

The Youth of the City

It is quite evident that in our cities, the young men and young women just beginning work in the factories, the shops and the offices do not have a fair chance in life. This is particularly true of those who are without parents or friends. Three natural longings these young people have—for the joys of life, for companionship and for a glimpse into the ideal world. Under existing conditions there is small likelihood that these longings will be satisfied in a normal manner. This being true one can well understand how neglected nature rebels against enforced starvation, and how it seeks compensation in unnatural extravagances and dissipations.

The Longing for Variety

A young man enters a factory. He is put at a lathe. All day long and every day for a year or more he is kept shoving pieces of wood into a great machine. The grinding, buzzing sound is ever round him. It dominates his thoughts, his feelings and his action. It becomes part of himself, or more properly he becomes part of it. He loses his identity, his personality; he is but part of the machine. How his whole soul revolts against the monotony! It is not that he dislikes work. The chances are he would glory in work suited to his nature and capacity; but he objects to servitude. He is but a youth, and as such demands something of the joy of freedom. This is why he rebels. This is why he "quits the job" and seeks another. A census in New York showed that one-third of those who entered work at fourteen years of age changed their occupations six times during the first year. Such is the attitude of youth to monotony. Hear the testimony of one who speaks from full experience.

"I recall a boy who had worked steadily for two years as a helper in a smelting establishment and had conscientiously brought home all his wages, one night suddenly announcing to his family that he 'was too tired and too hot to go on.' As no amount of persuasion could make him alter his decision, the family finally threatened to bring him into the Juvenile Court on a charge of incorrigibility, whereupon the boy disappeared and such efforts as the family have been able to make in the two years since have failed to find him. They are convinced that he is trying a 'spell of tramping' and wish 'that they had let him have a vacation the first summer when he wanted it so bad.' The boy may find in the rough outdoor life the healing that a wise physician would recommend for nervous exhaustion, although the tramp experiment is a perilous one."

How is it possible to better conditions? In any modern factory each man must do his own fractional part of the whole. The old system of manufacture can be tolerated no longer. A workman must be content to co-operate. Surely so, but yet there are conditions under which co-operation is intolerable and conditions under which it is joyful. The employer in a modern factory, or store or shop does not always consider this. Hear again what this woman who knows has to say:

"If a child goes into a sewing factory with a knowledge of the work she is doing in relation to the finished product; if she is informed concerning the material she is manipulating and the processes to which it is subjected; if she understands the design she is elaborating in its historic relation to art and decoration, her daily life is lifted from drudgery to one of self-conscious activity, and her pleasure and intelligence is registered in her product.

"I remember a little colored girl in this New York school who was drawing for the pattern she was about to embroider, a carefully elaborated acanthus leaf. Upon my inquiry as to the design she replied; 'It is what the Egyptians used to put on everything, because they saw it so much growing in the Nile; and then the Greeks copied it, and sometimes you can find it now on the buildings down town.' She added shyly, 'Of course I like it awfully well because it was first used by people living in Africa where the colored folks come from.'"

It is because no care has been taken in most modern factories to do the very thing suggested here that young men and women grow dissatisfied. They are not allowed to feel the joy of production, which after all is the true joy of living. With the invention of modern machinery and the consequent division of labor there was found in industry a place for growing boys and girls. We must be careful lest we sacrifice the human to the material. If we quench the fire of youth we not only destroy life, but imperil the future of industry itself.

The Longing for Companionship

Longing for variety of occupation is not the only longing of the young man or the young woman of the shop or the factory. There is the longing for companionship—first, for those of similar sex and then for those of the opposite sex. Cities have provided schools, but as yet they have provided few recreation centres for young people. All this is left to private enterprise. The young girl cannot meet a young man in her home—for often she has no home. If she joins the Y.W.C.A. she meets no young men at all, if she goes to a church she finds that she is not like the other girls who have homes of their own, and the young men are not usually of her class. So she goes to the rinks, to the picture shows, to the dance halls. She picks up companions. She has her fun anyway.

What is the remedy for these conditions? The community and the employers of labor must learn that their responsibility to young people does not end with getting them a position and paying them even a liberal wage. Opportunities must be provided for social intercourse under wise supervision.

"Already some American cities are making a beginning toward more adequate public recreation. Boston has its municipal gymnasiums, cricket fields and golf grounds. Chicago has seventeen parks with playing fields, gymnasiums, and baths, which at present enroll thousands of young people. These same parks are provided with beautiful halls which are used for many purposes, rent free, and are given over to any group of young people who wish to conduct dancing parties, subject to city supervision and chaperonage. Many social clubs have deserted neighboring saloon halls for these municipal drawing rooms beautifully decorated with growing plants supplied by the park greenhouses, and flooded with electric light, supplied by the park power house."

The Longing for Ideals

The third longing of the city youth is for glimpses into the ideal world—the world of the imagination. It is because the theatre, the moving picture show and the sensational novel help the imagination in its quest of ideals that these are so well patronized by both sexes. Some young working girls endure the hardships of the day only because they are looking forward to the picture shows at night. They prefer the society of one young man to another because

he is more generous with cheap theatre tickets. They frequent the bookstores and libraries and revel in fiction because it ministers to their appetite. If the picture show is more popular to-day than the theatre or the library it is not only because it furnishes cheap entertainment, but because the plots are worked out in short time, and because they make a strong appeal to the imagination. The pity of it all is that the owners of the picture shows are not always concerned with the moral effect of their productions. They are first of all concerned with money making. To them, audiences are not primarily to be educated or helped to better things. It is for this reason that the community should operate its own theatres. There is a glorious possibility in the moving picture. A few good theatres under community control and operated to provide amusement and instruction would be of the highest possible value. In this matter, as in the matter of recreation centres the community, and the factory owner could well co-operate. We look for the day when cities will feel the responsibility of properly educating their young people during the impressionable years. In the words of Miss Jane Addams who has been quoted so frequently:

"To fail to provide for the recreation of youth is not only to deprive all of them of their natural form of expression, but is certain to subject some of them to the overwhelming temptation of illicit and soul-destroying pleasures. To insist that young people shall forecast their rose-colored future only in a house of dreams, is to deprive the real world of that warmth and re-assurance which it so sorely needs and to which it is justly entitled; furthermore we are left outside with a sense of dreariness, in company with that shadow which already lurks only around the corner for most of us—a skepticism of life's value."

The Modern Church

"The Church, if it is to retain its hold upon the masses of the people, must again resume the lead in everyday life which, under changing standards of thought and life, it has to some extent lost. There is tremendous need for the wise direction of its ministers in the practical problems of the community and the State. The men who now go out from our theological colleges go out far better equipped for this task than did their predecessors. Is this side of beneficence denounced as materialistic? It was not outside of the Saviour's mission to be known to the common folks as the good physician, and to reach them in that way. Materialism is the enemy to be fought.

The Modern School

There is an old theory that it is difficult to uproot—"the theory that the barest rudiments of an education are all that is necessary for the farmer." This must be discarded in favor of the theory that farmers should become one of the distinctively educated classes of the country—men and women of clear thought and possessed of scientific knowledge and insight. For this reason the rural school must be transformed. It must become an educational and social centre, and the means of developing an appreciation for modern agriculture. Transformation will be effected when the majority of the people in any community wish for it. A few strong intelligent souls can soon gather around them a majority. One man of high purpose and sound intelligence and possessed of a little tact can mould the sentiment of a whole countryside. Will you be one of such men?