

PROTECTION FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN  
STORES, FACTORIES, AND OTHER  
PLACES OF BUSINESS.

*Edith*

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A PAPER READ BY ISAAC H. CLOTHIER, AT  
THE AMERICAN PURITY CONFERENCE,  
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BECAUSE I have been an employer on a considerable scale, of both men and women, for over a quarter of a century, I have been asked to present some views to this Conference, regarding practical measures looking toward increased safety for young women employed in large mercantile and manufacturing establishments and in other exposed business positions.

That my experience has been almost exclusively of an administrative and executive character, and not in the line of addressing public assemblies, is perhaps the very reason I have been asked to treat the practical subject which has been assigned me.

Let me preface the expression of the few thoughts I have to offer on the present occasion, by frankly admitting that I have heretofore shared the general feeling, that the less said on such a delicate subject as the relation of the sexes the better.

It has been generally assumed that because of the nature of the subject it should be avoided, and not even mentioned in mixed assemblies of men



and women, on the ground that there was danger therein, and that true manliness and womanliness held themselves above the suspicion of dwelling in thought on such subjects, or on any subject unworthy of the true manly and true womanly nature.

The whole matter is admittedly one of great delicacy and most difficult to deal with satisfactorily. So delicate is it that those who have been first stirred to call attention to the subject have sometimes been characterized by most worthy people as morbid or unhealthy in their imaginings or oversensitive in their feelings. While the extent of the evil is conceded, it has been believed that there was more or less danger in discussing impurity or social evils, and that the good to be secured would not offset the demoralization incurred by dealing openly with such unsavory themes. Sharing this view heretofore and measurably now, I have been led to believe that it is in some respects erroneous, and that the great and terrible evil of impurity stalks abroad in this professedly Christian land, secretly revelling in the fact of its security, partly because Christian men and women whose skirts individually are clean hesitate to discuss and denounce it, because of the peculiar character of its wickedness and wantonness.

For the reason that it is a delicate subject it would seem to be all the more obligatory that it be met as its nature and importance demand, and especially with regard to its far-reaching consequences. But it should be constantly remembered that the whole matter needs to be treated with the greatest care, delicacy and tact, without undue zeal or unnecessary expression. The Purity Congress of Baltimore, the proceedings of which I read with interest, has led in the movement toward awakening and influencing the public mind on this important subject, and in arousing the sleeping consciences of the men and women of the nation to their deficiencies, in thus practically ignoring a subject which is one of the most important that this age has before it for consideration, and which cannot be ignored without danger to the community and to future generations. And the poison does not descend only, but must inevitably widen on either side, corrupting the community in ever-increasing measure, unless the fierce light of public reprobation is turned upon it.

Believing as I do that the work indicated by the Baltimore Congress should grow and increase with wide and beneficent effect, I felt willing to aid, in ever so small a measure, by complying with the request made of me, not because I have any specially

practical measures to recommend to my brother merchants, whose ranks I have only just left, but that as one of them for almost a generation I have at least the right to commend the subject to their considerate judgment. While I trust I have been interested in all measures tending to the general comfort and well-being of employees, both men and women—and for the latter more than the former, because of their greater need—I cannot claim to have given this particular subject the close personal attention which its nature and importance demand, nor to have had during the years of close absorption in business cares and responsibilities, the real concern which should have led me to adopt every safeguard which could possibly be adopted to further the object desired. The firm of which I was an active member up to the beginning of the present year employed perhaps a thousand women in the various capacities of saleswomen, cashiers, typewriters, sewing-women, etc., etc., and an approximate number of men. It has always been our aim to employ the better class of young women rather than those which could be had at the lowest rate of wages, believing it to be good business policy to possess service of the best and most intelligent character. It is believed that success attended our efforts in this respect, and one reason therefor and

for the comparatively high *morale* of the force is the fact that the engagement of the help has always been done either by a member of the firm, or, by those in whom we had the fullest confidence as respects moral character, and their treatment of those with whom they were brought into contact, especially young women. There can be no doubt that wrong has been done to young and innocent girls by unprincipled men to whom has been entrusted the engagement of the force of employees in large establishments. By this I do not refer to actual and direct ruin, but to a loose and coarse disregard of the respect due from all men to all women, and especially from those in authority to young women forced by the pressure of circumstances to place themselves in positions almost of supplication and dependence, from which their natures often shrink, but which they are compelled to assume in obedience to the necessity which knows no law. From the rude stare, the coarse remark, the lewd joke, perhaps the familiar and at first repulsive touch, they have absolutely no appeal except to throw up their means of livelihood, and the first step is often thereby quite involuntarily and unconsciously taken toward a lowering of self-respect and of that fine instinct of womanhood which more or less dwells in every woman, and is at once the charm and preservation of the sex.



The great body of women who have succeeded to an inheritance of purity and refinement, and who from infancy have been tenderly nurtured and guarded from every unworthy influence, can scarcely realize or believe possible the conditions under which their less fortunate sisters are forced to exist and to battle for a bare subsistence. With a natural feeling of horror they would shrink from any treatment which in the slightest savors of disrespect or familiarity, and even regard with aversion those who had been subjected thereto, with the belief, natural in their cases, that every woman should be surrounded with an atmosphere of purity, which unconsciously to herself preserves her from all contaminating influences, innocently, but surely repelling the first intimation of familiarity. This we know, of course, to be the case with the women with whom we mingle in our daily lives.

I would here bear cordial testimony that the women whom I have met on a business plane for many years, the great body of employees of our house, were as refined in feeling, as self-respecting, and as far above all unworthy influences as any class of women in the community. And I would add that many of these women have personally exemplified in their characters and lives the dignity, the strengthening effect, I might say the refining influence of

labor, which is God's great boon alike to man and woman.

The community of women to whom I have referred as lacking business experience and as being entire strangers to many actual and sad phases of life, can scarcely conceive the defenselessness of their young sisters under circumstances such as I have briefly indicated, in quest of employment, scarce because of the over-demand, and therefore hard to obtain, and dispensed sometimes by unprincipled men with little or no respect for all that is fine and best in womanhood. Under such harrowing circumstances, with actual necessity compelling them to remain and receive the miserable pittance of wages which stands between them and utter destitution, is it strange that the finer instincts of many inexperienced girls are liable to become callous, their tastes vitiated, and the way prepared in many cases for absolute ruin? That instances such as I have referred to are comparatively rare is to be sincerely hoped, but that they do exist can, I believe, be easily attested. I have been assured on good authority that an employment representative of a mercantile establishment, when told by young girls that they could not possibly exist on the small wages offered, was in the habit of asking in reply whether they had not gentlemen friends who

would help, and that nothing was easier than thus to have their wages amply enlarged.

For the sake of human nature let us trust that such cases are rare, but while one such instance exists let us not shut our eyes to the terrible possibilities involved. What is needed, perhaps, is not so much to dwell on extreme cases as to call the attention of employers and of the great community, which stands back of and influences employers, to the exposed condition of young women, even under the most favorable circumstances, and to urge them to adopt every measure that may be practicable for their protection, not alone from absolute ruin, but from a deterioration of the moral sense and pure womanly nature which low and coarse surroundings inevitably induce.

I wish it were in my power to suggest some more practical measures for increased protection. From the nature of the case the suggestions must be general, not specific. Let the employing agents be most carefully selected, as well as all men in authority over young women, and let it be well understood that any proven breach of propriety or undue familiarity will be visited by swift and ignominious discharge. Of course injustice must never be done on the other side, but what is needed is the prevalence of a moral sentiment crystallized into

law-upholding respect for womanhood, and asserting that any familiarity is indeed the unpardonable sin.

In a city like Philadelphia, with the high personal character of its leading merchants, it is certain that every reasonable precaution would be by them most cordially approved and adopted if brought to their attention. But the keen competition of the times and the cares and responsibilities of business lead to everything being placed upon a business basis, and, without a pronounced and increasing public sentiment upon the subject, it is not unlikely that the care and precautions which should be adopted might be overlooked or postponed by the best intentioned employer. I do not at this time venture to suggest to those who are as well informed as myself regarding the subject any other practical measures of reform than those which will commend themselves to every employer when the subject is considered. I would however suggest that not only measurably to remove temptation should reasonably good wages be paid to young women, but that as a measure of sound business policy it at least pays its way in the sure betterment of the service, an important step toward financial success. But I would place the subject on higher ground. I ask employers to consider their peculiar and solemn responsibility toward these defenseless



children entrusted to their charge. In this age of wondrous strides in material advancement shall not Christian enlightenment prevail and increase, in humane methods of transacting business and in the care of those who perform, each her humble but important part of the service which animates these great hives of human industry? Perfected organization seems almost to have reached its limit. The next step should certainly be the humane care and safety of the force, especially those who need it most. And public sentiment now being gradually awakened will powerfully aid in the blessed consummation of this Christian hope.

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Since this paper was prepared I have been asked by a leading woman and housekeeper of this city to introduce into it that which is somewhat germane to the subject—a plea to young American women to engage in household service instead of store or factory work.

I wish it were in my power to aid in so desirable a consummation, and that a sentiment could be awakened among the young women of the nation leading them to seek positions where there is to-day so great a need for intelligent service, where they would be safe from danger, where their surroundings might be elevating and congenial,

and their occupation not only unobjectionable, but desirable in every sense. There are tens of thousands of comfortable homes scattered all over our land, thousands of them refined and cultured homes, needing intelligent, competent service, that tens of thousands of young women could render with great reciprocal advantage, who are now over-crowding the labor market with danger, discomfort, and almost starvation to themselves and their competitors, in the fierce race for subsistence.

There is no more honorable or self-respecting service than that of the household. The science of cookery, for instance, as taught to-day by the Drexel and other kindred institutes, is as elevating in the acquirement and practice as any other art or industry. The same may be said of other duties of the household properly performed. I know the reputation of the service suffers from the ignorant and inferior character of too many of those who have engaged therein. I know, too, the difficulties of the situation, and that the responsibility of the present position lies not alone on one side. Employer as well as employed, mistress and maid alike need to be educated to an appreciation of those difficulties and the remedy. Let the character, dignity, and independence of household service be recognized by the housekeepers of the



land, and then properly set before our young women, and a vast, new avenue of self-respecting, useful, and well-paid occupation lies before them.

With some comparative knowledge of the subject and distinct convictions thereon, I simply present the matter and invoke in its behalf that enlightened public sentiment which, once fully aroused, is all-powerful.