-house and the ribbon counter, keeping himself fit by football or allotment gardening in his off hours, whilst the woman continues to drive motors and build ships. The Waacs, the Wrens, and the girls employed on Government munition work, are all now required to "pass the doctor" before their services are accepted; we therefore have a great many of our women workers definitely grouped in "Class A1." And this is a fact that should be carefully borne in mind in considering their future occupations when they come to be disbanded. It would be as foolish to put the A1 girl on to the C3 job as to put the C3 girl on to the A1 job. At present the ordinary employer gets an undue proportion of C3 girls; but there is no reason why he should do so in normal times. Nor is there any reason at all why the proportion of C3 girls should remain at its present level. Better housing, better food, a healthier environment in childhood, and youthful recreation which shall no longer be confined to playing about the streets, running errands, or nursing the baby, will make a wonderful difference in this respect. The growing girl needs every bit as much consideration as the growing boy; but it is important that she should receive this, not solely because she may some day become the mother of a British citizen, but first and foremost because she is a human being, with a right to as much happiness as her life upon this troublous planet can afford her.—From "The Common Cause."

What good got here, my brothers, but
it came
From search and strife and loving sacrifice.