

Independent Industry of Women

Harriet Martineau, *Daily News*, November 17, 1859



For a good many years now the subject of the independent industry of women in Great Britain has come up at shorter intervals, and with a more peremptory demand on the attention of society. From the day when the *Song of the Shirt* appeared there could be no doubt that the industrial condition of women would occupy attention as we see it doing now. The founding of the Governesses' Benevolent Institution, the controversies about factory employment for women, the movement in favour of women and watchwork, the opening of a few Schools of Design to women, and of an annual exhibition of pictures by them, and the successful footing they have established in various department of Art, have all pointed to the awakening of that wide interest in the subject which we witness now. The *Edinburgh Review* of last April contained a full narrative of the actual state of female industry in this country; and at the Social Science Meeting at Bradford, a paper read by Miss PARKES excited so much interest that the discussion has been kept up, and does not seem likely to drop at present.

Discussion about what? This is an important thing to know in a case in which so much sentiment is involved, and so much prejudice, and so much sense, and so much goodwill. What is the precise mischief to be taken in hand? and what is to be done to cure it?

Miss PARKES's paper was abundantly clear and definite. She tells us the truth that a multitude of the daughters of middle-class men are neither educated nor provided for like their brothers; and that if they do not marry, they must work (unprepared by education as they are) or starve. The terms demanded on behalf of women are that parents shall either educate their daughters so as to fit them for independent industry; or lay by a provision for them; or insure their own lives for the benefit of their daughters in the day which will make them fatherless. This is very simple and clear. It is also very interesting; and, as a natural consequence, we hear of sympathy, in the form of advice and suggestions, in all directions; and of various establishments, existing or proposed, with more or less of the charitable element involved for the relief and aid of industrial women of the middle class. Under such circumstances there must be a melancholy waste of effort, unless we ascertain betimes what it is that is wanted, and how the want may be met, with something like concert and business-like faculty. Looking at the matter from a practical point of view, the conditions of the case seem to be these.

It is supposed by persons whose attention has not been particularly called to the subject, that the women of Great Britain are maintained by their fathers, husbands, or brothers. It was once so; and careless people are unaware that we have long outgrown the fit of that theory of female maintenance. It has been out at elbows at least since the war which ended with Waterloo. From the last Census Report we learn how things were eight years ago-before the last war which has much increased the tendency of women

to maintain themselves. In Great Britain, without Ireland, there were in 1851 six millions of women above twenty years of age. More than half of these work for their living. Does this surprise our readers? If it never occurred to them before, they will be still further impressed by the fact that two millions of women, out of the six millions, are independent in their industry—are self-supporting, like men. So far is the theory of women being maintained by their male relatives from being now true. But how do these women work? and how far do they succeed in maintaining themselves? for it is universally understood that women are paid less than men for the same kind and degree of work. Society has been a good deal surprised by the disclosures in the Divorce Court of the amount of effectual female industry, proved by applications for protection of earnings from bad husbands. That women should maintain themselves and their children seems a matter of course when they are unhappily married; and the revelation has caused a good many people to perceive that there is a good deal going on in middle-class life which they were unaware of. It may strike some observers that the matter has far outgrown the scope and powers of charitable societies, and that the independent industry of Englishwomen has become a fact which must be recognised by the law, and which must itself essentially modify middle-class education throughout the kingdom.

What, then, are these three millions and more of working women doing? and especially the two millions who are industrial in the same sense as men? There were in 1851 nearly 130,000 employed in agriculture, without reckoning the farmers' wives and daughters, who usually have their hands full. This is also exclusive of the widow-farmers, who are numerous. Nearly half of the independent class of workers are dairymaids. The ores and clays of the mining districts afford occupation to 7,000, now that female labour has ceased (ostensibly) in coal-pits. It does not seem to be ascertained how many women are employed in the catching, curing, and itinerant sale of fish. Jersey oysters alone maintain 1,000 women, and this may give some notion of the scores of thousands so employed all round our coasts. The country districts, however, afford the greatest number of all in the department of domestic service. Nearly two-thirds of our maid-servants are country born; and there are considerably more than half-a-million of them altogether. They constitute a fourth part of the independent workers. We employ no fewer than 400,000 maids-of-all-work. Other female servants amount to above 180,000, without reckoning the large class (about 51,000) of charwomen.

There are many thousands of shopkeepers, but they are for the most part the widows of the men who had the business before them; and it is too common a thing to see them marry their assistants in the business, from their own inability to keep the books, and manage the financial part of their concerns. The Divorce Court and the police courts, all the year round, afford evidence of this weakness and ignorance among women who have had a good business as innkeepers or shopkeepers. There are 14,000 of this class, butchers and milk merchants; 8,000 waggon or hackney-coach proprietors; 10,000 beer-shop keepers or victuallers, besides 9,000 innkeepers. These are the independent proprietors, excluding the wives, who are yet the mainstay of the industry in houses of entertainment and many branches of retail trade. With all this shopkeeping by women, there are no more than 1,742 shopwomen. This is a

fact eminently worthy of consideration. The function is one which occurs first to almost everybody's mind, when female industry is discussed, as one precisely fit for women. The failure may be partly owing to the jealousy of the men, who have hitherto engrossed it, and partly to the well-known prejudice of purchasers in favour of shopmen; but it is no doubt in part ascribable to the inferiority of women in the special training required; and especially in accounts and bookkeeping.

Manufactures maintain a million and a quarter of the women of Great Britain. More than half a million are employed on dress; that is, in millinery and laundry-work, exclusive of shoemakers' wives, who amount to nearly 100,000. Losing sight of the great field of female labour, because female industry is so completely established there, we are apt to say that there is no choice for a middle-class woman who must work but between the needle and tuition. The milliner's workroom and the school-room, we are wont to say, afford the only alternative. Yet we find in the Census returns "Teachers, Authors, and Artists," all lumped together, their collective number being under 65,000, exclusive of nearly 2,000 set down as "miscellaneous." Independent proprietors of lands, houses, or incomes are declared to be under 173000.

Considering these figures in relation to each other, we strive at some sort of notion of what is wanted -first, to provide for a certain proportion of women now left helpless or miserable on the death of fathers, or under the accidents of fortune; and next, to improve the quality of existing female industry, so as to render it more effective for the support of the individual, and the benefit of society. We do not conceive that any appeal to fathers to provide better for their daughters, in comparison with their sons, will be of much practical use (however just and right) till the women have established the fact of their own capability, and their will to be independent. All sorts of people have to show what they can do before obtaining free scope to do it; and, antecedently unjust as this seems, it is a fact, and to be taken into the calculation. Women need not object to this, judging by what they have lately achieved for themselves under manifold disadvantages. They have won a good position in many departments of literature and art; and there is a good prospect of their soon occupying what we have repeatedly insisted on as their proper place in the medical profession. The thing would be done at once (as it is already in the United States), if the decision rested with our wisest physicians and most enlightened heads of households. We see women now entering in increasing numbers on new methods of industry, introduced by the progress of science and art. We see them in the telegraph offices and at railway stations, transmitting reports with remarkable accuracy, and selling railway tickets-if not yet in charge of the signals, like French women. The arts of design for manufactures are open to them; and this is a wide and profitable field of labour. As authors and artists there is no hindrance in their way when they can prove their capability. No doubt, the counting-house, the shop-counter, secretaryships, and indeed any trade, and the medical profession will afford them entrance, notwithstanding a good deal of jealousy and prejudice, if they can make themselves valuable enough to defy obstacles. The practical question is how to establish the fact of the capacity. The fitness which exists may be called out and put to use by such associations as those which we see proposing to register applicants for work and for workers, and

to train young women to mechanical fitness for certain occupations. These efforts are good as far as they go; and we are always glad to hear of them. The educational preparation which is necessary to make effective workers of either men or women is a deeper and wider affair of which we must speak another day. Our present object is to show that it is mere waste of time to speak for or against the industrial independence of Englishwomen-above one third of their whole number being already established in that destiny. A smaller number of women are passing miserable lives under the wreck of the old theory that women are not self-supporting. These sufferers are not supported: they cannot support themselves, and they form the most prominent of our "uneasy classes." The old theory can never be reinstated in practice, and the question is how best to obey the natural laws of society, which now compel women to work.

The first step is to perceive that the problem is now simply an educational one. This is the point which the facts of the last Census seem to us to establish. The next step will be to provide the education specially required.