

## CHILD LABOR IN THE SOUTHERN COTTON MILLS

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One day last week the train from Memphis, Tennessee, to Spartanburg, South Carolina, through the far famed Land of the Sky, carried a company of fifty people bound for the South Carolina cotton mills. Among those on board who expressed themselves on the subject of these emigrants from Tennessee, were the agent in charge of the emigrants, the conductor of the train, a business man from West Tennessee, a missionary school teacher, a minister of the gospel; while a secretary of the Child Labor Committee took notes of what was said and reserved expression of opinion until now. It might be said that the business and professional life of the South was fairly well represented.

The minister happened to be a valued member of our North Carolina Child Labor Committee, and, of course, deplored the breaking up of these mountain homes, be they ever so humble, and recognized that the Church had little chance to influence the child when the mill had once claimed him. The school teacher, who had given her life with self-sacrificing zeal to educating the children of the mountaineers, felt that the child was equally beyond the reach of the school when the mill had made the demand for his labor. She was intimately acquainted with the life of the people, knew the bitterness of their poverty in some instances, but she felt that it was nothing short of a calamity for the children to be removed from their mountain farms to the cotton mills. The business man declaimed in two languages, English and the profane, against the scarcity of labor on the farms of West Tennessee on account of this steady draining of the tenant population from the farms to the mills, and he felt the unfair competition that came from the employment of children at man's work and woman's work in the mill, of course the business of the towns suffering from the

non-productivity of the farms, through the scarcity of labor. But the conductor of the train was the most vehement in his denunciation of the mills themselves for the employment of children. He had seen these people leaving their native hills in the full tide of vigorous manhood and womanhood, with rosy-cheeked children. And he had seen some of them return, broken in health and spirits, the fair pictures that had been painted for them by the agent blotted out in the tears of disappointment. If he had thought of the economic view of the question as concerning his own occupation, he would have known that the children who went into the cotton mills in tender years would never be fit in manhood for work on the railroad, with its demand for intelligent and alert workmen. But the point is that the people of the South are talking about this evil of child labor in the cotton mills, and that public sentiment is turning against the industry itself, with indiscriminate condemnation for the permission of such a system.

The agent of the cotton mills was the only one who regarded his work of inducing these people to leave their homes as a benefaction and himself as the advance agent of civilization. He said that he had found the worst conditions on the Pigeon River, in East Tennessee, among the Great Smoky Mountains. He had found fifteen living in one hut, who were glad enough to leave it for the mills; that there was no work for the women and children to do except in corn-planting or potato-digging time, while all could work in the mill, wet weather or dry, hot or cold; that he had thirty-two people on board for whom he had to pay half or full fare, besides the children; that he had made seven "shipments" from Newport, Tenn., averaging fifteen to the shipment; that seven more shipments had gone from Cleveland; that he must have shipped five hundred emigrants in all; that he represented an immigration association which had other agents out beside himself, and here he showed me one of the contracts to be signed by the emigrant, representing the cotton mill community as a sort of earthly paradise, with its free schools, free libraries, amusement halls and secret order rooms, indicating that the twelve-hour day of the cotton mills left considerable time for leisure and culture; that the family was a great deal better off in the mill, where the whole family could make \$3.75 a day, than on the farm, where the father had been able to make but seventy-five cents a day; that the law did not

allow a child under twelve to work unless it was a "widdler lady's" child, who is worked as young as he is able to work—presumably as the penalty for partial orphanage; that the parent was supposed to know how old his child was, and his word was taken as to the child's age, though, of course, there were a-plenty of children of six and eight and ten years in the mills, because their parents lied about their ages.

And then we undertook a little personal investigation of the children themselves. Little Harrison Swan was "going on ten" and was going to work in the Four Mills, at Greenville, S. C., and I doubt not is at work there now. Charley Matthews and a little comrade of about his size were each "about nine," and both were bound for the mills. And it made one's heart bleed to see the number of children younger still, and the babies at the breast, soon to be cast into the brazen arms of our modern Moloch. For, as our chairman said in an address last year, these people are of the purest American stock on this continent. North Carolina has a law requiring a cotton mill agent to take out a license that costs him a hundred dollars. And yet, from the little village of Clyde, on the Western North Carolina Railway, there went last year to the South Carolina cotton mills fifteen hundred men, women and children of this pure Anglo-Saxon stock, whose fathers fought at King's Mountain and New Orleans against the British, who fought on both sides in the Civil War, for the right as it was given each to see the right; who were the first to volunteer in the war with Spain, but to whom the nation will turn in the hour of her need in vain, as England looked to Manchester and Leeds and Sheffield in vain for men to conquer a handful of South African farmers, when the strength and vigor of her soldiers had been sapped by premature and long continued labor in the mills.

So it is that Tennessee, which has but thirty cotton mills of her own, is affected by the cotton mill industry of South Carolina, which stands next to Massachusetts in the number of spindles. The problem of child labor is one that affects the South as a whole and touches it at a point which it has hitherto most jealously guarded, the preservation of the vigor of its Anglo-Saxon stock. Nay, we make bold to say that child labor in the South is more a national question than child labor in New England or Pennsylvania. For in the North and East it is chiefly the children of the foreigners

that need protection. No child of American stock has been found in the sweatshops of New York City. But in the South, it is the breed of American that is threatened with degeneration.

To those unacquainted with actual conditions, the subject assigned me might be supposed to have an unjustly discriminating title. Why consider the cotton mills as the only industry cursed with child labor? It is true that there are several hundred thousand children of the South reported in the census as engaged in "gainful occupations." But the large majority of these are at work on the farms, under the eye of their parents, and would not be counted ordinarily except for the peculiarities of the tenant system in the South. This work is not only harmless, but helpful, save where it interferes with attendance at school. It is true also that there are some very young children employed in the tobacco factories of Virginia and North Carolina, in the cigar factories of Florida, in the woolen mills of Kentucky and Tennessee, in the coal mines of West Virginia and Alabama. But the evil here is slight in comparison with the child slavery of the cotton mills. Nor is this characteristic of the cotton mills peculiar to the South. The first recorded protest against this curse was the opinion of the medical men of Manchester, England, written by Dr. Thomas Percival, upon the occasion of a fever epidemic. They said: "We are decided in our opinion that the disorder has been supported, diffused and aggravated by the injury done to young persons through confinement and too long continued labor, to which evil the cotton mills have given occasion." That was in 1784. In the year 1796 the Manchester Board of Health, organized by Dr. Percival, says that they "have had their attention particularly directed to the large cotton factories established in the town and neighborhood of Manchester \* \* \* that the children and others who work in large cotton factories are peculiarly disposed to be affected by the contagion of fever, and that when such infection is received it is rapidly propagated. \* \* \* The untimely labor of the night and the protracted labor of the day, with respect to children, not only tends to diminish future expectations as to the general sum of life and industry by impairing the strength and destroying the vital stamina of the rising generation, but it too often gives encouragement to idleness, extravagance and profligacy in the parents, who, contrary to the order of nature, subsist by the oppression of their offspring."

In 1802 began the hundred year war in England, with the first of the factory acts, for the protection of the children, and England is just waking to the fact that protective and effective legislation came too late. That which the Manchester physicians of the eighteenth century had foretold was evident to all the world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Says one of the important magazine articles of the year: "In a day it seemed that the nation awoke to the fact that its physical vigor was sapped. It had no material for soldiers. The percentage of rejections at the enlistment stations appalled every reflective mind. The standards were lowered, the tests were conveniently made easy. Regiments were patched together of boys and anemic youths. They were food for the hospitals, not for powder. Once in South Africa, enteric swept them off like flies. They were only the shells of men. \* \* \* Men gathered from the dispatches that, as a matter of fact, the war was fought on the British side by the Colonials, Irish and Scotch." And now hear the testimony from Manchester after a hundred years: "The president of a Manchester improvement association testified that there were large districts in Manchester in which there were "no well grown children or men or women, except those who have been born in the country."<sup>1</sup> Every one knows the importance of Manchester as a cotton manufacturing center. Lord Shaftesbury claimed that the evil "spread from the cotton mills" into other industries.

When New England took up the manufacture of cotton on a large scale the same conditions, perhaps not quite so bad, were observed. As late as 1885 in Massachusetts, children as young as ten years of age were allowed to work eight hours a day in the cotton mills. And we have the reason set forth by President Roosevelt why the New England regiments, recruited from the factory districts, were unable to meet the rural regiments from the South in battle. It is a self-evident truth that men who fail in the test of battle are not able to win the more enduring victories of peace. To-day the American workman is hardly to be found in the cotton mills of New England. The wages are below the American standard, and the mills are filled with French Canadians, Greeks and Portuguese. For it is a sort of retributory law of economics

<sup>1</sup> John Dennie, Jr., *Everybody's Magazine*, March, 1905. Article, "Hooligan."

that when the parent puts his child to work in competition with himself, the wage scale falls to the child standard, and the whole family can make only so much as the father of the family can in those occupations where there is no demand for the labor of children.

Before the invention of the cotton gin had turned the South from its manufacturing industry to the raising of cotton for the world's supply, with the consequent growth of African slavery from a patriarchal to a commercial institution, the South was producing a larger quantity and a greater variety of manufactured goods than New England. In 1900 the value of her manufactured products again surpassed that of her agricultural. In the two decades from 1880 to 1900 there was an enormous expansion of the cotton milling industry, in response to the almost passionate demand at the South for her restoration to the position of a manufacturing people. Edward Everett Hale has satirized the average Southern village as a place where no one was competent to mend a broken pail. Henry Grady drew a picture of the equipment of a funeral which he attended in Georgia, the coffin manufactured here and the hearse yonder, the dead man's clothes woven in Philadelphia and his shoes coming from Massachusetts, ending with the classic remark that all which Georgia could furnish for the funeral was the "corpse and the hole in the ground." But the cotton exposition at Atlanta in 1886 gave a tremendous impetus to cotton manufacturing, as well as to the diversification of our industries. The climax of enthusiasm at that exposition was reached when the Governor of Georgia appeared one evening arrayed in a suit of clothes whose manufacture had been followed with interest by the spectators, who had seen the cotton for the clothes picked from the stalks in the field on the morning of that day. In 1880 there were 667,000 spindles in the South. In 1900 there were over seven millions. Now there are 9,205,000. And the industry is still going forward by leaps and bounds. In 1904 there were twice as many cotton manufacturing establishments of all kinds as in 1900. In six years the number of spindles in the two Carolinas has doubled. In 1905 it was found that the South had actually manufactured one thousand more bales of cotton during the year than the North and East. North Carolina stands first of the states in the number of mills, though South Carolina is first among Southern states in the

number of spindles. Old factories are being enlarged and new ones built, and the very latest principles of construction are used and the newest models of machinery.

This industry is centered in the four cotton producing states of the South, Alabama, Georgia and the two Carolinas. These mills are mainly located in the Piedmont section of these four states. Alabama has sixty-five cotton manufacturing establishments of all kinds, Georgia 169, South Carolina 163 and North Carolina 315. But these figures from the last Blue Book are probably already antiquated. The South still sends to foreign countries 65 per cent. of the cotton she produces. But it is now manufacturing into yarn and cloth a little more than half of the remaining 35 per cent. It would seem only a question of time when the cotton mill in the cotton field, other conditions being equal, must successfully compete with the cotton mill in Philadelphia or New England, the two other cotton manufacturing centers of the United States, and with the cotton mills of Old England as well. It is estimated that within sixty miles of Charlotte, N. C., there is enough water power to drive two-thirds of the spindles of England; that is, a million horse-power. In Alabama it is possible from a cotton factory to fire a rifle bullet into a coal mine and then throw a stone into a cotton field. The New England companies that own mills in both New England and the South find their dividends twice or thrice as great from their Southern mills. And it may be added here that they are conspicuous opponents of any legislation in the South that would diminish the labor of children, and that their representatives throng the halls of legislation for the repeal of such inadequate laws as we have and for the blocking of all humane legislation.

It is difficult for any one not reared in the South to understand the interest and pride that this expansion of the cotton mill industry has caused among us. The farmer has attributed to this increase of spindles and to the local demand for spot cotton the advance in the price of the staple that is at the foundation of Southern prosperity. The railroads are dependent in large measure for the increase in tonnage upon the output of the cotton mills, and there has been in several states a hard and fast alliance between the railroads and the cotton mills in opposition to any legislation directed against child labor. It may, perhaps, not be out of place to mention the obvious fact that successful competition with New England in its

chosen field of manufacture has added some zest and spice to the building up of this industry and to the favor with which the people have hitherto regarded it.

There are now employed in Southern cotton mills, according to the "Blue Book" of 1904-5, which is already a year old, 238,881 operatives. Counting the new mills that have gone into operation since, there must be a quarter of a million people thus employed. Of these, a former president of the Cotton Manufacturers' Association estimates that only 30 per cent. are adults, though by adults he means those over twenty-one. The president of the American Cotton Manufacturing Association, Mr. R. M. Miller, of Charlotte, N. C., in an interview deprecating the raising of the age limit in North Carolina from twelve to fourteen for girls and for illiterate boys, claimed that 75 per cent. of the spinners of North Carolina were fourteen or under. The average for children under sixteen employed in Southern mills, as given by the census of 1900, was 25 per cent. On that basis there must be 60,000 children, from six to sixteen, now working in the mills of the Southern States, and my own opinion is that there are 60,000 under fourteen years of age. And just now the mills are running night and day, and even the rule of sixty-six hours a week makes the working day for these little ones for five days of the week twelve hours.

But while there are natural advantages for the manufacture of cotton near the fields where it is produced, it is a fact easily proved that the child labor system of the South is an advantage to Northern mills. The employment of children is an economic error in that it tends to lower the standard of efficiency in industry and to use up the labor supply in exactly the same way that the putting of colts to the plough would do in agricultural communities. In the Georgia Legislature last summer a noted cotton manufacturer, a member of the Georgia Senate, in an eloquent plea against the child labor system, challenged his associates in that business who were also members of the Senate, to disprove his statement: that the same quality of cotton goods manufactured in the South was sold at a price from two to four cents a pound lower than these goods manufactured in the North. The New England mills that are prospering the most have thrown their old machinery upon the scrap pile and have ceased competition with the South by manufacturing the finer goods, in which there is the greater margin of



profit. Mills for the manufacture of these finer goods are now being erected in the South, but the demand goes up from them for a better class of labor, and it is another economic truth that the child laborer does not ordinarily develop into a skilled laborer. A Georgia cotton mill imported skilled laborers for the manufacture of fine goods. The goods were sold at Philadelphia and New England prices. Once some tags containing the name and location of this mill were slipped into the bales of finished cloth by the workmen. The mill management immediately received a letter from the commission merchant urging that this should never be done again; that he had concealed the fact that this particular mill was located in the South, and thereby had been able to get Northern prices for the goods. What a short-sighted policy it is, for the profit of the moment, to be wasting the opportunity for building up at the South an industry that shall be distinguished from the same industry in both New England and Old England, by being free at once from the long hours and the low wages and the infant labor that have been the curse of the cotton mill for a hundred years, and are chiefly now the curse of the Southern cotton mills.

And, as was shown in the introduction to this address, the people of the South are beginning to feel that the present methods of this industry are exacting too great a price for its prosperity. Physicians, individually and in their state conventions, are following the example of their predecessors in Manchester a century ago, and are protesting against the depreciation of the human stock by this cruel system; against the very presence in a cotton mill, with its flying lint, of young children with their more delicate lungs; are pointing out the frequent cases of throat and lung diseases they are treating in their hospitals among their little patients from the mills; and especially are protesting against the physical injury to young girls, at the critical period of their lives, and the necessary injury to the future race that is involved. The farmer is beginning to protest against the unfair competition between the mill and the farm in the labor market, the tenant being persuaded to leave the farm for the factory by the inducement that he can put his young children to work at profitable wages, reversing both the law of nature and the law of Scripture, that the parent should lay up for the child and not the child for the parent. The educational leaders are making bitter protest against the increase of illiteracy in the factory

districts, and we do not need any increase of illiteracy in the South. The Southern pulpit, with united voice, is crying aloud and sparing not, inveighing against man's inhumanity to children. The politician is beginning to feel this wave of public indignation against the evil. The Southern press, religious and secular, great dailies and country weeklies, with the exception of the mercenary few, are pointing out the inevitable tendency of child labor in the mills, the fact that the very supremacy of the white race is involved, since the negro is not employed in the cotton mills and his children are freed from that slavery. Southern patriots everywhere are proclaiming that the child should be put above the dividend, that the place for the child is not the mill, but the school. Even the stockholders of the mills are beginning to feel that their profits are of the nature of blood-money and are too dearly won at the price of the lives and the health of the little children. And there are many humane mill owners who, despite the feeling that they should stand together against restrictive legislation, in spite of the false fear that the child labor opponents are labor agitators, are unwilling to play the rôle of the infamous Herods who "sought the young child's life." In the three States of North Carolina, South Carolina and Alabama, where a twelve-year limit has been established by law, many are trying honestly to observe that law, even with no provision for law enforcement and no system of factory inspection or even of birth registration; and I am persuaded that in Georgia, unique among the manufacturing States of Europe or America in having no child labor law, many manufacturers, because they are honorable men, resent the reproach that has been brought upon them as a class by the wholesale violation of their own agreement not to employ young children, which is a matter of common knowledge. One of them proclaimed in the Georgia Legislature that the reason he had refused to join the Georgia Industrial Association was that he was unwilling to contribute, as a member of the association, to a legislative fund for preventing a child labor law. In spite of the ineffectiveness of present laws and the violation of solemn agreements and the utter absence of protective legislation in some of the states, I make bold to say, because I know my people and love my people, that the South is too kind-hearted to allow this sacrifice of the children. They know that "to be a man too soon is to be a small man." They believe, with John Ruskin, that "it is a shame for a nation to make

its young girls weary." And it is a Southern state, Louisiana, that is unique in making a difference of two years in the age limit for employment between the boys and girls, and in favor of the girls.

The child is the saviour of the race. What we do for the child, for his protection, for his education, for his training for the duties of manhood, for securing the rights and prolonging the period of childhood, is the measure of what we shall accomplish for the race that is to be. The ancient Hebrew prophet drew a picture of the golden age of the world, that with the Hebrew and the Christian is still in the future, a picture that has never been surpassed in literature. And the central figure on the canvas is that of the little child. The sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp. And when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, the cow and the bear shall feed—a little child shall lead them. And so it must be with this civilization of ours, if it is to endure.

Forces of leonine violence, forces of serpentine cunning, forces of wolfish greed, as well as the forces of peaceful industry and domestic labor, must consent to be led in peaceful procession, while walking before them, drawing their might with his innocence, and his helplessness and his promise, is the figure of the little child. God speed the day! God hasten the coming of the age when the child shall not be driven but shall lead, when the child shall not be the prey of the giant forces that are now contending for the mastery, but shall quell and tame their violence and inaugurate the reign of universal brotherhood.