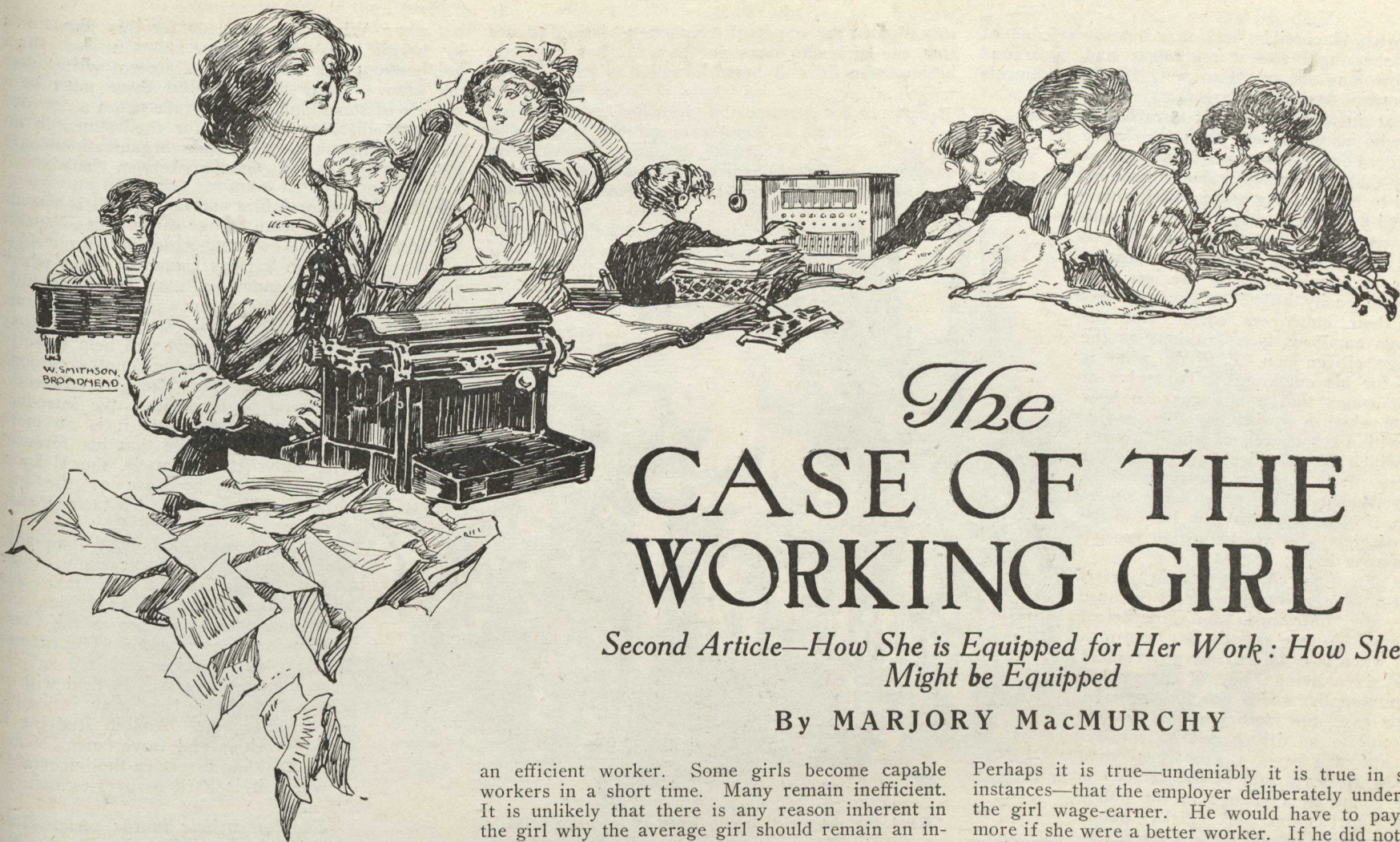




The CASE OF THE WORKING GIRL

Second Article—How She is Equipped for Her Work: How She Might be Equipped

By MARJORY MacMURCHY

an efficient worker. Some girls become capable workers in a short time. Many remain inefficient. It is unlikely that there is any reason inherent in the girl why the average girl should remain an inefficient worker.

The shop girl's position, as far as knowledge of her work is concerned, is about the same. She does use, however, her knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Those who check over her slips can tell how badly the average shop girl writes. If she is told about it, she resents what is said to her. Most people would. It is only individuals of unusual good sense who improve deficiencies when told about them. What the shop girl has to learn is to make sales. In order to do this, she must make a good appearance. No shop will employ a girl who does not look tidy and fairly smart. The time-keeper who admits the girls has authority to send them back if they are not properly dressed. He does send them back, if they do not keep the rules, and they are docked for time. If they are, it is their own fault, because shop girls know that they have to pass the test of being properly dressed. Last summer, in a big department store, a girl came in the afternoon in a white skirt. The time-keeper let her stay for once. But the other girls in her department pinned a couple of their black aprons round her. This is no hardship. It is part of the discipline of the shop.

TO learn to sell is not as simple as it may seem.

The girls teach each other in an off and on kind of way. But the shop girl has to depend mainly on her native gifts. If she does not succeed in one department, she is usually tried in one or two others before being let go. The idea would naturally occur to anyone that in this respect a forewoman would be of the greatest assistance. A forewoman must surely have the best opportunity to train girls under her. On inquiry, the forewoman does not seem to do this. There are exceptional heads of departments who have a gift for training girls and who are very kind, the girls say. In such a case, it is always added that the forewoman knows a great deal about the work of her department. To show how exceptional a case of this kind is, the writer has heard frequently for a number of years of one forewoman who teaches the girls in her department about the commodity which they have to sell. She is known to an outside public that has never come in contact with her because she is an expert. Her record is an indication of what a forewoman can do for the girl wage-earner. But probably the average forewoman has a great deal of other work besides teaching girls how to make sales. Some of the most progressive among the large stores have classes to train girls in making sales. The girls are let off from their departments to attend these classes. Is there any data to indicate what is the efficiency of the average shop girl? As a rule, the shop girl is paid less than the girl in a factory. Shop girls are often paid four, five, and six dollars a week. Her wages prove that the shop girl is poorly equipped to earn a living.

Perhaps it is true—undeniably it is true in some instances—that the employer deliberately underpays the girl wage-earner. He would have to pay her more if she were a better worker. If he did not, she could go to another shop and get higher wages.

THE girl in an office has been trained in a business college. She has special equipment—such as it is—and in consequence is in a different class from the factory girl and the shop girl. It is generally stated by employers, however, that good stenographers are extremely rare. Possibly they are not much rarer than very good positions. At least, the girl stenographer goes to work for the first time knowing something about the special work by means of which she has to earn a living. What appears most conspicuously in the case of the girl stenographer is that she does not know how to keep up her physical efficiency as a worker. This is true of the factory girl and the shop girl, but the writer believes that it is most noticeable in the case of the girl in an office. She does not know how to use money so that her wages will give her back their value. She does not know how to keep up to the strain of her work.

If the self-supporting woman, who has reached a position of comfort and success, is asked what will make or cripple the girl wage-earner in her endeavour to become self-supporting—after the girl has learned her special work—her answer will be that the final test is the girl's capacity to take care of her health and to spend her wages with good judgment. This is the point which means success or failure. And this is where, apparently, no one helps her. Each individual girl must find out for herself. Or she never finds out and she is always half-sick and half-poor. There are varying grades of not being as well as she ought to be, and of spending money for poor returns. The fact is that the girl—the woman—whether she is a wage-earner or a girl at home, is never taught the value of money. She is not taught how to spend money so that she may get back its value. In much the same way the girl is not taught what she ought to eat, how she ought to be dressed, or when she ought to rest. She finds these things out for herself, or she lives so much the less efficiently for not knowing them. It is a truism that girls are not taught how to feed babies, which is one of the chief causes of infant mortality. But the want of knowledge is wider than this. Girls are not taught what they ought to eat themselves. They are not taught as housekeepers what they should give their households to eat. These are sweeping assertions. They are made here, because this want of common necessary knowledge is part of the problem of the girl wage-earner. The statement applies to all alike, factory girls, shop girls, and girls in offices. The girl wage-earner does not know how to take care of herself. She may find out after some years. But she does not know, except in rare instances, when she begins to work. Her lack of knowledge is a great loss to her. Sometimes it is an irretrievable loss. Her knowledge of how she ought to spend

WHAT is the equipment of the Canadian girl wage-earner when she begins to earn her living? To tell the truth, we know very little about it, except in a general way. Take the case of a factory girl, a shop girl, and a stenographer. These are the girls whom we meet every day in the street cars and on the street, who are at work in the same offices as we are, whose work is performed partly for us, in the same way that we do our work partly for them. It is apparently true that the industrial and commercial world as it is organized at present is on a basis which makes it impossible for a certain proportion of these girls to earn a wage on which they may live decently. Four dollars is below a living wage. Yet this sum is being paid to a number of these girl workers. A certain number of people believe that the employer is wholly to blame for this condition. But it is the public, not the employer only, that is accountable. If the work a girl is able to do is not worth a living wage—to put the case in this shape for the moment—there are no market laws which will supply her with a wage on which she can live comfortably. If she has never been taught how to keep herself in good health, and if she has never learned the value of money nor how to spend money, it is not likely that she will be an efficient worker and useful citizen. The girl worker when she begins to earn her living is greatly under-equipped as compared with other workers.

When a girl applies at a factory for work—we are in prosperous days when practically any girl who applies will get work—what does she know to help her to earn a living? The average girl can read and write after a fashion. She knows some arithmetic and has a little other knowledge of the same kind, the possession of which places her higher in the scale of civilization than she would be without such knowledge. Suppose she is employed in the making of garments of any description. Does she know anything about cutting out her own clothes, or of design? Has she any idea of power machinery, or even of running an ordinary sewing machine, the management of which a girl ought to be able to learn at home? Has she any knowledge of making anything, or even of giving value for wages, or of receiving a fair recompense for work? From what the writer can find out, the answer to these critical questions is in the negative, with the exception, possibly, of the last question. The average Canadian girl has had no special preparation of any kind to fit her to earn a living. Her mother has not taught her, probably because the mother does not know what the girl needs to know. She has not been taught at school. It is not remarkable that there is a discrepancy in the girl's wages and that she suffers, unless she is supported, while she is learning, by her people at home. It is not remarkable that the average girl is not