

DO BARGAIN COUNTERS ENCOURAGE

A Claim That They Are Directly Responsible for Low Wages Paid to Women.



"The Sweat Shop Women Work for Dying Wages. Not Living Wages," Says Mrs. Nathan, President of the Consumers' League.

WITHOUT bargain hunters and bargain counters there would be no sweat shops. Between the ill-judged economy of wealthy or well-to-do women and the condition of thousands of those women and girls who, amid the massed tenement life of the East Side, toil and suffer at their ill-requited tasks there is a close connection. The over economy of the one class is largely responsible for the wretchedly small earnings of the other. This is the claim of some of the most thoughtful of those women who are eager to ameliorate the condition of their unfortunate sisters, and who are eager to find practical methods by which improvements and reforms may be accomplished and remedies applied.

"The sweat shop women work for dying wages, not living wages!" says Mrs. Frederick Nathan, of No. 151 West Eighty-fifth street, who is the president of the Consumers' League, of the City of New York. "And it is the seekers after bargains to whom such a condition of affairs is vitally owing! If bargain hunters did not flock to the stores, demanding the cheapest in every class of goods, the dealers would not be compelled to buy their goods at the wretchedly low prices at which they force the wretched workers to sell them."

Up the dark stairway of a rear tenement on Essex street I went, until the fifth story was reached. I heard the ceaseless whir of a sewing machine inside of a low door. I listened for a time, and there was not a moment's pause. Then I knocked and a tired voice told me to enter.

"With eyes that were weary and sad; with fingers weary and worn." Yes: Tom Hood had seen it all; and there was the literal truth of his description before me. The woman's eyes were sunken and heavy; her face was gaunt and thin; two little children looked at me, hungry-eyed, from a crib in a corner of the room.

"Oh, I'm doing very well now," said the woman, with a pitiful attempt at bravery in her tone. "I am getting 36 cents a dozen for these shirts. Last



week I got only 35. If times get real good, maybe the prices will go up to 40."

And she smiled, a wan little smile, and then stepped hastily to the crib, to soothe one of the children, who had just set up a whimpering wail. And then she came back to the sewing machine and the desolate whir recommenced.

"Stitch, stitch, stitch!

In poverty, hunger and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the song of the shirt."

And there came to me more that Mrs. Nathan had said:

"It is the wretched sweat-shop system that we want to break up, and for which the bargain hunters are so largely responsible. Women who sew for dying wages can justly blame the wealthy ones of their own sex. It is in all those classes of women's sewing work that are marketed in the stores that the awful prices prevail. The members of our association, and we are some 1,800 in number, do not so much blame the dealers as we do the buyers; for the buyers go to the store where the prices are lowest, regardless of the means by which the low prices are secured; and then the other dealers are forced by that successful competition to buy and sell their goods at prices that are equally low."

"But how do you plan to get at the root of the evil," she was asked.

"By awakening the public to a realizing sense of the dangers and evils of the present system," she replied. "A bargain hunter has no right to buy cheap priced goods without first learning by what means the dealer has become enabled to sell at such an exceptionally low figure. It may be that there is some proper cause for it, and then it is proper for the bargain hunter to buy, and the bargain is one of which she may well feel proud. For we do not try to check people in buying as cheaply as they can, so long as the cheap price does not represent the heart's blood of women and girls who toil ceaselessly at starvation wages. If the crowds of well-dressed women who push and fight and struggle with each other to get to a bargain counter could realize that they are pushing and struggling to take the living away from helpless ones of their own sex, they would be ashamed to continue. We are trying to let them know and understand these facts. They should inquire into the causes of cheapness of goods in a dry goods department store just as they would inquire into unwonted cheapness of food or plumbing work that was offered them. They should not buy a cheap dress or cheap apron more heedlessly than they would buy cheap meat or cheap milk. And if the dealer has wrongfully bought the goods cheap, the buyer is equally guilty if she purchases them of him at his cheap rate. And, too, the over eager seeker for bargains may easily incur the gravest danger. A woman buys a cheap suit of clothes for her little son at a price that she cannot but be fully aware is utterly inadequate as remuneration for the work involved. And likely enough the suit has been made by a hungry woman by the bedside of a fever stricken child of her own, and the eager bargain hunter conveys the dread disease to her little son with the bargain in which her economical soul delighted."

and sewing in poor women's homes, would it not take the bread out of many and sewing in poor women's homes, would it not take the bread out of many a poor woman's mouth?"

"Bargain Counters One of the Greatest Evils of the

CONSIDER bargain counters one of the greatest evils of so-called "modern economics." I have never bought an article at a bargain counter, but I have gone to the different shops that indulge in this sort of thing to get rid of a lot of imperfect or out-of-date goods with which they are overstocked, and I have watched with amazement the women who flock there and convert themselves, for the time being, into a pack of ravenous animals.

Those women complain of the worries of their domestic lives that make wrinkles in their faces and furrow their foreheads with lines. Well, I have thought, as I watched them, if they could but see the rasping, contorted expression in their faces, the frown of discontent and displeasure on their brows, and the firm, set lips, they would realize that a half-hour spent in a surging crowd before a bargain counter does more to make them old women than if they had sat quietly at home and made that very garment on their own

sewing machines.

Beyond doubt there is an occasional sale of some article that is cheap, but it is as the oasis in the desert.

Does it stand to reason that a shopkeeper is going to pay the regular manufacturer's price of an article, employ girls to sell it, pay hundreds of dollars to advertise the sale, and then sell it for far less than cost?

Some shopkeepers argue, with much truth, that the bargain counter is a decoy, and that while there indulging in a \$1 ribbon that is being sold for the astonishingly low price of 39 cents you will be tempted to buy articles at the other counters, and thus they make up the money lost on the bargain.

All I have to say to the bargain hunter is this: Go ahead, wear out your nervous system, lose your temper, have your toes trod upon and your body used as a punching bag for hundreds of elbows and fists, buy cheaply made arti-