



The CASE OF THE WORKING GIRL

Beginning a Series of Three Articles

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Drawings by W. Smithson Broadhead

THE writer has been asked to state some of the facts in the case of the Canadian working girl. The problem of the girl wage-earner is one of the most difficult in city life. For the girl, it is the most difficult. To men and women of good will, the problem is perplexing because economically a perfect solution seems to be impossible. A girl is worth a good deal. We have reason for saying that life is too hard for the girl who earns wages. This is true in our Canadian cities. There are several reasonable ways in which the girl can be helped, without making her dependent when she ought to be independent, and without interfering with the freedom which we all want for ourselves. These ways are not charitable, but of economic betterment. It is greatly desired to obtain the interest of the Canadian public in the case of the Canadian girl at work. First, her case has to be studied. The stories of Canadian working girls which follow here are true stories. Features in one story have been interchanged with features from other stories to make identification impossible.

A. X. is a stenographer. Her father, a farmer, died soon after A. X. came to the city. Her mother is old and lives with a married daughter. There are several brothers and sisters. As a child, A. X. had a good deal of the care of a feeble-minded sister who is now in an institution. This fact has something to do with making A. X. more nervous and timid than she ought to be. She is a competent worker, but not strong enough physically, and not up to the average in energy. She shares a room with one or another of her girl friends, wage-earners like herself. After five or six years of employment, she is now earning ten dollars a week. Her present situation demands more intelligence than is required from the ordinary stenographer. She must be nicely dressed, and she must be agreeable and tactful in dealing with the people who come into her employer's office. Her employer says that her hours are short, her work agreeable, and that her salary is all the position is worth. The girl, who is entirely on her own resources and who receives assistance from no one, has difficulty in making both ends meet and saves nothing. She might have less difficulty if she knew more of food values and if she denied herself all pleasure, including journeys two or three times a year to see her mother. Can any Canadian girl who is full of life, who wants a good time, who appreciates what is fine and delightful in life, who is sensitive and rather clever, be expected to satisfy herself with just living and no more? Girl stenographers in Chicago recently made a statement that it is impossible to live on less than twelve dollars a week. We have no statistics as to what a living wage is for a girl wage-earner in any Canadian city. One may make a

fairly accurate guess. It is improbable that there is any great difference between a living wage for a girl stenographer in Toronto and Chicago, or Montreal and Chicago. The girl who is a stenographer, the girl who works in a shop, and the girl who works in a factory, do not have equal expenses. It costs a stenographer more to be ready for her work. Many girl stenographers in Canadian cities get six, seven and eight dollars a week.

B. Y. is newly come from the country to the city. She is strong and determined to succeed. She has what comparatively few girl wage-earners have, a plan for the future. When she knows enough, she is going back to the town near her old home to establish a model restaurant. This fact alone makes B. Y. an exceptional working girl. She had saved some money, which she had earned herself, before coming to the city. Her first position was as a bookkeeper. She gave it up because she could not live on six dollars a week. This was before she found out on how little a girl can live when she must. B. Y.'s resources were exhausted before she got another position. In her present employment she gets four dollars a week. But she is learning the catering business, and her wages will be increased if she is a successful worker. She is not yet certain that she can make good in the city. B. Y.'s case brings us nearer to the lower levels of comfort and safety in the life of a girl who is earning wages. At first when she came to the city, B. Y. paid one-seventy-five a week for her room, and three dollars a week for her meals. This left her one-twenty-five per week for all other expenses, which is an impossible margin. She finds that by sharing a room with another girl, or with two or three other girls, that it is possible to rent a room for one dollar a week. If a girl pays less than a dollar the locality is undesirable. B. Y. is given her lunch where she works. The lowest sum which a girl wage-earner pays for three meals a day is two-twenty-five a week. With a room at a dollar a week and meals at two-twenty-five, both sums the lowest possible expenditure out of six dollars, two-seventy-five a week is left for other expenses. Many working girls in Canadian cities have to live on six dollars a week. They cannot live well. It is not exactly known whether they can remain in good health if they live on six dollars a week. But it does not seem likely.

THERE are working girls, mainly beginners, who get less than six dollars a week. Three and a half, four, four and a half, and five dollars are wages paid in some instances. These figures, which are clearly below a living wage, bring in another question. The working girl has to learn the trade by which she supports herself. It is folly to suppose that an employer of labour can pay a girl, whose work is of no value to him, sufficient wages to support her in comfort. How the girl is to live while she learns her trade is another story. It is partly the responsibility of the Canadian public, partly the responsibility of the girl's own people, partly the girl's own responsibility, and it is partly the re-

sponsibility of the employer. He must have as efficient labour as he can get. Hiatuses such as this, when a girl is learning to support herself, make the life of the girl wage-earner too hard. She does not learn her trade at home. She does not learn it at school. This difficulty applies particularly to shop girls and girls in factories. There is the business college for the stenographer and bookkeeper.

IT will be noted that the cases taken so far are of girls who do not live at home. Theirs is the hardest case. It is made hard by the fact that working girls who live at home, and perhaps do not have to pay for washing, and possibly even do not pay board, can live comfortably on a wage which means starvation to the girl who does not live at home. This is part of the problem of the girl wage-earner. There are no Canadian statistics to show what proportion of women workers live at home. The United States census report on Women at Work, compiling data taken from the 1900 census schedules, shows 65,186 women employed as saleswomen in one city. Of this number, 60,062 were single women, and of the single women, 86.1 per cent. lived at home. But 2,547 of these women lived in homes where the woman worker was the only breadwinner. These are not Canadian statistics. It seems fair to say, however, that probably about 86 per cent. of the working girls in Canada live at home. The effect of saying this is to leave the reader with an easy mind. But it is not plain from what we can find out of the case of the working girl that the easy mind is justified. It is conceded that the case of the working girl who does not live at home, is made almost impossible by the fact that she has to enter into competition with the girl living at home. The girl at home has to live, in the same way that the girl who is not at home has to live. It cannot be admitted that girls who live at home work for pocket money and showier clothes. There is probably a small percentage who work for this reason. It is so small as to be practically negligible. The great majority work for a living, whether they live at home or not. Ask any woman inspector of factories, ask anyone who has intimate knowledge of the girl wage-earner, and the statement will be made that a girl goes into a wage-earning life from necessity. Work is good for everyone. The girl who has no work in her life is much worse off than the working girl, unless the conditions under which the girl wage-earner lives are very hard indeed. No objection is raised to the girl being at work.

The fact remains, and this is known by actual investigation, that thousands of girls in Canadian cities like Toronto are paid less than three hundred dollars a year. What percentage of these girls earning less than three hundred dollars a year live at home? How many of them are entirely on their own resources? How do they live? These are questions to which every community which is socially alive, and particularly the non-wage earning women of the community, must find a reply.

C. X. is a factory employee, a native of the city