

SOCIAL SERVICE.

"SUPPER-TIME TALKS WITH TRANSPORT WORKERS."

By EVELINE WRIGHT CROPPER.

"England's the best place after all, only it's a bit over-crowded," writes a navy man from Australia, and yet the conditions of labour here were such as to drive him forth to seek a better chance in a new country. What are the conditions that force men to leave the fairest land in the world, made fairer by ties of association and memory?

Come with me to the home of a goods porter who works twelve hours a day, Sundays and weekdays alike, the only variation being that sometimes it is days and sometimes nights. A little man he is, with pale face and sunken eyes, in which a dim fire smoulders when I remark upon the suffering brought upon other poor people by the strike of the railwaymen. "It's not the strikers' fault," he said, "it's the middlemen that puts the prices up, and they've no need to do it." I said I thought the men would never be satisfied, and would always want more, however much they got. "No," he said, indignantly. "We only want a living wage, and we can't get it." And then, in answer to a further protest from me, he said, "Well, yer see, yer don't understand the ins and outs of the case, same as we do. That's wur it is." He did not mean to be rude, and I did not take it as rudeness. He was simply stating a fact. I retired crestfallen, for arguments that sound convincing in a comfortable drawing-room fall rather flat in the home of a man whose existence can hardly be called life, and who has to support a large family on what cannot be called a living wage.

"But they ought not to have families," someone suggests. Perhaps this wise person will devise a scheme for killing off the families, like puppies or kittens; but in the meantime there they are, and it is the parents who have to support them. Brilliant suggestions like this fall limp and powerless when they come up against that very solid piece of human nature, the working-man. How often we need to be reminded that we have to reckon with men as they *are*, not as we think they *ought to be*.

But now come and see a carter who earns thirty-four shillings a week and has no children. He and his wife are steady and hard-working, and there is no want in this home; at least, not in the ordinary sense of the word. It is eight o'clock in the evening, and his wife bids me come in and wait, saying, "He's been out since five this morning, so he ought to be back by now, but you never know. It's all hours when he gets back." The last time I was here the house was quiet and desolate, and she was telling me sadly of the loss of her little child. Now the kitchen is brightened by the happy faces of three motherless children whom she is mothering. All are

busy, and half-an-hour passes quickly, hearing recitations and watching the children at their supper. It seems an almost ideal home. No dirt, no confusion, no waste, no drink, good plain food on the table, and a blazing fire in the hearth. At half-past eight the children say "Good-night," and trot off to bed, and then the door opens and a giant of a man enters, having come straight back after fifteen hours' work, most of the time out with a lorry in the slush and fog of a winter's day. A few minutes in the back kitchen "cleaning himself," as he puts it, and he is sitting by the fire ready for supper. I hastened to say that I would not stay long, as he was so tired, for the poor fellow looked gaunt and haggard for want of sleep, with the look of a hunted animal in his hollow eyes. "Ay, I could drop off to sleep now, while I'm talkin' to yer," he said. "But aren't things much better since the strike? I thought the men got what they wanted." "Oh, yes," he replied, "it's a bit better than it was. We don't all have to go to the stables of a Sunday now. One man sees to all the horses, so we do get our Sundays, and we sleep most of the day. It's about all a man can do after working eighty five or ninety hours a week." "Do you get holidays?" I asked. "Yes, if we like to pay a man to do our work, and we can earn pretty good money when we're busy." His wife had produced an excellent supper, and urged me to share it, but I felt sure he could easily dispose of all there was, as it was his one comfortable meal in the day. Presently she left us alone, and I remarked how happy she seemed with children about. "Oh, ay. She's taking care of 'em. They've no mother, and their father's lodging here, too, but he's ill upstairs. He pays what he can, but he's not getting very good money, and it isn't much, but it's good for her to have them to look after. She was so lost, like, with me out all day, and nothing to do, as you may say, after our baby died. She was all the world to us, was our little girl, and we were that careful of her, we wouldn't let the wind blow on her." He repeated with pathetic emphasis, "I tell yer, we wouldn't let the wind blow on her. But I never hardly saw her except asleep, and on a Sunday. She'd be asleep when I got in of a night, and still asleep when I turned out in the morning. Now and then I'd be passing the road-end, with the wagon, in the daytime, and I'd see her playing in the road." The man's voice almost gave way as he talked of the little treasure whose loss had left the home so empty.

Hard work properly regulated helps us to bear our troubles certainly, but being forced to work to the point of exhaustion day after day, with no recreation, and often insufficient sleep, must surely make it very hard, if not impossible, to take a cheerful view of life's troubles and problems. Can we wonder that there is unrest and exasperation in the hearts of men who have to work under these conditions?

(To be continued.)

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