

**CHILD LABOR, A MENACE  
TO  
INDUSTRY, EDUCATION  
AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP**

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Child Labor, a Menace to Industry, Education and Good Citizenship by Various

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National child labor committee

# Child Labor

A MENACE TO INDUSTRY, EDUCATION AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP

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## CHILD LABOR IN THE SOUTHERN COTTON MILLS

BY A. J. MCKELWAY, D.D.,

Assistant Secretary of the National Child Labor Committee.

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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

*Later.*

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 Dennis, Jr., *Everybody's Magazine*, March, 1905. Article, "Hooligan."